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Sealed by the Holy Spirit: A Biblical Exegesis of Sphragizō

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Abstract

The concept of being sealed by the Holy Spirit is better understood through an exegetical study of the Greek term *sphragizō*, as used by Paul in Ephesians 1:13, which exposes the figurative mark of ownership that validates the inclusion of believers into the body of Christ which guarantees their inheritance and secures their future. Following their faith in Christ, believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit. Critical observation, interpretation, and application of *sphragizō* establishes the term as an invaluable expression of God's plans for believers; a promissory gift given through the Holy Spirit as believers embrace and believe in the redemptive work of Christ; a seal of divine approval that identifies members of God's possession and recipients of His favor.

Keywords: sealed, Holy Spirit, *sphragizō*, Ephesians 1:13, stamp, mark, ownership, identity, faith

Introduction

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul establishes the essential concepts of the Christian faith. Theologically, Paul's letter focuses on the design and propagation of redemption, noting its provision through the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The work of the Trinity is attributed to the evidence of blessings bestowed upon believers of Christ who, according to Paul in Ephesians 1:13, are marked by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of identification. The following research aims to identify Paul's use of the Greek term *sphragizō* in Ephesians 1:13 as a figurative marking of ownership, an imprint of the Holy Spirit that validates their inclusion into the body of Christ, guarantees their inheritance, and secures their future.

Observation

Proposed Definition

Ephesians 1:13 (NASB) reads, "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise." The word *sealed*, transliterated from Greek as *sphragizō* and pronounced sfhrahg-ID-zoo,¹ appears to define a type of marking or stamp that identifies or declares ownership and/or approval.

Summary of Pauline Usage

In the context of Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul clarifies the spiritual blessings one receives through acceptance and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's use of *sphragizō* in Ephesians 1:13 is a declaration of identity, a marking of the Holy Spirit that is imposed upon believers to signify their inclusion into the body of Christ. Paul perpetuates the proposed definition as he reiterates *sphragizō* in Ephesians 4:30 (NASB) saying, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." The Greek term is also used in Romans 15:28 as Paul states, "Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain," as a way to designate the inclusion of Gentiles into the body of Christ for their acceptance and faith in the gospel. And, in 1 Corinthians 9:2 (NIV), Paul uses *sphragizō* to authenticate his apostleship by validation of the Corinthians through their acceptance of the gospel saying, "Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord." Finally, in 2 Corinthians 1:22 (NIV), Paul maintains use of the Greek term *sphragizō* as a symbolic marking placed upon the apostles identifying them as believers and followers of Christ by saying God "set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

¹ Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, "Seal," in *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2000), accessed July 27, 2020, wsb.to/&3nz8-D.

Summary of New Testament Usage

Overall, the term *sphragizō* is used fifteen times throughout the New Testament. In Matthew 27:66 (NIV) reads, “So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.” In this case, the term is used as a literal marking that identifies Jesus’ grave, but in most cases, *sphragizō* is used to describe figurative markings. For instance, John 3:33 (NASB) uses the term as an affirmation of the truth of God, saying, “He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true” and John 6:27 (NIV) uses the term to denote God’s approval of Jesus Christ, saying, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

The book of Revelation finds the symbolic imprint, *sphragizō*, demonstrating God’s ownership of angels in verse 7:2a (NIV), stating, “Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God.” Verse 7:3 (NIV) illustrates the protection of believers from God’s wrath, saying, “Do not harm the land of the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” Also, 7:4-8 (NIV) affirm the seal as a sign of inclusion of the twelve tribes, saying, “Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben ... Gad ... Asher ... Naphtali ... Manasseh ... Simeon ... Levi ... Issachar ... Zebulun ... Joseph ... Benjamin 12,000.” Finally, verse 9:4 (NIV) is an echo of the same protection offered in 7:3 and states, “They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.”

Interpretation

Rejection of Usage

Revelation 10:4 (NIV) reads, “And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down” and 22:10 states, “Then he told me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near.” The term *sphragizō* is used in these Scriptures to describe the preservation of John’s writings. In Revelation 20:3 the term indicates the protected incarceration of Satan asserting, “He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.” In these cases, *sphragizō* is used to describe preservation or containment so, because these Scriptures are not in agreement with the usage of *sphragizō* in Ephesians 1:13, it is imperative they be eliminated from consideration for translation or interpretation.

