Hidden Treasure in Job 14:17

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AMID THE DIZZYING MIX of genres and metaphors that make up Job's fourth speech (chaps. 12–14) is a reference in 14:17 to a sealed bag of Job's transgression, which God subsequently plasters over:

Sealed in a bag would be my transgression, and You would plaster over my iniquity.	חתם בצרור פשעי ותטפל על־עוני

The image occurs in the final third of the speech in which Job addresses God directly (13:20–14:22), more specifically in a passage where Job longs for God to hide him away until God's anger has subsided (14:13-17).[1] In these verses Job opens himself to God and momentarily allows himself to hope for a renewed bond before he hastily abandons the dream, turning instead to images of erosion, which for Job more accurately depict God's effect on human hope (14:18-22).[2]

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[1] Although this kind of extended address is not unique to his fourth speech—Job concluded his previous two speeches with similar addresses (cf. 7:7-21; 10:2-22)—this instance is noteworthy because it is the last time Job speaks to God at length before the end of the book, when he responds to God's climactic appearance and speeches (40:3-5; 42:1-6). The three intervening addresses by Job to God are only two or three verses each (16:7-8; 17:3-4; 30:20-23).

[2] Building on the commentary of Carol A. Newsom ("The Book of Job," *NIB* 4:319-637, here 439), James L. Crenshaw has described this passage as "flirting with the language of prayer," because

Because of its obscurity, the image of the sealed bag in 14:17 has inspired various interpretations, but none has sufficiently accounted for all the details of the verse. Moreover, some interpretations seem inconsistent with the rest of Job's speech. For these reasons, I propose a new interpretation of the sealed and plastered bag, one inspired by the corpus of buried hoards that are attested throughout the Levant from the Iron Age. The new explanation based on this artifact more fully accounts for the image described in 14:17 and is more consistent with Job's outlook in these chapters.

I. Scholarly Opinions on Job 14:16-17

It will be useful to begin by quoting the verses that lead up to the image in question:

> If only you would hide me in Sheol
> And conceal me until your anger relented.
> You could set a time for me and then remember me.
> If a man dies, will he live again?
> All the days of my term, I would wait for my release to come.
> You would call, and I would answer you;
> you would long for the work of your hands.
> For then [כי־עתה] you would number my steps;
> you would not keep watch on my sin.
> Sealed in a bag would be my transgression,
> and you would plaster over my iniquity. (Job 14:13-17)

Interpreters agree that these verses begin with Job's vision of reconciliation with God and then shift abruptly to his despairing reality check; but there is considerable disagreement over when Job's flight of fancy breaks off. For some it ends in v. 16, in which Job seems to abandon his fantasy and to confront the hostile treatment he is presently receiving from God. According to this interpretation, the opening כי־ עתה in v. 16 marks a disjunction—"but now"—and "numbering steps" is an example of divine antagonism.[3] Of course, this reading requires some creative problem

of the intimate relationship Job imagines between himself and God ("Flirting with the Language of Prayer [Job 14.13-17]," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of John T. Willis* [ed. M. Patrick Graham et al.; JSOTSup 284; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999] 110-23, here 110). Newsom writes of this passage that "Job starts to be drawn into the language of prayer. . . . At the last moment, however, Job turns away from prayer's traditional words of appeal" (p. 439).

[3] This interpretation was prevalent among older commentaries, e.g., August Dillmann, *Hiob* (4th ed.; Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 2; Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1891) 125; Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Job* (trans. F. Bolton; 2 vols.; 1881–82; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 1:231-32; Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Hiob* (Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament 16; Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1897) 78; Georg Beer, *Der Text Hiob,*

solving, since "*not* keeping watch on sin" in v. 16b contradicts this portrait of divine antagonism.[4] Other interpreters (myself included), however, read vv. 16-17 as a continuation of Job's hopeful vision.[5] This understanding is based largely on other instances of כי־עתה in the Book of Job, where the phrase does not mark a disjunction (e.g., 7:21; 13:19). Of special note in this regard is 3:13, a verse in which כי־עתה occurs in parallel with אז.[6] Robert Gordis has noted that real disjunction in the passage comes not with כי־עתה in v. 16 but with ואולם ("But . . .") at the beginning of v. 18.[7] Finally, other examples of the phrase "numbering steps" (צעדי תספור) demonstrate that it does not indicate antagonism. As Job will say in his final speech, the issue is not that God "numbers all [his] steps" (31:4); he takes such oversight for granted and will even inform God of "the number of [his] steps" (31:37). Rather Job's protest is with God's misjudgment of what God has observed.

