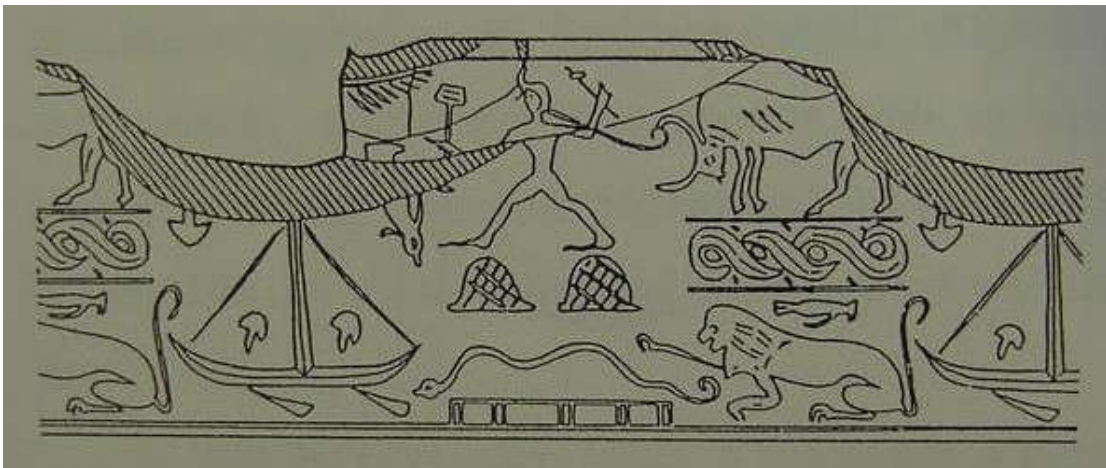


THE SEAL OF JOSEPH IN HIS PALACE AT *TELL ED-DABA*

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December 29, 2017, 11 Teveth 5778

Beth Midrash Ohel Moshe
Beit Shemesh, Israel



ABSTRACT: The symbolism on a cylinder seal impression found in the ruins of the Middle Bronze Age palace at *Tell ed-Daba*, dated to what some understand to be the 'early Israelite period' at Avaris, is given a fresh, thorough examination. A new interpretation is presented that replaces the inferior, Canaanite interpretation currently accepted by academia. This adds considerable weight to the already profound evidence linking the palace to the Israelites of the early Sojourn. When viewed through a biblical lens, the bulla clearly depicts early symbols of the Israelite tribes, evoking themes found in the blessings of Jacob to his sons in Genesis chapter 49, with motifs that would have been well understood among ancient Egyptians of the late 12th and early 13th Dynasties. The arrangement of the symbols indicates a strong, Joseph-centered bias. Accordingly, it seems likely that the owner of the seal, most likely the high official that owned the estate, may have been none other than the figure behind the biblical traditions of Joseph, or a chief among his heirs.

INTRODUCTION

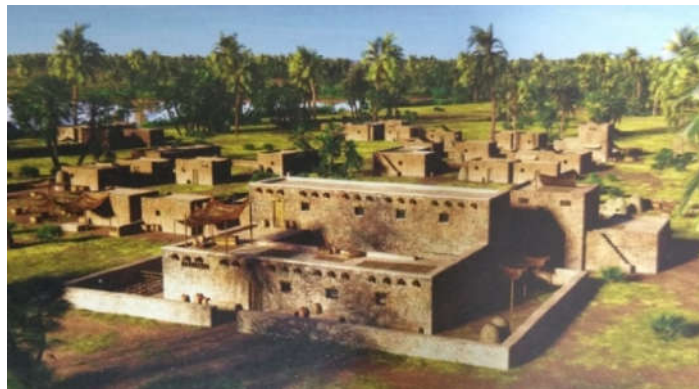
In 1997, David Rohl brought to global attention an archaeological find of profound importance in a field near modern Faqus, Egypt:

Standing out among the uncovered ruins of Middle-Bronze Age Avaris, *Tell ed-Daba Area F*, are the remains of a palace of a high-ranking official, excavated by Manfred Bietak with the Austrian Institute for Egyptology (see images below). Although the palace has an Egyptian style, it is understood by all that its chief occupant was a high-ranking Semitic official, on account of the graves in the cemetery of its palace garden. The honor given this Asiatic (another term for Semite) by the Egyptian crown was so great, he was given a pyramid tomb with a massive statue to commemorate his memory. It has been determined that the statue bore a striped, multi-colored coat, yellow-painted skin and flame-red hair, and held in its hand a throw-stick -- all quintessential marks of Semite ethnicity. That a Semitic official would be honored with a pyramid tomb is an anomaly with no equivalent in ancient Egyptian history. Most significant to our premise, it was found in Stratum G/4, dated to the 12th Dynasty, believed by some to be the 'early Israelite period' at Avaris (see further details on these points below).²



A reconstruction of the palace (right).³

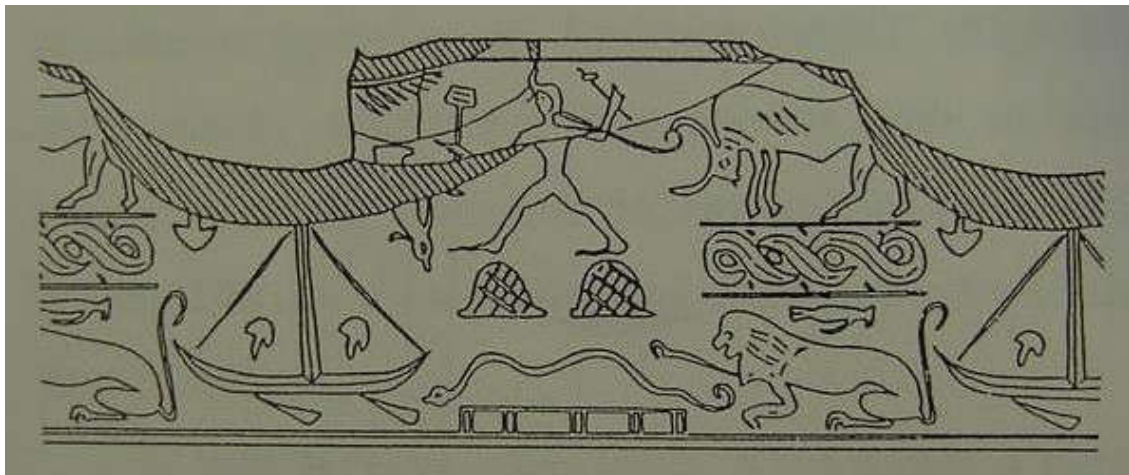
Significantly, this edifice was constructed right on top of the ruins of a previous structure in Stratum H, which it seems to replace: a stately residence of a characteristic, non-native, Syrian design. Every detail of this building, *the very first in Area F*, precisely fits what we would expect of the house of Jacob, whose family originated in Ḥarran, modern Syria. Genesis records that they were given the open area of Goshen to settle, after arriving in Egypt from Canaan (Gen. 46,34-47,6).⁴



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Rohl and other scholars in tow have treated at great length how, in many details, these structures are consistent with Israelite traditions about their early sojourn in Goshen and the career of the biblical Joseph. While Rohl's model has turned heads and created positive discussion, the remarkable case made by this first-class Egyptologist has not yet won over the academic orthodoxy, at least not openly. (This may have less to do with the biblical minimalism that still dominates the discipline, and more to do with a reticence to reassess the foundations of the discredited, standard chronology of Egypt.)

