

Σφραγίς (*sfragis*) and its metaphorical testimonial presence in 2 Timothy 2:19

Authors:

Carlos Molina¹
Ernest van Eck¹

Affiliations:

¹Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Note:

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Correspondence to:

Ernest van Eck

email:

ernest.vaneck@up.ac.za

Postal address:

Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, Lynwood Road, Hatfield 0083 Pretoria, South Africa

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This article presented a metaphorical testimonial approach in the interpretation of 2 Timothy 2:19 and the use of sealing. As starting point, attention was given to the concept of 'seal' through the Old Testament and Ancient Near East. These periods attest the fact that sealing was also utilised in a figurative way as a sign of ownership, property and authenticity. Σφραγίς in 2 Timothy 2:19 describes the intimate relationship between Christ and his followers through the terms γινώσκω [personal and vital relationship that transcends in practice] and ἀναγινώσκω [mainly an exterior knowledge]. These two vocables are in opposition to ἀδικία [to apostate from]. The message expressed in 2:19 exemplifies the principles that Christ lived by and he empowered his followers to stand by. Σφραγίς in 2 Timothy 2:19 is an *imitatio Christi* response against the ἀδικία of moral standards and entertainment in the ancient Roman world. It includes a rapid contemporary reflection on practical faithfulness for today's life.

Sealing the deal

In the literal sense, a seal is defined as:

an instrument of stone, metal, or other hard substance (sometimes set in a ring), on which is engraved some device or figure; and is used for making an impression on some soft substance - such as clay or wax - affixed to a document or other object, in token of authenticity.

(Orr & Nuelsen 1974:2708)

But a seal can also be referred to as a signet, that is, something containing a distinctive mark that represents the owner (Brad, Draper & England 2003:1455). Technically speaking, the concept 'seal' thus has two meanings:

- it refers to an instrument (such as a signet or ring [*annulus*]) used to imprint a desired mark (once or more often) on a suitable surface
- it refers to the imprinted stamp [σφραγίς], the seal, the actual impression made by the instrument mentioned above (Kittel 1971a:939).

In Ezekiel, the sealing instrument deals with the impression of an attitude of abhorrence to evil practices and authenticity in God's children is described as His ownership and property (Ezk 9:4). In the New Testament, sealing is associated with the Christian life and its process of transformation in the believer. As the wax receives the impression of the seal, so the soul must receive the impression of the Spirit of God and preserve the image of Christ (White 1911:18–7). This means a holistic sealing impression shown in a personal relationship that affects the person as a whole. Christ's vicarious sacrifice and mediatory ministry is attested in the believer by the fruits of the Spirit (Gl 5:22–26). The mark of the cross, that is to say, the presence of Christ in the believer (Gl 4:19), is represented on the forehead of the disciple (White 1898:126) by the letter τ (*Tau*) according to some. The concept of the seal on the forehead described by Hardinge (2005:129) and Marshall (1998:81, 91–93, 106–108, 112–114), depicts the seat of intellect and part of movement and emotions for mankind. The brain is where the seal and its impression take place.

To justify the metaphorical or figurative presence of sealing in 2 Timothy 2:19 as a Christian lifestyle and their moral standards is necessary to mention a short analysis on the various sealing attributes in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East (ANE).

Sealing attributes in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East

In the ancient biblical world, sealing evoked figurative attributes: authenticity, inviolability, ownership, preservation, property and so forth. These characteristics are justified throughout *el mundo veterotestamentario* (Gn 38:18; Ex 28:11; 1 Ki 21:8; Est 8:8, 10; Jr 22:24; 32:9–14; Dn 12:4, etc).

Regarding the ANE and the earliest evidence for seals, Kist (2002:1–3) and Martin (1940:34) say that the cylinder seal is the most ancient form of seals. They go back to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (between 3200 BC and 2300 BC). In the Babylonian period, almost every

citizen carried a handmade stick seal and anything could be set under a seal; a house (doors), jars, baskets, jugs (usually sealed on the handle) and even intellectual property (Brown 1997:773). The process of using a seal as defined above (an impression), was used for the authentication and validation of: letters, official documents, contracts (e.g. in the form of scrolls) and in tombs (to denote, for example, property, ownership, authenticity, or protection). Through this process the integrity of the object was also safeguarded, for when the pottery (or other material) upon which the seal was applied had hardened an intact impression formed. If the impression stayed intact, it indicated that the particular object had not been violated (Horn 1995:1072–1703). The presence of sealing in Mesopotamia also dealt with the cultic idea of protection and magical property. Etana, a legendary Sumerian monarch is depicted on an Akkadian cylinder seal, dated 2700 BC, ascending to Heaven in a chariot with a winged lion (Dalley 2000:90, 130, 183–197).