Kap. VI–XIV (Marburg: Elwert, 1895) 87; Samuel Rolles Driver and George Buehanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job together with a New Translation* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921) 130; Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* (KAT 16; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963) 236, 259; Édouard Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (1926; trans. Harold Knight; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1967) 203, but see more recently John Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 236-37; Samuel Terrien, *Job* (CAT 13; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1963) 123; and Edwin Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 87.

[4] Scholars have obliged with creative, if not convincing, solutions. Some emend תשמור to תעבר, based on the LXX's παρέλθῃ (see Driver and Gray, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* 130; and among earlier commentaries, see Heinrich Ewald, *Commentary on the Book of Job* [trans. J. Frederick Smith; 2nd ed.; Theological Translation Fund Library 28; Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1882] 168 n. 1; Duhm, *Das Buch Hiob*, 78; and Dillmann, *Hiob*, 126), but Harry Orlinsky has shown that this emendation misunderstands the LXX and is erroneous ("Studies in the Septuagint of the Book of Job," *HUCA* 29 [1958] 229-71, here 245). Alternatively, Fohrer reads v. 16b as a question: "wachst du nicht über meine Verfehlung?," which is actually closer to the LXX reading (*Das Buch Hiob*, 236). Perhaps the most creative of all is G. R. Driver's attempt to read לא as a "strong asseveration" expressed negatively ("Affirmation by Exclamatory Negation," *JANES[CU]* 5 [1973] 107-14, here 110).

[5] This interpretation has enjoyed favor in recent decades and is reflected in most common modern translations (see *RSV, NRSV, NAB, JPS, NIV*). Among its early proponents, see Karl Budde, *Das Buch Hiob* (HAT 2.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1896) 73. More recently, see Friedrich Horst, *Hiob 1–19* (BKAT 16; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968) 179, 211; Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1978) 132, 150-51; Marvin Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 100; David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word, 1989) 278, 333; A. de Wilde, *Das Buch Hiob* (OTS 22; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 164, 176-77; Norman Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 233, 243.

[6] Cf. certain examples of ועתה (Jonah 4:3; Gen 48:5; Num 14:17), which Uriel Simon refers to as "the consequential 'now'" (*Jonah* יונה: *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* [JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999] 38; I am grateful to Professor Gary Anderson for bringing this reference to my attention).

[7] Gordis, *Book of Job*, 151.

The relief that Job imagines in 14:16 is a return to God's impartial oversight and an end to the divine misguided fixation on sin.

The interpretation of כי־עתה has been complicated further by the obscurity of the imagery in v. 17, which features Job's transgressions sealed in a bag (חתם בצרור) and God plastering over (ותטפל) his iniquity. A survey of commentaries shows that various explanations have been proposed for this verse, with the interpretations of N. H. Tur-Sinai and Marvin Pope figuring most prominently. According to Tur-Sinai, the "bag" (צרור) is not really a bag but a "tied document," a meaning he extrapolates from the word's root meaning "to wrap (up), envelop."[8] For Tur-Sinai, then, the verse refers to a sealed document, such as the Elephantine papyri (fig. 1), on which Job's iniquity had been recorded.[9] Moreover, instead of "plaster" he translates ותטפל as "thou daubest," which he understands as a reference to the spreading of soft wax on the document on which a seal would be pressed. In regarding the "bag" as some sort of document, Tur-Sinai seems to have been influenced by the Targum, which, instead of צרור, reads בספר דוכרניא ("in the book of records") and instead of ותטפל, reads תחבר ("you will bind up my iniquity").[10]

FIGURE 1. A SEALED PAPYRUS FROM ELEPHANTINE.
COURTESY OF THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM.

