

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Seal ^{my} Heart

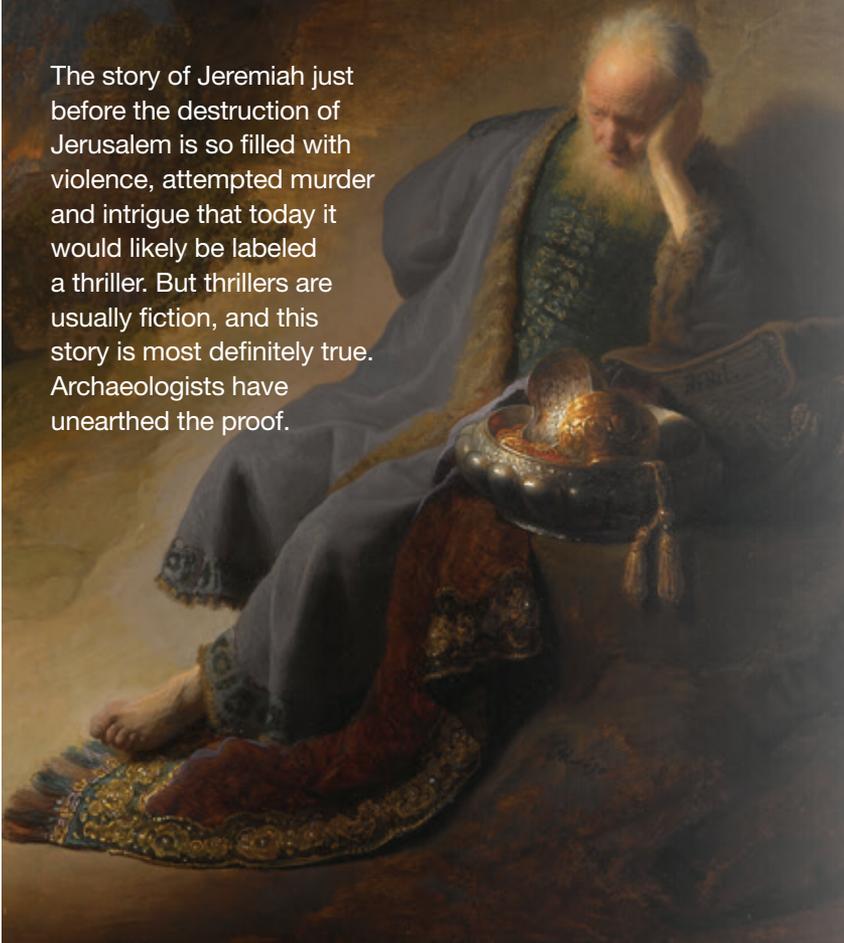
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Seal ^{my} Heart

The story of Jeremiah just before the destruction of Jerusalem is so filled with violence, attempted murder and intrigue that today it would likely be labeled a thriller. But thrillers are usually fiction, and this story is most definitely true. Archaeologists have unearthed the proof.



"Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem" by Rembrandt van Rijn/wikipedia.org

The Destruction of Jerusalem

For years, the prophet Jeremiah had warned King Zedekiah and the people of Judah that Jerusalem would be handed over to the powerful and ruthless King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon unless they turned from their wicked ways and returned to the Lord. The people had continually defiled themselves with idol worship, even sacrificing their own children in the fires of Molech. *“But neither he [the king] nor his servants nor the people of the land gave heed to the words of the LORD which He spoke by the prophet Jeremiah”* (Jer. 37:2).

Eventually, hardhearted Judah reached the point of no return. In January 587 BC, the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem. Jeremiah warned the king that those who surrendered to the Babylonians would escape with their lives; those who showed defiance would perish (Jer. 38:2–3).

Angered by his predictions of doom, Zedekiah’s royal advisors cast Jeremiah into an empty cistern, hoping to shut him up forever. Jeremiah sank down into a thick layer of mud at the bottom of the cistern, in danger of exposure and starvation (Jer. 38:4–6b).

After being rescued by a kind servant in the king’s household, Jeremiah made a final plea to Zedekiah. The king waffled back and forth, sometimes agreeing with his ministers’ advice, sometimes listening to Jeremiah. His indecisiveness sealed the fate of the city. Just as Jeremiah prophesied, in 586 BC the Babylonians burned Jerusalem to the ground, taking captive most of the remaining inhabitants, and destroying Solomon’s Temple.