Authenticity, ownership and property in the trading of people are the most evident sealing usage in the ANE. Even the impressions of the feet of children, found at the site of Tel Meskene (the ancient Emar on the upper Euphrates, dating back to about 1200 BC), can be related to this usage of a seal. It most probably refers to an incident where a father was obliged to sell his children, but the owner found them to be too young, thus leaving them with their parents until they were old enough. In the meantime, he kept an imprint of each child's foot (the seal in this case) as proof of his deferred ownership (Mason 2009). Another crucial function of sealing (using cylinder seals) was the role it played in the economic life of the ANE, functioning as an important mechanism in controlling the economy (Sibson 1977:15).

With this brief background usage of sealing in mind, the consideration of the metaphorical approach to 2 Timothy 2:19 will be discussed in the following section.

2 Timothy 2:19, metaphorically testimonial speaking

The term used in 2 Timothy 2:19 for 'sealing' is the word σφραγίς. This article assumes the conservative position that Paul was the author of this pastoral epistle. As a noun, σφραγίς appears in many other contexts in the New Testament. In the book of Revelations, it occurs 31 times. In the rest of the New Testament, it appears in Matthew 27:66, Romans 4:11; 15:28; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 9:22 and Ephesians 1:13; 4:30. In the New Testament, the idea and process of 'sealing' as a spiritual instrument is also manifested in a metaphorically testimonial mode when describing Christ's followers as 'exemplifying' him (the principles that Jesus spoke of and lived by) in their daily moral standards. This figurative mode is expressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:1–5 when he indicates that Christians are letters of moral integrity. They must be as authentic as the inviolate seal on a letter. Richards indicates that the seal on a letter (or the signet worn by the person delivering the letter) gave an authentic farewell to the future reader (2004:174). By using this imagery, Paul alludes to the fact that, in the same way that a seal warrants the integrity of a letter, so

Christians' moral integrity manifests or seals the fact that Christ is present in them. So for Paul, to be a slave of Jesus Christ (Rm 1:1; 1 Cor 4:1; Phlp 1:1; Tt 1:1) is to be marked by the figurative sealing concept of the *imitatio Christi*. As the slave was branded to indicate whose master he belonged to, figuratively, the attributes of Christian living are being reproduced on his followers. Actually, for some authors this was the core of Pauline incarnation preaching, that the principles Christ lived by must permeate the lives of believers (Whittington 1994:3–5).

In the days of Paul, the choice to live a Christian life was, in essence, the same as issuing an open invitation to persecution and mocking because the Christian lifestyle so contradicted the standards set by the state religion. Paul (Brown 1997:347) describes it as a *radical transformation* in a person's life (e.g. 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:1–10). Thus, during early Christianity the idea of 'sealing' in the metaphorical mode meant that Christ's followers saw themselves as a moral testimonial to Christ's teachings on values and how to live. But, striving towards the one ideal necessarily meant staying away from the other, ἀποστήτω ἀπὸ ἀδικίας (['to be far from iniquity']; 2 Tm 2:19, New King James Version), literally meaning 'to apostate', or 'to keep away from wickedness'. In this context, it was Rome's imperial worship, as well as their general moral practices, that were seen as against the 'seal' of God for Christians (e.g. Ac 4:12; 5:29, 32; Rm 1:18–32; 1 Tm 2:5). According to Paul, this meant that as followers of Christ they had to be apart from it (ἀδικίας; 2 Tm 2:19). It was this aspect of Christian behaviour, this voluntary isolation from moral corruption and idolatry, which attracted upon Christians humiliation and eventually persecution. It promoted an adverse reaction from pagan Roman society, especially when these iniquities that were to be avoided were related to the pagan moral, political and religious standards enforced by Rome.

This Christian attitude, against Roman society, entertainment and moral practices, is well attested to during the 1st century AD, right through to the 4th century AD. Although it may have had negative consequences for the believer; the strong reaction to their choice and lifestyle does give us an indication that these believers' Christian way of life was indeed a signet of Christ-likeness.