Marvin Pope, on the other hand, correlates the imagery of v. 17 with the Mesopotamian practice of using small stones to traffic in sheep and goats. This interpretation is based on A. Leo Oppenheim's study of accounting practices at Nuzi, in which he argued that the exchange of such stones corresponded to the

[8] N. H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job: A New Commentary* (rev. ed.; Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1967) 240. He compares this usage to Isa 8:16, in which the prophet instructs a follower to "bind up [צור] the testimony, seal [חתום] the teaching among my disciples," though Tur-Sinai reinterprets (wrongly, in my view) the MT's לִמְדִי ("my disciples") as לְמוּדִים ("upon the strings with which it is tied") (ibid.).

[9] In his commentary, Tur-Sinai includes a picture of such an Elephantine papyrus—folded, tied, and sealed with wax (ibid., 241). That same image is reproduced here as fig. 1.

[10] David Stec, *The Text of the Targum of Job: An Introduction and Critical Edition* (AGJU 20; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1994) 96*; see also Céline Mangan, *The Targum of Job Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (Aramaic Bible 15; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 45 n. 12.

movement of animals.[11] The connection to Job 14:17 comes from one particular "egg-shaped" clay tablet that is inscribed with a tally of sheep and goats and which also contained forty-eight pebbles (fig. 2). Pope suggested that this egg-shaped container represents the kind of pouch that Job mentions in v. 17 and that his transgressions are being reckoned in the same way that sheep and goats were tallied at Nuzi.[12]

FIGURE 2. THE EGG-SHAPED TABLET FROM NUZI.
COURTESY OF THE SEMITIC MUSEUM, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

Finally, there is the most recent treatment of Job 14:17 in an article by Shalom Holtz, which appeared in a recent issue of *Biblica*. Holtz connects this verse and Hos 13:12 to the Neo-Babylonian legal practice of tying up (Akk. *rakāsu*) and sealing (Akk. *kanāku*) evidence that will later be used against a defendant at trial.[13] According to this analogy, Job 14:17 describes God's process of collecting and

[11] A. Leo Oppenheim, "On an Operational Device in Mesopotamian Bureaucracy," *JNES* 18 (1959) 121-28. Since Oppenheim's article, other studies have confirmed this practice elsewhere in Mesopotamia in contexts that predate the Nuzi evidence considerably, in some cases by several millennia. See Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "An Archaic Recording System in the Uruk-Jemdet Nasr Period," *AJA* 83 (1979) 19-48.

[12] Pope, *Job*, 103-4. Here we should note that Otto Eissfeldt was the first to explore the implications of Oppenheim's article for biblical studies. In a 1960 article, cited by Pope, Eissfeldt connected the unusually shaped clay tablet to the phrase "bundle of the living" in 1 Sam 25:29, where the Hebrew word for "bundle" (צרור) is the same as that for "bag" in Job 14:17 ("Der Beutel der Lebendigen: Alttestamentliche Erzählungs- und Dichtungsmotive im Lichte neuer Nuzi-texte," in *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig* [Philologisch-historische Klasse 105/6; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960] 22-26).

[13] Shalom Holtz, "Why Are the Sins of Ephraim (Hos 13,12) and Job (Job 14,17) Bundled?" *Bib* 93 (2012) 107-15.

preserving testimony of Job's transgressions: "God . . . bundles sins in a sealed package that is carefully stored for the time of judgment."[14] In this way the verse takes on a distinctly forensic flavor and also a punitive one, since the preserved evidence is not exculpatory but incriminating. At the time of the trial, it will be used to convict and punish the offender, who in the case of Job 14:17 is Job himself.

These explanations of Job 14:17 are important contributions to our understanding of the verse's obscure imagery, but at the same time, each comes with certain disadvantages that diminish its explanatory value. On the positive side, the interpretation of the sealed bag as a commercial or legal accounting device connects it to other legal and accounting metaphors in the Book of Job.[15] Moreover, such accounting devices are consistent with the sin-as-debt imagery that became prevalent in the Second Temple period.[16] Thus, an argument can be made that these three interpretations of the sealed bag resonate with Job's poetic style and with the larger Jewish discourse on sin.

