

## The Sealed Tomb (Matt 27:62-28:7)

### Overview

Our Lord's tomb was sealed. Only Matthew mentions it. The Pharisees were concerned that someone might try to steal the body of the Lord, and then claim that he had risen. So they asked Pilate to guard the tomb. Pilate did more than that—he sealed it. But the seals could not hold the Lord Jesus, and he rose in spite of them.

Today, we'll study seals in the Bible. We'll learn what they meant at the tomb—and in later NT promises.

Our study will illustrate an important Bible study principle. Events in the Bible take place in a cultural setting that is often different from ours today. But the Bible contains enough information about that setting that from the Bible itself you can figure out the meaning of these cultural details.

### Details of the Story

**62 Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, 63 Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.**--The Pharisees remember the promise of the resurrection better than the disciples did. He told them frequently, and openly enough that even those outside of the circle of disciples knew of the promise, but the disciples were surprised when it happened.

**64 Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.**--They understand the power of resurrection as evidence for the message that the Lord brought. Their worst fear was fulfilled: it was the message of resurrection that formed the basis of the gospel.

**65 Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can.**--As throughout the passion,

Psa 2:2 The kings of the earth [Rome and Herod] set themselves, and the rulers [of the Jews] take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed

Acts 4:24-28 make clear that “the kings . . . and the rulers” encompass both the Gentile powers and the Jewish leaders. The two were complicit in the death of Jesus, and in trying to keep him dead.

**66 So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.**--Not only did they post a guard, but they also sealed the stone, probably by passing a rope across it and sealing it to the bedrock on either side, so that anyone who would roll the stone open would have to break the seals. The figure below illustrates how it might have looked. Thus there would be two seals. Perhaps one represented Rome and the other the Sanhedrin, corresponding to the kings and the rulers in Ps 2.

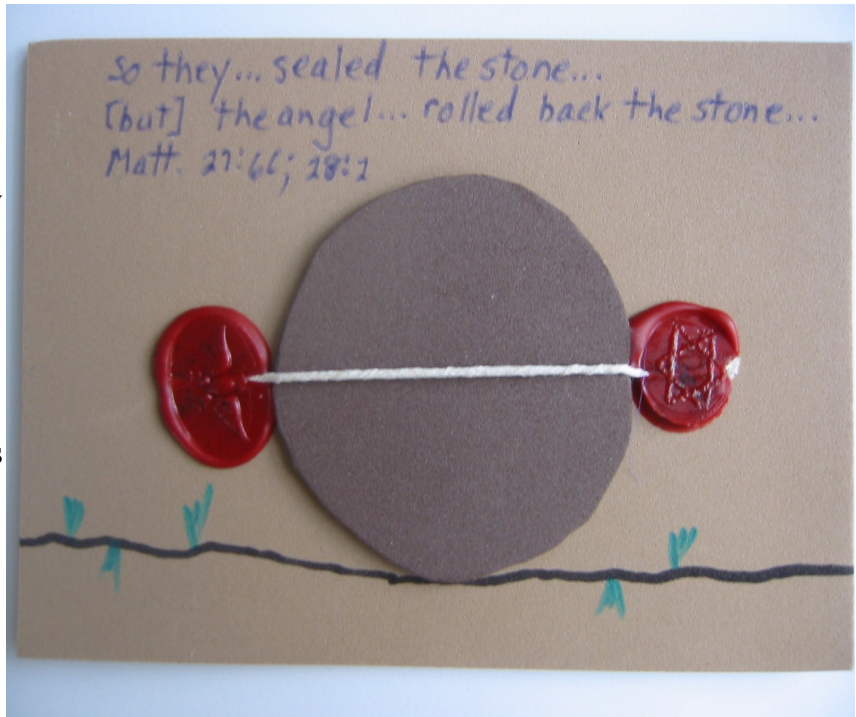
What did the seals mean? Why did the kings and rulers seal the tomb, and what significance do the seals add to the opening of the tomb in 28:2?

## What is a Seal?

A seal is a piece of carved stone or metal, used to make a distinctive impression in clay or wax. Job uses the imagery of a seal to describe how the sunrise affects the earth:

Job 38:14 It [the earth] is turned as clay *to* the seal;

KD: “The earth is the subject to Job 38:14: the dawn is like the signet-ring, which stamps a definite impress on the earth as the clay, the forms which floated in the darkness of the night become visible and distinguishable. ... the light of morning gives to everything its peculiar garb of light, so that, hitherto overlaid by a uniform darkness, they now come forth independently, they gradually appear in their variegated diversity of form and hue.”



Letters in most of the ancient world were written on clay, which was cheaper than parchment and more widely available than papyrus. The earliest scripts, other than in Egypt, were cuneiform, so that they could easily be marked on clay with a stylus. It's hard to make a distinctive signature with a stick on clay, so people had a carved stone cylinder that they rolled over the surface of the tablet.