Unearthing the Proof

The City of David is a wedge-shaped slice of land that slopes down steeply from the southern wall of the Temple Mount to the Pool of Siloam. Over 3,000 years ago, King David captured the city from the Jebusites and established his own capital on the site. Archaeologists have uncovered some remarkable finds there in recent years, in particular, an extensive collection of clay seals called *bullae*. They are small clay impressions about 2 cm (.78 in.) in diameter, often stamped with an administrator’s name and used to sign and seal important documents.

In 2005, Dr. Eilat Mazar, a biblical archaeologist, discovered a massive structure in the City of David believed to be King David’s palace.



Arnelly/wikipedia.org

At the site, she also found something very tiny: a clay *bull*a seal inscribed with a name.

Mazar wrote: “I took the *bull*a home that night. Well into the night, when the children were asleep and the house was quiet, I began to study it. Slowly, I deciphered the name in the first line: Yehuchal. Could it be a biblical name? I did not recall any Yehuchal in the Bible. Perhaps my reading of the name was wrong. But just to make sure I pulled from the shelf a biblical encyclopedia.

“There he was, as large as life—in the book of the prophet Jeremiah: King Zedekiah sent Yehuchal son of Shelemiah to the prophet Jeremiah to pray for the people (Jer. 37:3). In the following chapter, we learn that this same man, who was a royal minister, heard the decidedly unwelcome predictions of disaster coming from Jeremiah’s lips. When I opened the encyclopedia and saw the same name in the Bible as was on the *bull*a, I let out a shriek of surprise that rang throughout the still house. Fortunately, the children slept soundly. I felt as though I had just ‘resurrected’ someone straight out of the Bible.”

In 2008, Dr. Mazar and her team unearthed another seal, and after deciphering the 2,600-year-old inscription, read “le Gedalyahu ben Pashhur”—Belonging to Gedaliah, son of Pashur.

Remarkably, both these *bull*ae were found in the same area at David’s palace excavations, both inscribed with names found in the first verse of Jeremiah 38, and both accurately dated to the time of Jeremiah.

The seals were found in a thick layer of ash, bearing witness to Jerusalem’s fiery destruction. The papyrus documents that the *bull*ae sealed were destroyed in the fire, but the clay *bull*ae themselves were hardened and preserved by the



Courtesy Dr. Eilat Mazar. Photos by Gabi Laron. Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University

intense heat, and still legible after 2,600 years—astonishing proof of Jerusalem’s destruction during Zedekiah’s reign, and the existence of a prophet named Jeremiah and those who plotted to kill him.

The Ancient Use of Seals

The word seal has several meanings: the verb form is to affix one’s seal, to fasten up by sealing, to lock up, to be stopped. The Hebrew word is *chatham* (חתם). The noun form is *chowtham* (חורתם), as in “*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm...*” (Song of Sol. 8:6). It refers to a signet ring that kings wore and used to stamp official edicts and documents, such as the one King Ahasuerus gave evil Haman.

In the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.), the use of seals is mentioned frequently. A seal was the legal “signature” of its owner at a time when many people did not know how to read or write. In the East, a seal was usually made of soft clay, placed on important documents and stamped with a signet ring. Signets, usually made of a hard substance such as metal or stone, were in regular use among the Hebrews in ancient times, often worn around the neck on a cord (Gen. 38:18) or on a finger of the right hand (Jer. 22:24). Abraham would have been familiar with the use of seals—his homeland was ancient Mesopotamia where cylinder seals were used to label trade items and for other purposes. The Israelites were also familiar with the use of seals during their sojourn in Egypt—Pharaoh conferred his royal authority upon Joseph by giving him his signet ring (Gen. 41:42).

The common usage of seals in Judah and surrounding countries would seem to indicate that any person of stature would have owned a signet.

Sealing a Deal in Anathoth

On a tour to the hills of Samaria one day, we discovered that our bus driver lived in the village of Anathoth, the same hometown as Jeremiah! Anathoth is located 4 km (2½ mi.) north of the Old City of Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin.

In 587 BC, as the rapacious Babylonian army advanced through the Land, God instructed Jeremiah to purchase a field from his cousin in Anathoth. By this time, Anathoth had already been laid waste by the Babylonians, and Jeremiah was still languishing in prison. Jeremiah’s relatives had tried to assassinate him a few years earlier, and his cousin was likely one of the culprits. We can imagine Jeremiah’s confusion over God’s order—what sane person would purchase a piece of property that had just been burned and ravaged, and who would be left to work the land now that everyone was about to be killed or captured? God’s directive must have seemed absurd, but Jeremiah faithfully obeyed Him for he knew “*that this was the word of the Lord*” (Jer. 32:8).