The chief problems with all three interpretations are lexical: their tendency to stretch the meaning of certain terms in 14:17 and ignore other terms altogether. For example, Tur-Sinai's interpretation requires us to translate the noun צרור and the verb טפל with meanings that are unattested in the Hebrew Bible. And however illuminating Holtz's recent comparison to Neo-Babylonian court procedures may be, his argument is based on legal terminology that lacks direct parallels in Hebrew, as he himself notes.[17] We may also question how "sealing" and "plastering" fit into Holtz's forensic analogy.[18] Finally, Pope's interpretation of 14:17 is intriguing, but its relevance is questionable. Besides the distance in time and geography that separates Nuzi in the second millennium B.C.E. from the Book of Job (whenever we may date it), the egg-shaped container leaves unexplained several key details of the verse, namely, the bag and plastering.[19]

[14] Ibid., 115.

[15] The prevalence of the legal metaphor in Job's speeches has long been recognized (see Habel, *Book of Job*, 54-57). For the commercial accounting metaphor, see Job 7:1-3.

[16] See Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 27-39.

[17] Holtz, "Why Are the Sins of Ephraim (Hos 13,12) and Job (Job 14,17) Bundled?" 108 n. 5.

[18] One weakness of Holtz's article, which interprets Job 14:17 together with Hos 13:12, is his tendency to let the Hosea verse dictate his reading of the Job verse, as typified by this quotation: "But forgiving sin makes little sense in Hos 13,12; the context practically demands punishment. So, based on economy of argument, one would expect binding sins to have the same meaning in Job 14,17" (ibid., 112). In fact, there are no "binding sins" in Job 14:17. It is true that Hos 13:12 features the verb צרר, but in Job 14:17 there is only the noun "bag, bundle" (צרור). They share the same root, of course, but the distinction is significant. Moreover, Holtz's emphasis on "binding" in Job 14:17 obscures the actual verbs in the verse—חתם and טפל—which receive almost no attention.

[19] Oppenheim speculates that the egg-shaped container is a clay representation of the cloth or leather bags that would have been used in the same way ("On an Operational Device in Mesopotamian Bureaucracy," 124). Although Marvin Pope refers to this Mesopotamian accounting system and many commentators cite it as his interpretation, Pope actually doubts its relevance: "It is not clear whether Job's transgressions are represented as tallied by means of pebbles in a receptacle or bundle, or written on papyrus or leather, or whether they are sealed in order to be hidden away and forgotten, or filed for future reference" (*Job*, 104).

In addition to these lexical difficulties, I would also argue against the assumption, shared by all three interpretations, that the sealed bag refers to some sort of accounting device. Though such an interpretation may resonate with other imagery in the Book of Job, it is precisely the opposite of what we would expect in Job 14:17 in light of the preceding v. 16. Emendations notwithstanding, Job imagines in v. 16 a future in which God would *not* keep watch over his sin, but the proposals of Tur-Sinai, Pope, and Holtz require God to do just that in tallying and recording Job's iniquity.[20] These ancient parallels taken from the world of accounting and jurisprudence wrongly import into the verse the kind of hostile surveillance that Job wants to escape. Whatever the merits of these parallels from a historical-critical perspeetive, they do not succeed at an exegetical level because they are inconsistent with the rest of Job's prayer in 14:13-17.

Moreover, these interpretations ultimately do not bring us any closer to resolving the dilemma mentioned at the beginning of the article. Instead of clarifying vv. 16-17—whether they represent God's continued antagonism or Job's longed-for relief—these appeals to accounting devices and court dockets have created a new bifurcation among scholars. Will the document one day be opened and Job made to answer for his transgressions, as Holtz and others suppose?[21] Or will it be filed away and forgotten as in a genizah, as David Clines and others suggest?[22] Still others acknowledge both possibilities and admit that neither conclusion is certain.[23] The absence of a compelling explanation for Job 14:17 is the occasion for the present proposal, which reinterprets the imagery of the verse and argues against the punitive overtones that scholars have tended to read into it.

II. Sealed Bags and Buried Hoards

In place of such interpretations, I offer a new understanding of the sealed bag in Job 14:17, one that has a parallel in the *realia* of ancient Israel and also is consistent with the rest of Job's address to God in chaps. 13–14. In my opinion, the best context for interpreting the imagery of v. 17 is to be found in the corpus of buried hoards that have been excavated in the Levant in strata that date from the

[20] Although this request may seem to mark a departure from Job's previous requests that God provide just such a tally—for example, he asks God iu 13:23, "How many are my iniquities and sins? Make known to me my transgression and sin" (cf. 10:2)—those requests may best be interpreted not as demands for a bill of particulars but as rhetorical questions by which Job emphatically expresses his innocence (see Clines, *Job 1–20*, 318-19). But even if we interpret 13:23 and the like as genuine requests, this fourth speech marks the last time Job will make such a request. Indeed his desire to be concealed may be a sign that he has given up hope that there is a legal process by which he and God can resolve their dispute (see below).