## What is the Meaning of a Seal?

### *Identity of the Owner*

The seal was how one signed (clay) documents, and thus was a mark of a person's identity. Judah's seal plays a central role in his shameful transaction with Tamar:

Gen 38:17 And he said, I will send *thee* a kid from the flock. And she said, Wilt thou give *me* a pledge, till thou send *it*? 18 And he said, What pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy bracelets [cord], and thy staff that *is* in thine hand. ... 25 When she *was* brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these *are*, *am* I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose *are* these, the signet, and bracelets [cord], and staff.

The word translated “bracelets” elsewhere means “cord,” and probably refers to the cord threaded through the center of the seal, so that it could be carried around the neck. Each person's seal had a different carving on it, and marked their identity. In other cases, particularly where parchment or papyrus was available, flat stamps or rings were also used.

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The seals on the tomb showed who had placed them: Rome and the Sanhedrin.

### **Agreement with a document**

Because the seal identifies its owner, it indicates agreement to any document to which it is fixed.

1Ki 21:7-8 And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, *and* eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. 8 So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and **sealed them with his seal**, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that *were* in his city, dwelling with Naboth.

Neh 9:38 And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, **seal** unto it.

When the Jews and the Romans put their seals on the tomb, they were signing their work, recording their agreement with the execution of Jesus. The seals witnessed the truth of Acts 4:27,

27 For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together,

### **Authority**

When the person who seals something is a ruler, the seal conveys, not only the identity of the ruler, but also the ruler's authority. We saw this in how Jezebel used Ahab's seal to demand the death of Naboth. Another good example is the book of Esther. When Haman asked Ahasuerus to destroy the Jews,

Est 3:10 the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.

In this case, the seal was engraved on the ring. Giving Haman the ring allowed him to issue commands in the king's name.<sup>1</sup>

12 Then were the king's scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded ... in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and **sealed** with the king's ring.

Later, in Esther 8, when the king places Mordecai over the house of Haman and authorizes the Jews to defend themselves, the ring features prominently (vv. 2, 8, 10). Note in particular 8:8,

for the writing which is written in the king's name, and **sealed with the king's ring**, may no man reverse.

The seals on the tomb asserted the authority of Rome, and of the Sanhedrin. They said, "We are in charge here. If you want to open this tomb, you have to come talk to us."

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<sup>1</sup> Centuries earlier, Pharaoh gave Joseph authority in just the same way (Gen 41:42).

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### **Protection**

As long as the seal remains unbroken, the contents of what is sealed are protected, and cannot be changed. Thus legal documents were often sealed, to ensure against tampering:

Jer 32:9-12 And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that *was* in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, *even* seventeen shekels of silver. 10 And I subscribed the evidence, and **sealed** *it*, and took witnesses, and weighed *him* the money in the balances. 11 So I took the evidence of the purchase, *both* that which was **sealed** *according* to the law and custom, and that which was open: 12 And I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, in the sight of Hanameel mine uncle's *son*, and in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison.

The open copy was for daily reference. The sealed copy could be opened in the presence of witnesses if there were ever any question about whether the open copy had been changed.

The seal's authority protects whatever is sealed. If you break the seal, you must answer to the person who placed it.

One instance of the seal used for protection in the OT is particularly similar to Matthew's account.

Dan 6:16-17 Then the king commanded, and they brought Daniel, and cast him into the den of lions. Now the king spake and said unto Daniel, Thy God whom thou servest continually, he will deliver thee. 17 And a stone was brought, and laid upon the mouth of the den; and the king **sealed** it with his own **signet**, and with the **signet** of his lords; that the purpose might not be changed concerning Daniel.

Daniel's den of lions is an excellent parallel to our Lord's tomb, and the sealing in Matthew may even be intended to recall Daniel's experience. In both cases, the king has no personal animosity against the man of God, but acts at the instigation of other rulers. In Daniel's case, we are told explicitly of multiple seals, one from the king, and the other from the nobles who had accused Daniel in the first place.

Anybody who would try to open the den of lions would be punished by the king of Persia. Similarly, anybody who would try to open our Lord's tomb would be punished by the power of Rome.

But the seals of Persia and of Rome, of nobles and of the Sanhedrin, mean nothing to God. Neither the stone nor its seals could keep God's angel out of Daniel's den, or keep the Lord Jesus in the tomb.

God didn't bother to break the seals in Daniel's case, but on Easter,

Matt 28:2 the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.

The other gospels simply note that the stone was open. Only Matthew describes the angel's action in rolling it away, probably because of the symbolism of the seals. And Matthew emphasizes the seals because his focus is on the Lord Jesus as the king, who overrules all earthly kings.

God deliberately broke the seals to mock the authority of Rome and the Temple hierarchy. The angel appeared, walked right up to the stone in the presence of the soldiers, and pushed it aside, breaking the seals. Then he sat on it, as much as if to say, "There. What are you guys going to do about that?" The

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soldiers would have killed any human who behaved in this way. But

Mat 28:3-4 His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: 4 And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead *men*.

Ps 2 prophesied the opposition of the kings (Gentiles) and rulers (Jews). The Psalm goes on to say,

Psa 2:4 He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.

He mocked them by breaking their seals, and thus despising their authority. The resurrection of our Lord is not just his victory over death, but the announcement of his claim to authority over all the earth:

Rev 11:15 The kingdoms of this world are become *the kingdoms* of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.