Proper Translation of *Sphragizō* (Ephesians 1:3-14)

To properly interpret the Greek term, *sphragizō*, it is necessary to consider the context of Ephesians 1:3-14. The purpose of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was to challenge Jewish dependency on human fulfillment and works of the law so, he maintained his proclamation of the gospel and insisted Christianity was built upon divine provision through which salvation was attained by faith in God. “Ephesians is the letter in which the will of God is mentioned the most, the will of God being the complete salvation of the elect in Jesus Christ.”² As was often the case, Paul opened his letter with a benediction then, he offered praise to “the God and Father of our

² G. Breed, "Ministry to the Congregation According to the Letter to the Ephesians," *Acta Theologica* 35, no. 1 (01, 2015): 40, accessed July 27, 2020, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2183263555%3Faccountid%3D12085>.

Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (vs. 3).

According to German Reformer, Martin Bucer, *the heavenly realms* clarifies the location of Christ while the word, *spiritual* should be viewed as “‘characterized by the Spirit’ or ‘given through the Spirit’s agency’.”³ “The word ‘spiritual’ should not suggest something like ‘immaterial and otherworldly’ ... our blessings are ‘spiritual,’ not because they are vague or intangible but because they are mediated by the Holy Spirit.”⁴ Additionally, Bucer insists believers find their blessings in Christ, “not in some ethereal realm or unknown future. Inasmuch as believers find their identity in Christ, their blessedness is identical with Christ’s. If Christ is seated in the heavenly places, as Ephesians 1:20 indicates, then believers are in turn the recipients of all the privileges that attend Christ’s exalted state.”⁵ As Paul affirms Christ’s election of believers for the purpose of being “holy and blameless in His sight. In love ...” (vs. 4), Bucer suggests *in love* is an implication of “God’s loving embrace of us in the Son ... there is an experiential holiness that is the fruit of the imputed holiness of Christ. Bucer attributes the former to the work of the Spirit and also grants it a confirmatory role in relation to election.”⁶

Paul continues by praising God for choosing believers: in Christ (vs. 3, 4, 5, 6); before the foundation of the world (vs. 4); to be holy and blameless in His sight (vs. 4); in love for the purpose of adoption (vs. 5); to the praise of His glorious and generous grace (vs. 6). He also praises God for His redemption: through the blood of Christ (vs. 7); and the forgiveness of sins (vs. 7); according to the riches of his grace (vs. 7-10) which He lavished on us (vs. 8); according to His wisdom and insight (vs. 8); made known to us through the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure (vs. 9), for the purpose of uniting all things in Christ (vs. 10). Then, Paul praises God for providing believers with an inheritance through their union with Christ: to those who are predestined according to the His plan (vs. 11); for the praise of His glory (vs. 12). Finally, as people hear the truth of the gospel and believe, Paul praises God for marking them with a seal, *sphragizō*, of the Holy Spirit (vs. 13) who guarantees the inheritance, of those whom God possesses, until the day of redemption (vs. 14).

In ancient times, a *sphragizō*, translated in English as seal(s, -ed, -ing), was originally produced to secure and protect documents, jars and/or bottles, but was eventually used as a personal marking to indicate origination of possession, authorship, and/or ownership. To seal something is to imply or confirm “a contract, which is legally valid by virtue of the seal that the contracting party places on the document. By virtue of the seal, the person vouches that they will honor the contract; so that seal serves as a guarantee in the person’s absence, as effectively as if he were actually present. Christians have received such a seal from God.”⁷

While *sphragizō* can be translated, “to stamp (with a signet or private mark) for security or preservation (literally or figuratively),”⁸ it is appropriate to interpret Paul’s usage of *sphragizō*

³ Michael Allen and Jonathan A. Lindsey, *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Exegesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 88.

⁴ Mark D. Roberts, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2016), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 24.

⁵ Michael Allen and Jonathan A. Lindsey, *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Exegesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 87.

⁸ Muhammad Wolfgang G. A. Schmidt, “Seal,” in *A Greek-English Reference Manual to the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament. Based on Tischendorf’s Greek New Testament Text and on Strong’s Greek Lexicon with*

in Ephesians 1:13 as “a mark ... to indicate ownership (John 6:27; Romans 15:28; Revelation 7:3-5, 8),”⁹ It is also important to understand, in this context, “whatever is meant by sealing, it is something which follows faith.”¹⁰

Application Sealed by Faith

As people come to believe in the gospel and submit to their faith in God, they are marked with a *sphragizō* of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of indicating authenticity; “a seal was used to stamp a thing as genuine, and to distinguish from counterfeit.”¹¹ In ancient days, possessions were marked with unique wax seals so, “when believers in Christ are given the Holy Spirit, they are sealed in Christ, and therefore they know that they belong to God (see also 2 Cor. 1:22).”¹² According to the Catholic Church, *sphragizō* is depicted as the Holy Spirit’s mark of confirmation which, in addition to grace, is administered as a “sacramental character or seal by which their recipient is made a member of the Church.”¹³ It is evidence of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit as He “bears witness that Christians are truly children of God (Romans 8:16).”¹⁴