Apparently unnoticed in the discussion is a stunning bulla (seal impression) found by Bietak among the ruins of that grand, Egyptian-style palace. Presented here is a fresh, new interpretation of the symbols in that bulla, that **they represent early symbols for the 12 tribes of Israel**. It would have been created latter years of the tribal fathers, long after the passing of Jacob, or after their passing, in the days of their sons, when those "tribes" were still small clans. If my general premise is found tenable, if not in every detail, it would not only serve to further vindicate the identification of the palace as the bastion of Joseph; it would provide the first indirect archaeological evidence for the lives the 12 founding fathers of the Israelite tribes, key events in the Book of Genesis, and elements of a rabbinical *midrash*. However, lest the reader be misled that this is but an exercise in wishful thinking, the facts should speak for themselves.



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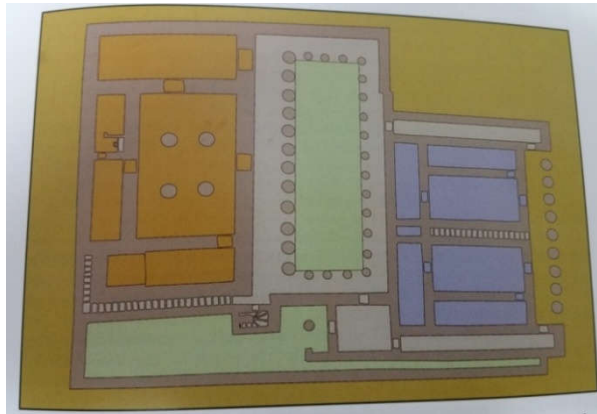
The accepted interpretation is that it depicts symbols from Canaanite religion, namely the deity *Baal-Şaphon* standing upon twin peaks, with the depiction of *El* as a bull and *Yam* as the sea. I believe the view presented here will be found to be more parsimonious to anyone not predisposed to reject the essential historicity of biblical traditions. Before analyzing the imagery in the seal impression, we must first build confidence that the palace remains among which it was found belonged to the biblical Joseph in his old age, or his chief heir, Ephraim (who is likely to be the early 13th dynasty vizier Iymeru son of Ankhu, see below).

What Identifies the Palace as Joseph's

Here are key reasons why scholars such as Rohl identify the palace with the stately mansion of the historical figure behind the biblical Joseph:

- The palace's location **in Avaris**, widely-accepted to be biblical Goshen.

- The palace's immediate predecessor being of **Syrian architectural style**, typical of Bronze Age dwellings in sites such as H̄arran.
- Its unique design with two central rows of **12 stately pillars**. This is what one might expect to have graced the bastion of the 12 tribes of Israel.



Plan of the high official's palace at Avaris. Note the two rows of 12 central columns.⁴

- The palace garden has a **cemetery with Semitic burials**. While Egyptian burials tend to be straight-bodied, buried on their backs, Semites buried their dead on their sides, in semi-fetal position. All the pottery and weapons found in the tombs are of Canaanite origin. Of all the burials, there were **12 prominent tombs; 12 main graves for men of seniority**. This is precisely what one might expect to find in the central bastion of Jacob's Israelites.



Model of the palace garden cemetery, by the Austrian Archaeological Institute.⁵

- Among the main graves, all vaulted tombs, is a **single grand pyramid tomb** with the broken remains of a 3-meter-high, sitting statue of a Semitic lord in **a long, rich, multi-colored coat**, believed by Rohl and others to depict the famous vizier *Ankhu*. The Torah records that Joseph wore just such a coat, the envy of his brothers (Gen. 37,3-4).

In a lecture at the British Museum in July 2004, Dorothea Arnold, Chairman of the Department of Egyptian Art at and its curator emeritus, determined that this statue must have been created in the same royal workshops in Hawara where the statues of Amenemhat III were carved. Then, to further stress her statement that this colossal statue excavated by Bietak is one of the most important discoveries of the last quarter of a century in Egypt, she

surprised all by proclaiming: "Some have identified this statue as Joseph, the Israelite vizier of Pharaoh in the book of Genesis."⁶ Considering how skeptical, understated and tight-lipped such eminent scholars tend to be, it was a weighty nod of acknowledgement that the Semitic vizier immortalized in the statue is likely to be **Ankhu**, the historical vizier who served under Amenemhat III, and the biblical Joseph.

Partial acknowledgement was voiced to David Rohl by a co-attende of the lecture, Professor Alan Lloyd of Swansea University, Chairman of the Academic Committee of the Egypt Exploration Society and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. He wouldn't mind labeling the Asiatic official "Proto-Joseph", but was puzzled when Rohl confronted him with the implications of the whole picture: Could we call the Asiatics residing in Avaris (Goshen) in the latter 12th and 13th Dynasties "Proto-Israelite"? (To this Lloyd replied "yes".) Followed by a "Proto-Exodus", and then a "Proto-Conquest" by a "Proto-Joshua" to describe the widespread destruction of Canaanite cities in the Middle Bronze Age?! **"Why not do away with all the 'Protos' and simply accept that the events described in the biblical narratives were based on real history?"** ⁷

⁸ Although Dr. Peter van der Veen (Professor of West Semitic Studies at the University of Mainz) chose not to equate Ankhu with Joseph in his own book (*Volk ohne Ahnen?* 2013), he humbly admitted this could have been wrong, and that the picture of Ankhu's viziership, in its many details, "fits the story of Joseph remarkably well".⁸



A reconstruction of the massive statue found in the pyramid tomb (right), wearing his trademark multi-colored coat.⁷

Ankhu is the core of the Egyptian name of Joseph recorded in the Torah, *Zafenath Pa`**aneah*** (the Z is a *ʿ-ṣadi*, pronounced as a sharp S), as it would most likely have been pronounced: *Zatenaf Pa-**ankh***, according to Dr. Kenneth Kitchen. This meant "He Who Lives". According to Rohl, it would have meant "The One Who Lives".⁹ The Torah relates that the pharaoh was awed by Jacob, Joseph's father (Gen. 47,8). Considering how the pharaoh witnessed the dramatic reunion between the vizier and his father (who had given Joseph up for dead for so many years), it is particularly fitting that he would name his vizier, "The One Who Lives".