[21] See also Driver and Gray, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* 130; Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob*, 259-60.

[22] Clines, *Job 1–20*, 334; de Wilde, *Das Buch Hiob*, 177. (The analogy to a genizah comes from Horst, *Hiob 1–19,* 212.)

[23] See Horst, *Hiob 1–19*, 212.

twelfth to the seventh century B.C.E.[24] It is not possible or worthwhile to examine here each of the more than thirty (and counting) buried hoards, especially since the hoards exhibit many of the same features. Instead, I will describe their general characteristics and look at some illustrative examples. First, almost all of these hoards feature metals stored inside a ceramic vessel, usually a jar but sometimes a pot or a flask.[25] In some cases, the jar is so mundane that excavators had no idea of the treasure it contained.[26] Second, the metals from a number of these hoards have been wrapped in linen cloth. Sometimes there are only traces of textile to indicate the cloth that once bundled the metals, but in at least seven hoards we find multiple cloth bundles in a single jar.[27] Of the examples in which we find no cloth at all, it is possible that the linen has disintegrated entirely. Finally, these hoards were often deliberately hidden underneath a floor or within a wall. Seymour Gitin and Amir Golani have catalogued several seventh-century B.C.E. examples of concealed hoards from various Near Eastern sites such as Tel Miqne-Ekron (Hoards 1, 3, 4, 5) and Ein-Gedi in the Levant, Nippur and Ashur in Mesopotamia, and even sites in Media and the Persian Gulf.[28] Such buried hoards are attested also in the eighth century B.C.E. at Eshtemoa;[29] in the late eleventh–early tenth century B.C.E. at Tel Dor (fig. 3);[30] in the eleventh century

[24] For an outline of many of the buried hoards, see Christine Thompson, "Sealed Silver in Iron Age Cisjordan and the 'Invention' of Coinage," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 22 (2003) 67-107, esp. table 2 on p. 84 and the appendix on pp. 97-102; also Seymour Gitin and Amir Golani, "The Tel Miqne-Ekron Silver Hoards: The Assyrian and Phoenician Connections," in *Hacksilber to Coinage: New Insights into the Monetary History of the Near East and Greece. A Collection of Eight Papers Presented at the 99th Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America* (ed. Miriam S. Balmuth; Numismatic Studies 24; New York: American Numismatic Society, 2001) 27-48.

[25] As the bibliography on these hoards will show, most scholarly attention has been focused on how the precious metals and jewelry contained in these hoards help to reconstruct the economy and numismatic history of the ancient Mediterranean.

[26] Of a hoard found at Tel Dor, dating to the late eleventh or early tenth century B.C.E., excavator Ephraim Stern writes, "Although it had been first discovered at the end of the 1995 season, we left it in situ (having no idea of its contents!), until we had reached the associated floor and uncovered the entire locus during the next season" ("The Silver Hoard from Tel Dor," in *Hacksilber to Coinage* [ed. Balmuth], 19). Excavators at Tel Megiddo give a similar account of a hoard that was found there in the 2010 season (see Nir Hasson, "Megiddo dig uneartbs cache of buried Canaanite treasure," *Haaretz*, May 22, 2012; online, http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/megiddo-dig-unearths-cache-of-buried-canaanite-treasure.premium-1.431797).

[27] See Thompson, "Sealed Silver in Iron Age Cisjordan," 84, table 2. Of the thirty-four hoards surveyed by Thompson, ten yielded evidence of cloth bundles that totaled more than thirty-three bundles.

[28] Gitin and Golani, "Tel Miqne-Ekron Silver Hoards," 30, 38-39.

[29] See Raz Kletter and Etty Brand, "A New Look at the Iron Age Silver Hoard from Eshtemoa," *ZDPV* 114 (1998) 139-54.