With consideration for its figurative use in Ephesians 1:13, Paul professes *sphragizō* is the “certainty of divine approval”¹⁵ not only for Christian Jews, but also for Gentile Christians. As they experience the Holy Spirit, they are marked “as members of God’s ‘possession,’ and, in so doing, makes the reception of the Holy Spirit, instead of circumcision, the key identity marker of those who ‘live in the fullness of time.’”¹⁶ The New Testament symbolically uses the term *sphragizō* to confirm “God’s personal ownership ... Jesus exhibits God’s personal name because He is God’s personal expression ... the Spirit is God’s mark of ownership on the believers – it also means that the Spirit protects and preserves the believers.”¹⁷

Ephesians 1:13-14 also gives evidence of the work of the Trinity. “God is the one who seals, Christ is the sphere in which the seal is done, and the Holy Spirit is the instrument of the seal.”¹⁸ As one embraces and believes in the redemptive work of Christ, only then will the

Some Additions and Amendments (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2017), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 517.

⁹ Frederick William Danker, “Seal,” in *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 344.

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, “Chapter 1: Verses 3-14” in *A Commentary on Ephesians* (Word Search Corp, 2004), accessed July 27, 2020, wsb.to/&3P6ws2.

¹¹ Robert Haldane, “Chapter XV - Romans 15:1-33: Verse 28,” in *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Word Search Corp, 2006), accessed July 27, 2020, <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com/reader>.

¹² Mark D. Roberts, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2016, accessed July 27, 2020, 33, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹³ Gregg R. Allison, “Indelible Mark,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 78.

¹⁴ Gregg R. Allison, “Inner Testimony of the Holy Spirit,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 80.

¹⁵ Orville J. Nave, “Seal,” in *Nave’s Topical Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1979), accessed July 27, 2020, wsb.to/&kXF5r.

¹⁶ Tucker S. Ferda, “‘Sealed’ with the Holy Spirit (Eph 1,13-14) and Circumcision,” *Biblica* 93, no. 4 (2012): 558, accessed July 27, 2020. <https://search-ebsochost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001949766&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁷ Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, “Seal,” in *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2000), accessed July 27, 2020, wsb.to/&3nz8-D.

¹⁸ Eldon Woodcock, “The Seal of the Holy Spirit” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 155:618 (April 1998): 4, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://www-galaxie-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/article/bsac155-618-02>.

believer be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and imprinted with God's character through "the Holy Spirit's acts of regeneration, enlightenment, and sanctification."¹⁹ The purpose of the impression or *sphragizō* is to establish God's possession and/or ownership, providing identity for believers and protection from the anticipated catastrophes of end times.

Heirs to God

A Christian's receipt of the Holy Spirit in this life is described as the 'seal', 'pledge', 'guarantee', or 'first installment' for what is to come (Eph. 1:13-14, 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5) ... the Holy Spirit is the "pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people,"²⁰ "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance."²¹

Though *sphragizō* can be used to express safety, protection, or verification, in the context of Ephesians 1:13, identification of ownership is more appropriate. In fact, the divine appointment of *sphragizō* suggests "God is to be blessed because he seals believers, claiming them as his own, and securing their future inheritance ... believers are sealed with the Spirit which is the indication that they are possessed by God and thus guarantee a future inheritance."²²

"The seal is the Holy Spirit of promise ... the fact that the children of God wait for their inheritance, truly wait, is in itself the proof, guarantee, and surety that they do not wait in vain. God can vouch for his own promise, and the fact that God is with us as the pledge of his promise and personally witnesses to his own trustworthiness constitutes our sealing with the Holy Spirit."²³

"As an heir of the world to come, the Christian is *sui juris*, or rather *divini juris*. His fellowship with God comes with unassailable certainty because he has it like he has nothing else. It is real certainty precisely because it depends on God and not on himself."²⁴ The *sphragizō* of the Holy Spirit assures believers "they are sealed for salvation; i.e., they are certain of being saved ... marked with a seal for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30) ... assures us of God's favour; it indicates who belongs to him; and it makes their salvation certain."²⁵

Secured Future

As a result of one's union with Christ, the Holy Spirit watches over, preserves, and protects believers. He is the promised Holy Spirit of the Old Testament ("I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." Ezekiel 36:26-27, NIV; "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke." Joel 2:28-30, NIV), poured out by Christ ("And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

²⁰ Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), accessed July 27, 2020, 127, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108629287>.

²¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Ephesians: Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), accessed July 27, 2020, 12, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5153170>.

²² Benjamin L. Merkle, *Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 62.

²³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), accessed July 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 87.

²⁴ Ibid., 85.

²⁵ Charles Hodge, "Chapter 1: Verses 3-14" in *A Commentary on Ephesians* (Word Search Corp, 2004), accessed July 27, 2020, wsb.to/&3P6ws2.

Holy Spirit’.” John 20:22, NIV; “Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.” Acts 2:33, NIV). “The Spirit as our seal is an eschatological gift from God anchoring our present salvation; indicating that we belong to him; guaranteeing our future, final redemption.”²⁶

The *sphragizō* of the Holy Spirit provides believers with a future-oriented, personal identity. Not only can believers be hopeful for a glorious future with God, but they also “have a taste and guarantee of it now. And that aspect of our identity comes from ‘outwith’ us, to use a word from Scottish English; but at the same time, it comes to reside within us—the promised Holy Spirit indwells us.”²⁷ Additionally, as the *sphragizō* of the Holy Spirit guarantees the future and inheritance of believers, their glorious future impacts who they are and how they will live, presently.

2 Corinthians 1:22 (NIV) assures believers that God has, “set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” Similarly, 2 Corinthians 5:5 encourages, “Now the one who has fashioned us for this Spirit is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” Both Scriptures reference the Spirit “as proof that our future in God is secure and that the Holy Spirit reassures us of this future blessing.”²⁸

Conclusion

Performing a biblical exegesis on the Greek term *sphragizō*, as used by Paul in Ephesians 1:13, exposes a gratuitous amount of evidence on the importance of the work Holy Spirit. God not only had an eternal plan for believers, but He was fully involved in carrying out the plan as Father, Son, and Spirit. While the focus of New Testament Christianity was a life lived *in Christ*, it also required a dependency upon God’s indwelling Spirit.

In Ephesians 1:13-14, Paul encourages, “*In Him*” (emphasis added), you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God’s own* possession, to the praise of His glory.” *Sealed*, in this context, is the English translation of the Greek term, *sphragizō*. which Paul and other New Testament writers use to describe a figurative marking of ownership given by the Holy Spirit. In the context of Ephesians 1:13, the seal is a secondary act that is preceded only by one’s hearing and having faith in the gospel.

For New Testament believers, the concept of being sealed was valuable and important. Just as religious cult members subscribed to the practice of tattooing cult images on their bodies, those who were *in Christ* viewed the seal of the Spirit as their emblem of faith. “The experience of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life is a sign to them and to others of the genuineness of what they believe. It provides the Christian with the inner assurance that they belong to God. The Spirit in the believer’s life is the undeniable mark of God’s work in and for them.”²⁹

²⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Ephesians: Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), accessed July 27, 2020, 12, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5153170>.

²⁷ Brian S. Rosner, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2017), accessed July 27, 2020, 186, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁸ Mark D. Roberts, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2016, accessed July 27, 2020, 33, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁹ John Phillip Stapp, “Renewing the Restoration: A Call for Spiritual Renewal within the Restoration Movement,” Order No. 9314184, Fuller Theological Seminary, Doctor of Ministry Program, 1993, in PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 23,

The *sphragizō*, or seal, confirms the inclusion of believers into the body of Christ and provides them with security and protection. Additionally, the seal is a verification of the believer's faith, providing them with a personal identity through the affirmation of God's ownership. As a reflection of God's love, the seal produces evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit who, by regeneration, enlightenment, and sanctification, leaves an impression of God's character upon believers.

Furthermore, the *sphragizō* is an expression of a promise fulfilled, the security of redemption, the guarantee of an inheritance made possible through a deposit made by Holy Spirit. The expression affirms salvation, the certainty of divine approval. As a gift from God, the *sphragizō* allows believers to experience the hope of redemption in real time because they have a sense of belonging, they are held secure in the promise of their salvation. The *sphragizō* supplies evidence of the important work of the Holy Spirit who, upon belief and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, vouches for the inclusion of believers into the body of Christ, provides a rooted identity that reflects the character of God, guarantees their promised inheritance, and offers peace of mind by securing their future.

Paul's use of the Greek term, *sphragizō*, is defined as a figurative marking of ownership, but it is also an invaluable expression of God's plans for believers. Ultimately, the *sphragizō* is a demonstration of God's commitment to His creation, a reflection of His love. Through faith in Christ, believers are marked by the Holy Spirit with the ownership of God that encourages them to embrace the inheritance and future promised to them.

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