Unlike any of the other main graves, which retained their bones and buried valuables, **the body in the pyramid tomb had long been removed** in what seems to be an act of piety (grave robbers plunder treasure, not bones).⁹ This matches what is related in the Torah and Book of Joshua: per the request of Joseph, that his bones not be left behind in Egypt but be brought to the Promised Land (Gen. 50,24-25), Moses himself brought Joseph's remains to the border of Canaan (Ex. 13,19), after which they were buried in Shechem (Joshua 24,32).

It is remarkable historical vizier Ankhu was followed by *two* sons who both became powerful viziers in their own right: **Iymeru and Ressenab**. The high rank of Joseph's *two* sons, **Ephraim and Manasseh**, is implied in the Torah, in that each would become the father of a separate tribe, and all Israel would bless our sons, "may God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh." (Gen. 48,20)

- **The palace's dating to the 12th Dynasty** (Stratum G/4, although the pyramid tomb over Ankhu's grave may have been added later). Scholars such as Dr. Charles Aling (professor of history at University of Northwestern and President of The Institute for Biblical Archaeology)¹⁰ and Bryant G. Wood (Research Director for Associates for Biblical Research)¹¹ agree that this is the period of the early Israelite Sojourn. Their own papers on the subject should be read.

The 12th dynasty is the corresponding time for Joseph's viziership according to New Chronology: Amenemhat III, again, one of the pharaohs served by Ankhu, reigned from ca. **1678 to 1631 BCE** (as co-regent with Senuseret III for 20 years). The Torah's own chronology, after all is considered, suggests that Joseph entered Egypt at 17 years old ca. 1662 BCE, and was elevated to high office in his 30th year, ca. **1670 BCE** (according to the widely adopted, Septuagint-based chronology of Edwin Thiele,¹² and the strong reasoning of David Rohl).

While providing a fair defense of Rohl's New Chronology is beyond the scope of this paper, it must be mentioned that Amenemhat III's placement in early Sojourn-era Egypt is anchored in several formidable lines of proof. For example, using a computer astronomy software, astronomer David Lappin revealed a **sequence of 37 out of 39 lunar month lengths that were recorded in 12th Dynasty contracts**. In comparison, the same regnal years in the conventional chronology only yield 21 matches at most, which is not statistically significant by comparison. After much scrutiny by experts, Lappin's data and methodology were found to be sound and solid.¹³ Lappin hails this pattern as "startling" support for Rohl's New Chronology.¹⁴ Other proofs, among many more, include a fixed date provided by archaeo-astronomy for (a) a solar eclipse close to sunset during Akhenaten's reign (observed from the city of Ugarit), occurring at 6:09 PM, May 9, 1012 BCE, and (b) a powerful, indirect proof for the beginning of Neferhotep I's reign circa 1540 BCE.¹⁵ This is based on the precise astronomical dating of an extremely rare event observed in Babylon: a lunar eclipse followed by a solar eclipse only 14 days later on February 25, 1362 BCE.¹⁶ **Note that these points are physics and math-based, lending them formidable weight.**

- Again, Amenemhat III's approximate regnal length is 1680-1633 BCE. Precisely during his reign was the Great Famine brought on by catastrophic inundations of the Nile, which prompted the creation of the canal Bahr **Yusuf** (noted also by Diodorus Siculus¹⁷). The pattern of flood height measurements recorded on the cliff face of the river gorge, dating precisely to this time, is testimony to this traumatic episode. It is one that can perfectly explain the "years of plenty" followed by the "years of famine" in the Joseph story; the latter being symbolically foreseen as fat, well-fed cows emerging from the Nile, followed by starving, emaciated cows *also* emerging from the Nile (Gen. 41).¹⁸ Moreover, contemporaneous Egyptian papyrus documents provide evidence for the centralized state gathering of grain, like that ordered by Joseph in Genesis.

GIVING THE BULLA A FRESH NEW LOOK

Again, when freshly examining this bulla in the context of Israel's traditions of its Patriarchal Period, **it appears to bear a symbol for each the 12 tribes**, mostly based on Jacob's blessings to his sons (Gen. ch. 49). Only if one ignores the biblical details can he insist that these can only be Canaanite deities. Note that this thesis does not have a "single point of failure". While nine of my identifications are strong, three are slightly speculative. Even if wrong, they do not undermine my premise: There are certain to be details about the tribal fathers' careers, identities, banners, and symbolic meaning in their culture that are lost to history. Some tribes are likely to have had more than one symbol. Finally, there may have been reasons to exclude one or more tribes from the seal.

The tribal fathers were, in order of birth: **Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and Benjamin**. It is remarkable and should be noted, so there be no need to repeat each instance, that the symbols given here for six of the tribes, **Simeon, Judah, Zebulon, Dan, Asher, and Joseph** (Ephraim and Manasseh), all of which seem to be depicted in the seal impression, appear precisely as described in the ancient *midrash*, Bamidbar Rabbah 2,7. (Regarding questions concerning perceived contradictions with rabbinical midrashic tradition, see the appendix.)

Right Column, Top to Bottom

Yoseph (Joseph) -- Bull. In both Jacob and Moses' blessings, Joseph is a fighting bull (Gen. 49,6, Deut. 33,17):

<p>יז בְּכוֹר שׁוֹרוֹ הַדָּר לוֹ, וְקַרְנָי רְאִים קַרְנֵי-וִי- בָּהֶם עַמִּים יִנְגַח יַחְדָּו, אֶפְסֵי-אֲרָץ ; וְהֵם רִבְבוֹת אֶפְרַיִם, וְהֵם אֲלָפֵי מְנַשֶּׁה. { ס }</p>	<p>17 His firstling bullock, majesty is his; and his horns are the horns of the wild-ox; with them he shall gore the peoples all of them, even the ends of the earth; and they are the myriads of Ephraim, and they are the thousands [or "captains"] of Manasseh.</p>
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Note the emphasis on the horns, both in the verse and image at right. These are also be a key feature in the future blessing of Moses, and the false prophecy of Šidqiyah ben Ḥananiah, who claimed that Ephraim would defeat Aram in war (II Chronicles 18,10).