[30] See Stern "Silver Hoard from Tel Dor," 19-26; idem, "Buried Treasure: The Silver Hoard from Dor," *BAR* 24, no. 4 (July/August 1998) 46-51, 62.

FIGURE 3. THIS JAR FROM TEL DOR CONTAINED SEVENTEEN CLOTH BUNDLES OF SILVER THAT TOGETHER WEIGHED 8.5 KILOGRAMS. COURTESY OF THE TEL DOR CONSORTIUM.

B.C.E. at Tell Keisan (Stratum 9a),[31] Megiddo (Stratum VIA),[32] and Beth Shean;[33] and again at Beth Shean in the twelfth century B.C.E.[34] Perhaps the concealment

[31] A jar containing six or seven cloth bundles of metals was found in a pile of bricks, which is likely the remains of the wall that originally encased the hoard (see Étienne Nodet, "Objets en métal," in *Tell Keisan [1971–1976]: Une cité phénicienne en Galilée* [ed. Jacques Briend et al.; OBO, Series Archaeologica 1; Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1980] 325-26).

[32] At Megiddo, four cloth-wrapped bundles were discovered: three were buried together in Room 2012 in Area AA (Timothy Harrison et al., *Megiddo 3: Final Report on the Stratum VI Excavations* [OIP 127; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2003] 17, 78, pl. 29; see also Gordon Loud, *Megiddo II: Seasons of 1935–39. Plates* [OIP 62; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948] pl. 229:7-9), and one was found buried in Area DD (Yigael Yadin, "Megiddo of the Kings of Israel," *BA* 33 [1970] 77-79). (There is another likely hoard from this same stratum, but there is no evidence of its having been buried [Loud, *Megiddo II*, pl. 228:6]). For the dating of Stratum IVA at Megiddo to the eleventh century B.C.E., see Harrison, *Megiddo 3*, 7-13. Alternatively, Israel Finkelstein has dated this stratum to the tenth century B.C.E. ("State Formation in Israel and Judah: A Contrast in Context, a Contrast in Trajectory," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 62 [1999] 35-52).

[33] Two foundation deposits in Room 1029 of the Southern Temple Room yielded a hoard each (see Alan Rowe, *The Four Canaanite Temples of Beth-Shan,* part 1, *The Temples and Cult Objects* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940] 26, pls. 29:12-44, 66a:1-3). They were found in the temple that Rowe attributed to Ramses III (Stratum V) and thus were dated to the twelfth century B.C.E., but recent excavators have redated the temple to the eleventh century B.C.E. (see Amihai Mazar, "Beth-Shean," *OEANE* 1:308).

[34] This metal mass, which had no ceramic container but did bear traces of a cloth wrapping, was found beneath a wall in Room 1095 in the North Temple, which Rowe attributed to Seti I (Stratum VI) and thus dated to the end of the thirteenth century B.C.E. (*Four Canaanite Temples of Beth-Shan*, 19, pl. 34:17, 21, 67a:1-3). This dating too has been lowered by recent excavators, who now date the temple to the twelfth century B.C.E. (Mazar, "Beth-Shean," 307). There are two other small, cloth-wrapped hoards that date to this same century, but it is not clear from their publication

was a routine precaution,[35] but in a few cases it seems clear that the hoards were buried in the face of an imminent threat, such as a military assault, and whoever hid them away did so expecting to retrieve them one day when the crisis was over.[36] Of course, for the corpus of hoards discovered by archaeologists, that day of recovery never came.

Though only a few of the hoards demonstrate all of these characteristics, each hoard exhibits two or more of them. Viewed altogether, these examples provide us with a typology of buried hoards in the Iron Age Levant, which I think underlies the imagery of Job 14:17. First, there is the prevalence of cloth bags, which some archaeologists have already identified with the Hebrew word *ṣĕrôr*.[37] Indeed, as several biblical references show, the word refers to a bag containing silver, that is, money (see Gen 42:35; Prov 7:20; Hag 1:6). Rather than evidencing an unattested meaning such as "tied document" for the noun צרור, the buried hoards offer an interpretation that preserves the common definition of the word. This interpretation is further bolstered by the clay bullae that were found with two of the Levantine hoards (Tell Keisan and Tel Dor [fig. 4]). Ephraim Stern observes that at Tel Dor "each unit [of silver] had been placed in a cloth bag (biblical *zeror kesep*) and sealed with a stamped clay bulla. . . . The bullae which sealed with linen wrappers were all stamped by a single scarab stamp seal, indicating that the entire hoard was the property of one person."[38]

FIGURE 4. CLAY BULLA FROM TEL DOR HOARD.
COURTESY OF THE TEL DOR CONSORTIUM.

if they were buried (see Amihai Mazar, "Four Thousand Years of History at Tel Beth-Shean: An Account of the Renewed Excavations," *BA* 60 [1997] 71-72).