He purchased his cousin’s property for 17 shekels of silver, then “*signed the deed and sealed it, took witnesses, and weighed the money on the scales*” (Jer. 32:10).

The deeds, likely written on papyrus, would have been rolled, tied with string, and sealed with Jeremiah’s personal seal. Multiple witnesses, present in the court of the guard where Jeremiah was being held prisoner, also signed the



deed. It was verified, signed and sealed, and therefore completely legal. Jeremiah then took the sealed deed and an unsealed copy of the deed containing the terms and conditions of purchase, and handed them to his scribe Baruch for safekeeping (Jer. 32:6–12). It is intriguing to note that two clay *bullae* bearing Baruch's name (one with his thumbprint) were also found in the City of David excavations.

Then Jeremiah revealed an amazing promise from God to the men of Judah who were witnessing the transaction: *"Then I charged Baruch before them, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Take these deeds, both this purchase deed which is sealed and this deed which is open, and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may last many days.' For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land'''"* (Jer. 32:13–15).

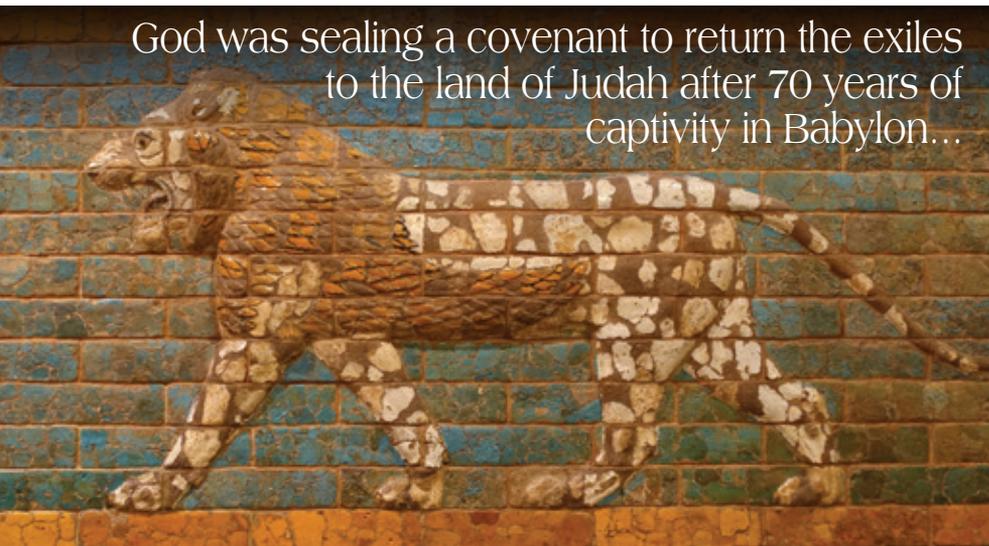
Jeremiah was not merely sealing the deeds of a land purchase; God was sealing a covenant He made with Jeremiah to return the exiles to the land of Judah after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, and then to eventually draw them back from an exile that would last even longer—for 2,000 years. God promised restoration and future inheritance of the land for His people. Our bus driver from Anathoth was a living fulfillment of that covenant.

Spiritual Significance of Seals

OWNERSHIP:

God has stamped and sealed us as His possession. He sets His seal upon our hearts as a sign that we belong to him—not by coercion; it is with our permission. In the Writings of the Apostles, Paul says, *"Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee"* (2 Cor. 1:21–22). Our hearts, at that moment of submitting

God was sealing a covenant to return the exiles to the land of Judah after 70 years of captivity in Babylon...



"Striding Lions" from the Processional Way in Babylon c.604–562 BC • Daderot/wikipedia.org

to God's ownership, must be soft and malleable like clay, easily yielding to the imprint of the Holy Spirit. Once that seal has been set upon us, our lives take on His image, His very signature.

EXCLUSIVITY:

We not only belong to God, we are His exclusive possession. Our hearts and lives belong to Him alone. As Christians, we believe we have been bought at a costly price—the shed blood of Yeshua—and no one can snatch us from His hand. *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand"* (John 10:27–29).

AUTHENTICITY:

In the ancient Middle East, there was so much importance placed upon a seal that without it a document was not considered genuine. Just as a seal confirmed and authenticated the document on which it was stamped, so does God's seal upon us confirm that we truly belong to Him.