<p>י וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ צְדָקְיָהוּ בֶן- חֲנַנְיָהּ, קַרְנֵי בַרְזֶל; וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה, בְּאֵלֶּה תִּנְגַּח אֶת-אֲרָם עַד-כְּלוּתָם.</p>	<p>10 And Šidqiyah the son of Ḥananiah made him horns of iron, and said: 'Thus saith <i>YHWH</i>: With these shalt thou gore the Arameans, until they be consumed.'</p>
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Re'uven (Reuben) -- Unstable water. In Jacob's blessing, Gen. 49,3-4:

<p>רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹרִי אַתָּה פְּחָד בְּפִימִם</p>	<p>Reuben, thou art my first-born... unstable as water.</p>
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Indeed, while Badmidbar Rabbah 2,7 gives mandrakes for the banner of Reuben, in Ḥabbani-Yemenite oral tradition, Reuben was associated with unstable water.^{lbid.}



Note the large size, high placement, and prominence of this symbol of Joseph in the seal. It would not only have conveyed the elite position of Joseph's clan in Egypt, it would have conveyed their dominant position among the Israelites.

Note how the bull is the only animal depicted with normal limb proportions. *This hints to a connection between the bull and the owner of the seal.*

Apparently due to his scandalous affair with his father's concubine-wife, Bilhah (Gen. 35,22), Reuben was likened to unstable water. This matches academic interpretation of this symbol as *Yam*, the sea.

It is noteworthy how the symbol that would represent Reuben suggests his weakness, and the bull of Joseph is standing right on top of it. This would communicate the ascendancy of Joseph (who would be given the status of firstborn, with a double inheritance) over Reuben, the actual firstborn of Jacob. Joseph may have felt that the self-control that he had exhibited by rejecting the sexual advances of the wife of Potiphar (Gen. 39,6-12), in contrast to Reuben's moral weakness, legitimized his taking the leadership role in the family.

Lewi (Levi) -- Bird of Prey. In Ḥabbani-Yemenite oral tradition,¹⁹ Levi was symbolized by a high-flying vulture.

While the precise identification of is less clear than the others, is most resembles a bird of prey such as a falcon, flying from left to right, with its beaked head pointing downwards, as we see in the photo below of a snail kite in perfect hunting pose:



This is a more appealing explanation than the prevailing opinion that it represents an oarfish. Considering its tail and head, neither or which resemble those of the oarfish, that is a most forced interpretation. The **split tail** seems to be a common way the Egyptians depicted bird tails, as seen in the images at right.

Neither head nor tail of the oarfish are anything similar:

There is no anal fin and the caudal fin is either quite small or absent with the body tapering to a fine point.²⁰

The thin line that descends in an arc beneath the creature, mostly likely represents its feet in mid-flight (in the images below, the birds are standing) or its wing. Whoever feels that a wing would have been drawn thicker should compare it with the paw of the lion just below the bird. It is the style of the artist.

Another hint it could symbolize the Tribe of Levi is that Levi was the **third** son of Jacob, and this is the **third** symbol from the top.



21



22

Above are paintings by Howard Carter of bird depictions from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamon.

Below are images of oarfish:



23



24

Y'hudah (Judah) -- a Lion. In Jacob's blessing, Gen. 49,9:

ט גור אריה 9 Judah is a lion's whelp... he
 יהודה... רבץ כפאריה couched as a lion, and as a
 וקלביא, מי יקיימו? lioness; who shall rouse him up?

Noteworthy is the low position of the lion of Judah; it is at the bottom of the image. Not only was Judah the author of the idea to sell Joseph in the biblical account (Gen. 37,26-27), he was the other leader within the Israelite clan, besides Reuben, over whom Joseph would have felt a need to show dominance.

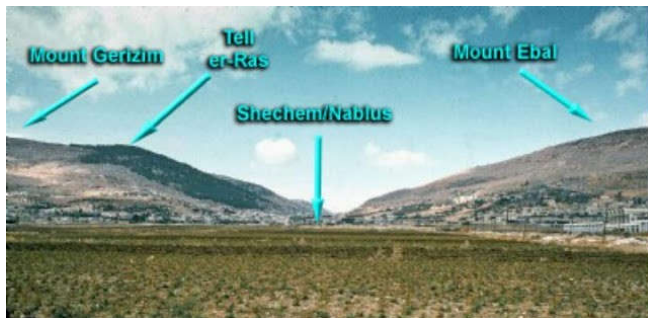
Another hint that this symbolized the Tribe of Judah is that Judah was the **fourth** son of Jacob, and this is the **fourth** symbol from the top.



25

Middle Column, Top to Bottom

Yoseph (Joseph) -- An anthropomorphic image of YHWH as a "Man of War" standing over the twin peaks that bracket Shechem. Below it is explained why this is the preferred option.



26

Nestled between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. `Ebal, Shechem is the crown of Jacob's inheritance, which he bequeathed to Joseph (Gen. 48,22), per his firstborn status. Mt. Gerizim remains sacred to the Samaritans until this day. While it is well beyond the scope of this paper, the evidence that it had been so in the Patriarchal period is great and profound.

Alternatively, it could be a symbol for the Tribe of **Binyamin (Benjamin) -- "He rests between the shoulders [hillsides]" with God hovering over him. "**

יב לבנימן אמר--:ידיד 12 Of Benjamin he said: The
 יהוה, ישכון לבטח beloved of YHWH shall dwell in
 עליו; חפץ עליו כל- safety by Him; He covereth him
 היום, ובין כתפיו שכון. all the day, and He dwelleth
 between his shoulders.



An anthropomorphic image of the seal bearer's chief Deity in His warrior aspect. In Ex. 15,3 YHWH is called quite plainly a "Man [Leader] of War", in the Song of the Sea.

For questions on the religious implications of such a depiction of God on a seal of Joseph, see the appendix.

Deeper Analysis: Benjamin's "Shoulders" or Joseph's Shechem?