One interesting Old Testament parallelism in describing 2 Timothy 2:19 is found in the book of Ezekiel. Amongst the characteristics of the ones that are 'sealed' in Ezekiel is the idea that they are in this way reacting against detestable things (Ezk 9:4). This is a challenge that Christians throughout the ages have also had to face, the challenge of fighting against evil in its many forms, through entertainment and the dubious moral standards that come with it. According to ancient Latin writers such as Lactantius, Tatian and Tertullian, from the 3rd and 4th century AD there were reasons why Christians confronted Roman society on things such as the games, entertainment and religious practices of the age. *They represented idolatry and murder* (2004:6.20); *they taught immoral behaviour* (2004:5–48) and *renounced Christ* (Tertullian 2004:3.16).

It becomes clear from the previous that the 'atheism' accusations, for which Christians were persecuted, could well have been caused by their negative thoughts and writings on the worship of the emperor or the gods. The Roman state was both established and protected by these institutions. Schüssler (1985:144) also states that it was this refusal to worship the emperor and the gods that the plight of Christians were exceedingly worsened, because it led to an ever-increasing threat by means of economic deprivation, imprisonment and execution.

Another important factor influencing Rome's persecution of Christians was the Christian's aggressiveness in witnessing Christ to the pagan world. They were not satisfied with their uncompromising withdrawal from the practices of heathen worship, but also actively assailed the pagan cults. Their way of living was a constant metaphorical lesson for others to get to know Christ and his teachings (Orr & Nuelsen 1974:2603–2605).

It becomes evident that Christians knew the difference and limitations between γινώσκω and ἀναγινώσκω. [to walk our talk]. In the Johannine literature, the first term refers to one that has received and has the recognition and reception of love. The Son has been sent to make this possible because of his revelation to a sinful world (Kittel 1964b:711). In Paul, the term is associated to a practical knowledge that is rooted in the sincere Christian conviction of loyalty and faith. Ἀναγινώσκω interacts with exterior knowledge, to know exactly or to recognise and is used, for example, for a person reading a letter (Ac 15:31; 23:34; 2 Cor 1:13; 3:2; Eph 3:4). In Revelations 1:3 the reference is to the reading of the presented prophecy (Kittel 1964c:343). Thus, in early Christianity, both terms affected a deep impact in a system based on slavery, polytheism and self-exaltation. The metaphorical uses of sealing as an instrument of spiritual sealing in 2 Timothy 2:19 invites readers to get to know Jesus by a personal and authentic relationship with him. It means more than to be part of a religious affiliation. It is Christ living in us.

In today's world, Christians confront a similar threat, but with a different scenario than the first Christian believers did. For the early Roman world of the 1st century AD and beyond, religion was the Roman State and, at the same time, any priest could minister for different gods. Today, the concept of 'biblical principles' in this postmodern society is not the same anymore. It is now being considered to a relative and personal way of thinking. It is often uprooted from the Biblical context foundation, relegating the Bible to a mere folklore or a mosaic of literature genre.

Another of those subtle tramps in disguise is described by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:5, ἔχοντες μόρφωσιν εὐσεβείας 'having a form of godliness'. Μόρφωσις is a verb that denotes 'to fashion' or artists who shape their material into an image, especially into an idol. But it is also used in Galatians 4:19 to indicate a living relationship of life transformation given by Christ to the believer (Kittel 1967d:752–753). However,

the external fashion verbal art of the word μόρφωσις in 2 Timothy 3:5 suggests also various other serious connotations. One is the religion of external forms in which authenticity and loyalty is absent and a verbal acceptance of truth is denying the practical effectiveness of it. In the early Roman world of the 1st century AD and beyond, the sense of sealing as a spiritual instrument meant a sense of ownership and property to God's principles.

For early Christians, morality and religion was linked to a depraved concept related to the worship of gods and evil society pleasures. Today, Media suggests immorality and modern witchcraft as being woven with prestige, fame, getting good luck or looking good. Violence and immorality is craftily designed in video games and movies. But, on the contrary, Christians are called to present their minds and bodies:

as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect with God.

(Rm 12:1–2)

During the 1st century AD, the Gospel reached all the corners of Roman Empire. No other Christian generation have had the blessing of satellite and Christian media technology that is possible today. Massive amounts of Christian literature are distributed every day throughout most parts of globe. The metaphorical testimonial use of sealing in 2 Timothy 2:19 invites us individually to experience a γινώσκω and ἀναγινώσκω [to walk our talk] with Christ as a daily vivid authenticity and loyalty to the message that Jesus lived and died for. This is the most powerful missionary activity any believer is called to be involved with. After all, sealing in its metaphorical testimonial approach leaves an impression on other lives too. The sealing instrument here is the principles that Jesus lived by.

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