For example, the Gospel writers tell us that God set His seal upon Yeshua (Jesus) and His ministry to mark them as authorized and approved (John 6:27), as well as on Abraham. He received the sign of circumcision as *"a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised..."* (Rom. 4:11). Through that seal, God confirmed His covenant with Abraham and with all those who believed in Him.

Later on, Paul referred to the Corinthian believers as the *"seal of my apostleship in the Lord"* (1 Cor. 9:2) whereby it was the believers to whom Paul ministered who confirmed that Paul was an authentic apostle.

GUARANTEE:

A guarantee is a promise or assurance that another's obligation will be fulfilled. As Christians, we believe God seals us with His guarantee—the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in us at our moment of salvation and will never leave us. We are His redeemed and valued possession, sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit who is our guarantee of future redemption. *"When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession..."* (Eph. 1:13–14 NIV).

ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY:

In the book of Esther, King Ahasuerus of Persia foolishly gave his signet ring, the sign of his royal authority, to Haman, who issued a decree intending to seal the fate of all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. Edicts sealed by the royal stamp could not be revoked by anyone, not even the king himself. Only when Haman was finally dead and the king's signet ring reclaimed, could a new decree be issued to counter the old one. The king instructed Mordecai, *"You yourselves write a decree concerning the Jews, as you please, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for whatever is written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring no one can revoke"* (Esther 8:8).

In contrast to weak King Ahasuerus, God reigns with absolute authority—authority that He will never relinquish. His decrees are just and merciful, compassionate and righteous, and whatever He ordains will surely come to pass.



“...whatever is...sealed with the king's signet ring no one can revoke.” (Esther 8:8)

"Ahasuerus, Haman and Esther" by Rembrandt van Rijn/wikipedia.org

PROTECTION:

Those who bear God's seal of ownership are secure from His wrath. In Revelation, the final book in the Writings of the Apostles, the Apostle John describes the time of the Great Tribulation when the Lord comes to destroy the work of Satan and establish His own millennial kingdom. *"Then out of the smoke locusts came upon the earth. And to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads"* (Rev. 9:3–4).

SANCTIFICATION:

God gave instructions to the Israelites about crafting a diadem for the High Priest. *"Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: holy to the Lord.* (Exod. 28:36 NIV). The gold plate was to be attached over Aaron's turban with a cord and always worn on his forehead so that the offerings the children of Israel brought before the Lord would be acceptable to Him.

Another clay seal was unearthed near the Temple Mount in 2011, stamped with the words *"deka leyah"* meaning "pure to God." Archaeologists believe it may have been used to stamp sacred offerings at the Temple indicating that the offering was ritually pure. It may also have been used as a token to purchase offerings that were pure to the Lord, or even used by pilgrims presenting themselves to the Temple guards to prove they had purified themselves before coming to worship.

The Writings of the Apostles continue this theme, declaring that believers are sealed with the words "pure to the Lord" as we present ourselves as *"living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God"* (Rom. 12:1).

SECURITY:

The prophet Daniel received visions and revelation about the future but was told to keep the words of his prophecy concealed until the end of the age. *"But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end..."* (Dan. 12:4).



Vladimir Naytkin/USA

The scroll in
God's hand
is a land
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a deed to
the whole
earth...

Again in the book of Revelation, the Apostle John sees God seated on His throne holding a scroll sealed with seven seals. Contracts, deeds, wills and similar documents would be secured with multiple seals, depending on their importance.

Like Jeremiah's sealed deed in Jeremiah 32, the scroll in God's hand is also a land deed—a deed to the whole earth, reclaimed from Satan and subject to redemption by its rightful Owner. John tells us only the Lion of the tribe of Judah is found worthy and able to open the sealed scroll, to take back what belongs to Him, and to release judgment upon the earth.

John is told, *"Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand"* (Rev. 22:10). The time has now come to unseal what has been kept secret for so long—the Messiah is coming quickly.

COVENANT:

A covenant between God and His people is a sacred agreement motivated by a love relationship. It was God's chosen way of interacting with His human creation. In this covenant of love, He has redeemed us and made a way for us to have eternal life with Him.

In the *Tanakh*, while a written document was validated with an impressed seal, a verbal covenant was often sealed with blood. The two parties to a covenant would pass between the two halves of a dead animal as a solemn oath to adhere to the conditions of the agreement. In Abraham's case, God put him into a deep sleep and passed through the animal halves alone, promising to give the land of Israel to Abraham and his seed.

"And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates...'" (Gen. 15:17–18).