Although the blessing to Benjamin that could be the source for the "Deity over two hills" imagery is found only in the *later* blessing to Benjamin by Moses in Deut. 33, it could easily have been based on a much earlier tradition. However, besides the added weight of this assumption, there is another reason to prefer the image to be depicting the twin hills abutting Shechem, Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. A closer analysis of Moses' blessings of Benjamin reveals a more likely understanding:

Although traditionally interpreted to be speaking of *YHWH* dwelling between Benjamin's "shoulders" (which would suggest the *Shekhinah* rests between two hills of Benjamin; i.e. those on either side of Mt. Moriah), the original meaning seems to allude not to *YHWH* dwelling, but to Benjamin's sitting securely, as a chick riding on the back of its mother-bird. Deuteronomy 33,12:

יב לבנימין אמר--ידיד יהוה, ישכון
לְבִטָּח עָלָיו; חֲפָף עָלָיו כָּל-הַיּוֹם, וַיָּבִין
כְּתִפָּיו שָׁכַן. 12 Of Benjamin he said: The beloved of *YHWH* shall dwell
in safety by Him; He covereth him all the day, and He
dwelleth between his shoulders.

In the Septuagint, the one "dwelling" is not *YHWH*, but Benjamin himself:

Jehovah's [sic] beloved, in safety will live. For God's shadow will always be with him, And between [God's'] shoulders, he'll rest.²⁷

Beloved by the Lord he shall encamp in confidence -- and God overshadows him all the days -- and he rested between his [God's] shoulders.²⁸

This seems directly connected to Deut. 32,11, which relates how *HaShem*, in a vulture-like aspect, bears His young (Israel) upon His "back":

יא כְּנֶשֶׁר יַעִיר קֶנֶד, על-גִּזְלֵי יְרֵחַף; יִפְרֹשׁ
כְּנָפָיו יִקְחֵהוּ, יִשְׂאֵהוּ על-אֲבָרְתָּו.
11 As a vulture that stirreth up her nest, hovereth
over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings,
taketh them, beareth them on her pinions



29

The "shoulders" might even refer to Benjamin's brother tribes who protected him from the North and South: Joseph and Judah.

Back to Joseph's perspective on these matters, which is what would truly count here: The one and only tribal portion called in the Torah "blessed by *YHWH*", and on account of "the precious things of Heaven" is Joseph's Shechem. Gen. 49,13:

יג ויליוסף אמר, מברכת יהוה ארצו, ממגד שמים מטל, ומתהום רבצת תחת **13** And of Joseph he said: Blessed of the *YHWH* be his land; for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and from the deep that coucheth beneath

Gen. 48,22:

כב ואני נתתי לך, שכם אחד על-אחיך: אשר לקחתי מיד האמורי, בחרבי ובקשתי. **22** Moreover I have given to thee Shechem, one portion above thy brethren, which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow.'

The spot that *epitomizes* "the precious things... from the deep that coucheth beneath", clearly referring to underground springs, is Mt. Gerizim. It is fed by *dozens* of such springs.³⁰ It would only be befitting for Joseph's seal to portray that choicest if not sacred part of his inheritance, **the twin peaks that bracket *Shechem***: Gerizim and Ebal, with *YHWH* standing over them, *as described in Gen. 28,13*:

יג והנה יהוה נצב עליו, ויאמר, אני יהוה אלהי אברהם אביך, ואלהי יצחק; הארץ, אשר אתה שכיב עליה--לך אתנגנה, ולזרעך. **13** And, behold, *YHWH* stood over it [the ladder, possibly atop Gerizim as the original Beth El], and said: 'I am *YHWH*, the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac. The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed.

Finally, Joseph may have only intended to depict symbols for the clans he desired to show dominance over. He may have felt no need to do so for that of his beloved, full brother who he favored so strongly.

Left Column (Top to Bottom)

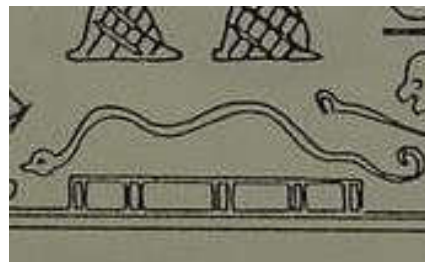
Dan -- "a Serpent Along the Path" (Jacob's blessing, Gen. 49,17)

יז יהי-דן נחש על-דרך, שפילן על-ארץ--הנשף, עקבי-סוס, ויפל רכבו, אחר. **17** Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake along the path...

This identification is truly straightforward, as the symbol is obviously a serpent.

Another hint that this may symbolize the Tribe of Dan is that, considering how the paw of Judah's lion is outstretched over the snake, this is the **fifth** symbol from the top. Dan was the **fifth** son of Jacob.

The "snake of Dan" is among the seven above-mentioned tribal symbols appearing in the seal impression that are clearly described in the midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 2,7.



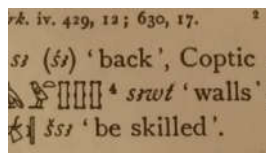
Shim'on (Simeon) -- the Gated Wall of Shechem.

According to rabbinical legend (Bamidbar Rabbah 2,7) the flag of Simeon bore an image of Shechem (the walls thereof), which he and Levi destroyed. This *midrash* is likely to have been based on an earlier tradition. For what we see in the bulla is a wall with a niched façade, or with gates or false doors along it. There are several examples in Egyptian architecture and writing that come close to this image: First is the niched enclosure wall of the Zoser funerary complex at Saqqara (the four images at right). Second, are the Egyptian hieroglyphs for wall and walls (below). Third is the wall with open doorways to the Temple of Seti I in Abydos (lowest image at right).

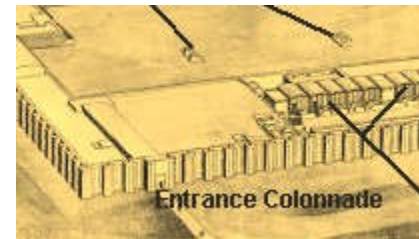
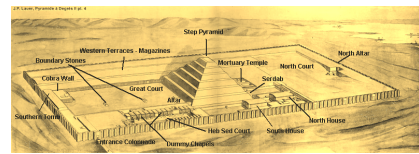
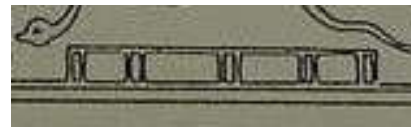
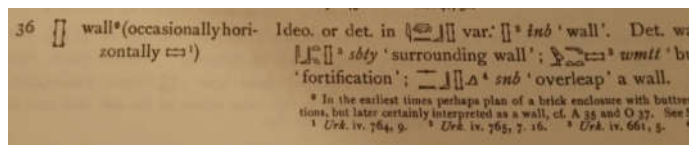
That this symbol is at the very bottom of image, in the lowest position among the tribal symbols, fits well with being a symbol for Simeon, who was clearly the main culprit in the sale of Joseph:

In his parting blessings on his deathbed, the patriarch Jacob laments how Simeon and Levi "wounded a bull" (Gen. 49:6), the powerful animal symbolizing Joseph (see above). Note how, when Joseph framed his brothers to be spies (before he revealed himself to his brothers), the Egyptian viceroy singled out Simeon, out of all the brothers, to be imprisoned (Gen. 42,24).

While Simeon's "city wall" symbol is next to the symbol of Judah, it is beneath his paw, suggesting what is known from tradition:³¹ While Judah had the idea to sell Joseph, he was saving him from Simeon's original idea to kill the young brother and throw him into a pit. While Torah relates that Simeon was forgiven (Gen. 45,4-5, 50,19-21), it is a deed that would not have been forgotten by Joseph. Just as the memory of the crime was maintained in the sacred chronicles of the Israelite nation, the Torah, it is only reasonable that a seal of Joseph would bear a subtle hint to it as well.



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Asher -- Rich in Oil (inheriting a region with plentiful olive groves) In Jacob's blessing, Gen. 49,20 and Moses' blessing in Deut. 33,24:

כד וילאֶשֶׁר אָמַר, בְּרוּךְ
 מִבְּנֵי אֶשֶׁר; יִהְיֶה רְצוּי
 אֶחָיו, וְטָבַל בַּשֶּׁמֶן
 רַגְלוֹ. 24 And of Asher he said: Blessed
 be Asher above sons; let him be
 the favoured of his brethren, and
 let him dip his foot in oil.

In Gen. 49,20:

כ מאֶשֶׁר, שֶׁמֶנָּה
 לֶחֶמוֹ; וְהוּא יִתֵּן,
 מִעֲדֵי-מִלְּךָ. 20 As for Asher, his bread shall
 be fat [or "oily"], and he shall
 yield royal dainties.

Near the top of this section, we see the lower side of an olive branch with 8 leaves. Asher was the *eighth child* of Jacob.

Naphtali -- an Deer/Antelope Set Loose, Goodly Words In Jacob's blessing in Gen. 49,21:

כא נַפְתָּלִי, אֵילָה שְׁלֹחָה-
 הַחַיִּת, אֲמַר־יִשְׁפָּר. 21 Naphtali is an antelope let
 loose: he giveth goodly words.

This is a more speculative identification, because the impression did not leave a clearly recognizable creature. The hatching prevents us from understanding if there is a back portion to the creature, and what it looks like. While it has been interpreted as a dolphin, a very reasonable option, there are two few slight difficulties:

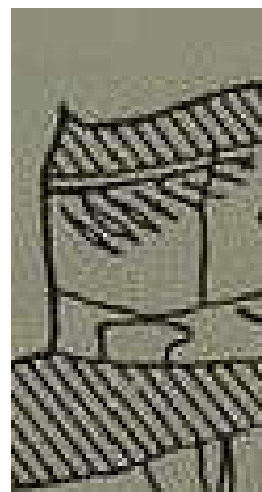
1. The position of the eye indicates the seal is depicting a side view, so we should not see two flippers on either side of the creature.
2. As a side view, it would have to be depicting the "dolphin" with a very elongated, narrow dorsal fin just behind the head.. Dorsal fins on dolphins are comparatively much shorter and further back.
3. While Egyptian heiroglyphs for fish have elements in common with my glyph for Naftali, they all have a a tapering tail. The rear part of the creature in question has widens towards the back.



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The next best option is that this is a side-view of that horned or long-eared "antelope let loose", running downwards on the seal. This could simply be due to lack of room: When an artist is trying to crowd the symbols for 12 tribes into a small space, it is only natural that one or more symbols would need to be crammed in at an odd angle.

NOTE: Even if this were indeed a sea creature, it



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Although the אַיִל-ayal is most likely a roe deer (above), it is often translated as "antelope" (below). Indeed, the ancients could have applied the same term to different animals in the region that looked outwardly similar.



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would not undermine my premise: While we would not be able to find a symbol for the tribe of Naftali, it could well be hidden in the hatching (the scratched out surface), Naftali may be symbolically represented differently here according to information or symbolism lost to history. Could a dolphin have somehow symbolized אִמְרֵי שֵׁפַר -- "goodly words" to the Hebrews? Finally, like Benjamin, Joseph may not have felt the need to show dominance over that clan.

It is noteworthy that the symbols I identify as representing Asher and Naftali are so close to one another. In the Land of Israel, those tribes would indeed be neighbors, in the northern-most part of the country.

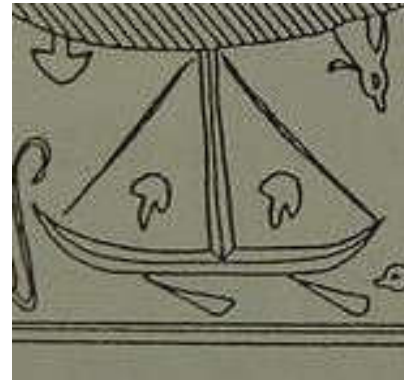
Zevulun (Zebulun) and Yissakhar (Issachar) -- a Ship with the Bounty of Overseas Trade Therein.

Although Issachar is called a "strong-boned donkey" in Gen. 49,14, Moses would bless him in a single verse together with Zebulun. They are blessed with the bounty of the seas (Deut. 33,18-19).

As in the case of Benjamin, Moses' blessing would easily have been based on an earlier concept from well before Moses' time, characterizing the careers of Issachar and Zebulun. Indeed: the foundational sources for the Masoretic Text are the Ben Asher and Ben Naftali codices. In the former, Issachar is written יִשָּׁשְׂכָר, a shortened form of יִשָּׂא שֶׂכֶר -- "he will incur reward", or "earn payment". In the Ben Naftali, it is יִשָּׁשְׂכָר, either from יֵשׁ שֶׂכֶר -- "there is reward/ payment/earning", or a shortened form of אִישׁ שֶׂכֶר -- "man of earnings". These befit a tribe of traders.

The bounty depicted here is clearly rare mushrooms, a royal delicacy in Egypt. Considered to be the "food of the gods", they were the exclusive treat for those of high birth:

The ancient Egyptians called mushrooms "sons of the gods" and "plants of immortality" and thought that the storm god Set created them by hurling lightning bolts coated in mushroom-seeds to earth. Consuming mushrooms was the exclusive privilege of the pharaoh and his dining companions. Hieroglyphs carved some 4,600 years ago [at right] forbid common men from even touching mushrooms because they were strictly provender for the high-born. The pharaoh Khufu... adored truffles and made sure the royal table was always supplied with these rare desert-born fungi.