Adherence to the terms of the covenant was no longer dependent on Abraham's faithfulness or that of his descendants; it was God's responsibility alone, therefore making the covenant unconditional.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

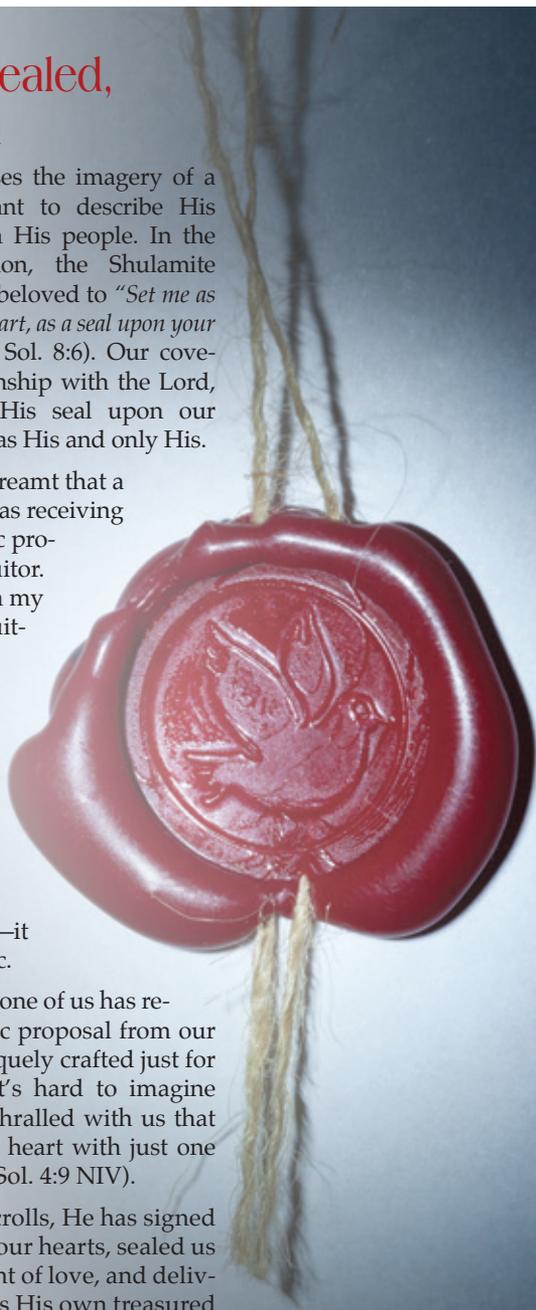
God often uses the imagery of a marriage covenant to describe His relationship with His people. In the Song of Solomon, the Shulamite maiden asks her beloved to *“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm...”* (Song of Sol. 8:6). Our covenant love relationship with the Lord, represented by His seal upon our hearts, marks us as His and only His.

One night I dreamt that a young woman was receiving a wildly romantic proposal from her suitor. Then I realized in my dream that the suitor was Yeshua!

Even though I was just a fly on the wall and the proposal wasn't directed at me, it is no exaggeration to say that I almost swooned—it was that romantic.

In fact, every one of us has received a romantic proposal from our Bridegroom, uniquely crafted just for us. Sometimes it's hard to imagine that He is so enthralled with us that we can steal His heart with just one glance! (Song of Sol. 4:9 NIV).

Like living scrolls, He has signed His Name upon our hearts, sealed us with His covenant of love, and delivered us forever as His own treasured possession.



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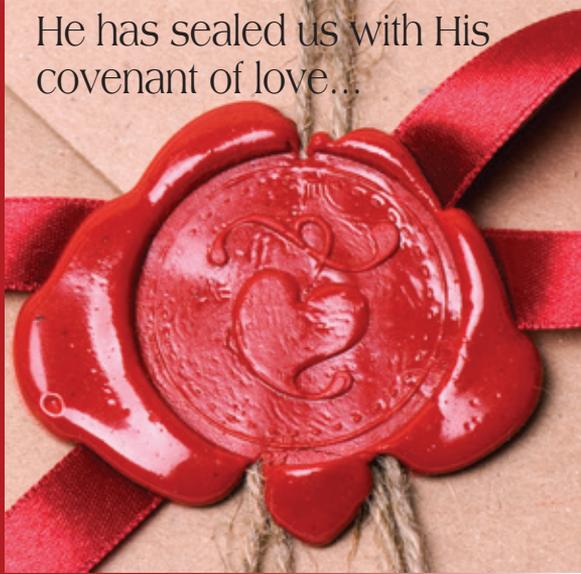
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He has sealed us with His
covenant of love...



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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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