Amanita muscaria contains potent psychoactive compounds, and some believe that the Greeks used it to induce altered states of consciousness. (Photo by Mikhail Kochlev/shutterstock.com) ⁴¹



An inscribed Egyptian tablet. The Egyptians crafted laws prohibiting commoners from eating mushrooms. (Photo by George Shuklin. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported.) ⁴⁰

"Not only did the Egyptians think mushrooms were scrumptious; they were also considered health food. ...⁴⁰

According to Stephen R. Berlant, the obsession by ancient Egyptians for mushrooms, particularly psychoactive mushrooms, went so far that "the Egyptian White and Triple Crowns were originally primordia of the entheogenic *Psilocybe (Stropharia) cubensis*." In a unique paper, he develops a fascinating case:⁴²

...the plant known commonly as the Eye of Horus, which Egyptians included in cakes and ales designed to spiritually rebirth the living and the dead, was an entheogenic mushroom cap entirely analogous, if not identical to Soma.

Accordingly, it would have been a perfect symbol to communicate the great value of the goods traded by sea-faring Zebulon and Issachar, "the bounty of the seas".

The ship and valuable cargo, representing trade, are very prominent in the seal image. This connects us to a key observation by Bietak, regarding the palace at Tell ed-Daba, among whose ruins the bulla was found (emphasis added):

There is no evidence that the palace was any kind of royal residence; Bietak hypothesizes on the basis of inscriptional material that it was the headquarters of **an official who supervised trade** and mining expeditions across the northeastern border (Bietak 1990: 69).⁴³

Gad -- a Symbol of Luck, Good Fortune (especially in Fertility). (Gen. 30,10-11) When the matriarch Leah exclaimed, "Gad [luck] has come!" (below), she was referring to the fortuitous blessing of fertility -- the context in which the name was given:

וַיִּלְדֶּה זִלְפָּה שְׂפָחַת לְאֵה--לְעֵקֶב בֶּן. **10** And Zilpah Leah's handmaid bore Jacob a son.

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאֵה, בָּגַד (בָּא גָד); וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ, גָּד. **11** And Leah said: 'Fortune is come!' And she called his name Gad.

It is entirely possible that Gad is being symbolized here by an upside-down mushroom, just as the symbol for Naftali would be at an odd angle, for the same reason proposed above. In that case, this would be an entheogenic mushroom conveying "divine fortune from heaven".



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Alternatively, considering that the context of his name-giving was fertility, the symbol could well be an undetailed depiction of the mushroom shape of the tip of a circumcised phallus. Although, as proposed above, it could be a depiction of an actual mushroom, as in the symbol for Issachar and Zebulun's trade bounty; unlike the exquisite mushrooms in the ship below, this one is *upside down*, the position of a phallus. As such, it may have conveyed "divine blessing from above" in the culture of that time and place.

As Dr. John D. Meade makes perfectly clear,⁴⁵ circumcision was not a uniquely Israelite practice, but existed in ancient Egypt from far earlier than the 19th century BCE, the time period of Abraham. Accordingly, this would have been a very well-known concept to the Egyptians in Joseph's time.

CONCLUSION

I hope that the above analysis makes it clear that the seal impression found at *Tell ed-Daba* indeed depicts early symbols of the 12 tribes of Israel. It should hopefully complete the impression of reputable scholars: that the palace there was none other than the bastion of the Israelites of the early biblical Sojourn.

As noted earlier, this thesis does not have a "single point of failure". Concerning the three identifications that are somewhat speculative; even if they are off, they do not undermine my premise. There are likely to have been details about the tribal fathers' careers, identity, banners, and symbolism in their culture of which we are unaware, lost to history.

Nonetheless, the wealth of evidence cannot be dismissed: The imagery not only reveals matches many of the tribal blessings found in the Torah, but reflects information about their birth order (found in Genesis chapter 28) and the power struggle among the brothers as related in Genesis. It bears motifs from early Israelite religion, found in Genesis and Exodus, that the ancient Egyptians would have understood. Note the following points that restate some of main observations:

- Six tribal symbols corresponding to **Simeon, Judah, Zebulun, Dan, Asher, and Joseph** (Ephraim and Manasseh), all of which seem to be depicted in the seal impression, appear precisely as described in the ancient *midrash*, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 2,7.
- The height, size, and prominence of the "bull of Joseph", and that it is the only animal drawn with normal limb proportions

- The equivalent height, size and prominence of the symbol of Joseph's Shechem, the crown of Jacob's inheritance; unless it is the symbol of Joseph's beloved full-brother Benjamin
- The bull of Joseph stands right over the unstable water of Reuben, showing his dominance over the true firstborn of Jacob,
- The symbols for Simeon and Judah, the major culprits in the sale of Joseph, are beneath all the others at the very bottom of the image.
- The order of the symbols in the main column, from top to bottom, would be:
 1. Joseph (having firstborn status, with a double inheritance)
 2. Reuben (the deposed firstborn of Jacob)
 3. Levi (the third son of Jacob)
 4. Judah (the fourth son of Jacob)
 5. Dan (the fifth son of Jacob)
 6. Simeon beneath them all (as the leading culprit in the mischief done to Joseph in their youth)
 7. Asher's place in the family as the eighth son is hinted to as well, with an eight-leafed olive branch

Based on all the above and more, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this is none other than the signet seal of the House of Joseph from the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, communicating the greatness of their family to 13th Dynasty Egypt, as well as their dominance over their nascent brother tribal families. The brother-founders of Israel's 12 tribes should no longer be dismissed as mythical figures. Between their excavated graves and the cultural memory of their legacy enshrined in this seal, matching so many biblical details, they have made their appearance as real historical personages.

Acknowledgements and References

Beyond the broad vistas he has opened up for the world regarding the ancient past, I extend my deep, heartfelt thanks to my mentor, colleague, and dear friend, David Rohl for his invaluable critique, advice, tireless guidance and support. I thank my students Ben Israel, and Ephraim Wiederman for their own contributions to the work. I thank my dear wife Levana for her enduring patience and support of my efforts.

Above all, however "un-academic" this may be, recalling the verse from my tradition, 'ראשית חכמה יראת ה'--"the beginning of wisdom is the awe for *HaShem*" (Psalm 111,10), I thank the Holy One Blessed Be He for opening up my eyes to the insights shared in this paper and others, for the time and strength it took to write them, and for the continued wisdom to maintain my balance between reason and faith.

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All quotes from TaNaKh are according to the authentic Yemenite manuscript edition posted on www.mechon-mamre.org. The English translations are, with a few slight modifications by the author, from the JPS Bible based on the electronic text © by Larry Nelson.

APPENDIX

Regarding Contradictions with Jewish Tradition

Those of a more puritanical, religious bend may be offended by the notion that Joseph would have a few of the symbols on his seal that I propose. They should recall that Joseph was an ancient Egyptian Hebrew from Canaan, and his seal would have needed to convey ideas according to the cultural norms of his ambient. To impose our own cultural taboos on the past, especially such early times, long before the Torah was given at Sinai, is not an honest search for truth.

While it is only natural for a believing Jew to raise an eyebrow at the notion of Joseph's seal bearing an anthropomorphic portrayal of God, **it would be another 200 years until the Torah would forbid this**. This seal clearly seems designed to convey concepts to the Egyptians in imagery that they would understand. Moreover, this seal could only have been created many years after Jacob's parting blessings, either in Joseph's final years, or in the days of his chief heir after Joseph's passing. We cannot know how zealous the Hebrews were in guarding *all* of our unique religious taboos at that point in history, but tradition holds that the Hebrews were generally assimilating into the idolatrous environment in which they lived. Sadly, the primitive belief in the Creator having a body persisted among Jews into medieval times. While it is utter heresy in the tradition codified by RaMBaM (Maimonides), established *halakhah* in our day, Rabbi Avraham ben David attacked his position. Arguing against *Hilkhoth Teshuvah* 3:7, he wrote: "many, and his [RaMBaM's] betters have believed just that [that God has a body]"¹ If a few Jewish thinkers believed thus so late in history, and isolated talmudic statements can raise an eyebrow,² we cannot know how far Hebrew faith had evolved by the time of Joseph and Ephraim.

It can frustrate some Orthodox Jewish scholars that archaeological discoveries can lead us to reconstruct biblical historical realities that contradict Talmudic legends, called *midrashim* or *aggadah*. One example is the legend that not only were Joseph's bones brought out of Egypt and interred in the Holy Land, but each and every tribe did the same with the remains of their tribal father (Yalqut Shim`oni, Sefer HaYashar). If the palace remains excavated at Tell ed-Daba are indeed the bastion of the early Israelites, this *midrash* has been falsified as historical truth. Just as one understands from a plain reading of the Torah's faithful account, only the bones of Ankh-Joseph are missing. How could such a widely-believed legend be historically untrue?

First, it should be noted that not only is this idea totally absent from the biblical narrative --not even hinted at-- it is hard to know how such a noble, national undertaking could have escaped any biblical mention. Moreover, it is not difficult at all to understand how such a legend could be born in a culture that has always desired to inculcate our children with the importance of honoring the deceased.

Ba`alei ha-midrashim, authors and compilers of those teachings, lived some 1700 to 2200 years after the life and times of Joseph. Most of those legends were not written and taught for the purpose of objective historical reporting, but as vehicles to convey spiritual insights and values, such as the awesome deed of honoring the dead. However, even regarding those *midrashim* that were truly intended to reconstruct or convey biblical realities, it is well known that the RaMBaM (Maimonides) taught that *even received traditions* that are not fundamental tenets of faith can be reinterpreted when found to contradict scientific discovery. (Guide For the Perplexed 2,25)

While it is common for the RaMBaM to be unfairly sidelined on this matter as a "rationalist", a "philosopher", or an "Aristotelian", he walked firmly in the footsteps of his predecessors. The early medieval sage Sh'muel HaNaggid (Samuel Ibn Naghrillah, 10th century C.E.), perhaps the highest ranking rabbinical figure of his generation, plainly wrote in *Mevo HaTalmud*, his guide for understanding Talmud, reprinted in every volume of the traditional Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud:

והגדה הוא כל פירוש שיבוא בתלמוד על שום עניין שלא יהיה מצוה זו היא הגדה. ואין לך לתלמוד ממנה אלא מה שיעלה על הדעת.

And *aggadah* [legendary *midrash*] is any explanation that is brought in Talmud on any matter that does not pertain to a commandment [*mišwah*]. **And one is not to learn from it except that which makes rational sense.**

He walked in the footsteps of the Geonic Rabbis. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote (emphasis added):³

In my humble opinion we must not be more clever and more pious than our great early authorities, and we should follow in their footsteps; one who separates himself from them is as if he has separated himself from life. [This refers to] **the Geonim Rav Sherira and Rav Hai Gaon and Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon** and, following in their footsteps, the early authority, **Rabbeinu Chananel** (Shitah Mekubetzeth, Bava Metziah 59b), and later, **Rytva**; their words were cited in different places in *Ein Ya`aqov* by the editor ("HaKoteiv"). They all taught the nation wisdom and gave over to them this principle: words of Agadah are only subjective and conjecture, and we only derive from them that which is compatible with logic... Rabbi Shemuel HaNaggid recorded this principle in *Mevo HaTalmud*, printed in the beginning of all our volumes of the Talmud...

Whatsoever is proven to be true, however it may clash with old and hallowed misconceptions, should be accepted. Older beliefs may still have deep moral or pedagogical purposes, but whatever is the most logical, parsimonious solution -- if it is within the parameters of permitted belief, should be embraced.

Even if what we find may run against our imagined picture of biblical reality, it is a small price to pay for what we gain: archaeological discoveries such as what I am calling the "Seal of Joseph" can give us breathtaking glimpses into the truth of past times that until now were merely legend, shrouded in myth. For the devout, I can only hope that the joy of our possibly having confirmed so many points of the biblical narrative should outweigh any frustration felt by contradictions with such pre-conceived notions. Ultimately, we have a choice: either to hold on to such prejudices and reject scientific discovery, or embrace what we have always hoped for: a confirmation of the historicity of at least the essential backbone of our traditions.

NOTES

1. Scholem, Gershom (Trans. by Allan Arkush). *Origins of the Kabbalah*. The Jewish Publication Society, Princeton University Press. USA (1987) p. 211.
2. One example, found in Bab. Talmud tr. *Berakhoth* 6a: just as Israel, the Holy One Blessed be He also "puts on tefillin". Across the spectrum of normative Orthodox Jewish thought in our time, this is understood *figuratively*. However, it does not seem that it always was, certainly not by all.
3. Levi, Yehudah. *Torah and Science: Their Interplay in the World Scheme*. Feldheim Publishers. Jerusalem, Israel (2006). p. 224