[35] One hoard from Tel Miqne-Ekron was found "hidden in the hole of a hewn-down and reused perforated olive oil press stone weight," which Gitin and Golani speculate was "a primitive wall safe" ("Tel Miqne-Ekron Silver Hoards," 33).

[36] Ibid., 30. See also Amir Golani and Benjamin Sass, "Three Seventh-Century B.C.E. Hoards of Silver Jewelry from Tel Miqne-Ekron," *BASOR* 311 (1998) 57-82, here 61; Kletter and Brand, "New Look at the Iron Age Silver Hoard," 152.

[37] See Stern, "Buried Treasure," 48; Gitin and Golani, "Tel Miqne-Ekron Silver Hoards," 31; Thompson, "Sealed Silver in Iron Age Cisjordan," 79.

[38] Stern, "Silver Hoard from Tel Dor," 22-23. For the clay bullae from Tell Keisan, see Nodet, "Objets en métal," 325. For an Old Babylonian example of a metal hoard that included a cylinder seal, see Judith Bjorkman, "The Larsa Goldsmith's Hoards–New Interpretations," *JNES* 52 (1993) 1-23.

These clay bullae show that the precious metal from these hoards was literally "sealed in a bag" (חתם בצרור), the very phrase spoken by Job in 14:17.[39] As for the plaster in the second half of the verse, this detail would at first seem to laek a correlate in the buried hoards, and it is true that none of them has yet shown evidence of plaster. But because these hoards are often buried beneath floors and behind walls, it is reasonable to imagine that the verb תטפל could refer to the plaster that usually faced mudbrick walls, as described in Ezek 13:10-16 and 22:28, and which sometimes covered floors in the ancient Levant.[40] In many cases such plaster will have disappeared long before excavations, so its absence is not unexpected.[41] And even lacking a concrete example of a hoard hidden behind a plaster wall or floor, the present explanation of תטפל is preferable to previous interpretations, which either ignore the verb or give it a definition that is not attested in the Bible or extrabiblical sources. In short, the buried hoards from the Levant in the Iron Age provide the most complete archaeological parallel for Job 14:17.

III. The Sealed Bag and Concealment in Job's Fourth Speech

The upshot of this interpretation is a new appreciation for the image's poetic character and its significance in Job's fourth speech. As for its poetic character, we can see that Job 14:17 is a prime example of what Robert Alter calls "sequential movement" in biblical poetry, according to which the second line of a bicolon follows temporally or logically an idea that was introduced in the first line.[42] This

[39] Several commentators have anticipated this interpretation. Dhorme, for example, writes that the bag in this verse "eontained precious things . . . in particular those which it was desired to conceal from others" (*Commentary on the Book of Job*, 204). Hartley comes even closer to the interpretation presented here when he writes, "The picture could be that of storing valuables like gems or silver coins in a bag. Such valuables were put into a bag, which was fastened, daubed with wax, and pressed with a seal. . . . The bag could not be opened without breaking the seal" (Hartley, *Book of Job*, 237). It is hard to know, however, if Hartley has in mind here the metal hoards surveyed in this article. Certain other details that he mentions, such as the fastening and the daubed wax, are not attested among the hoards I have researched.

[40] See Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 28. In these verses from Ezekiel the Hebrew word for "plaster" is תָּפֵל, which is a noun and the object of the verb טוח ("to daub"). The root of this noun (תפל II) is related to the verb טָפֵל found in Job 14:17 (see *HALOT* 1:378-79; 2:1776). Walther Zimmerli has suggested that Ezekiel preferred the noun תָּפֵל (with a *taw*) because of its similarity to תפל I, "insipid, worthless" (*Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979] 287).

[41] One field manual recommends, "Most mudbrick walls were originally faced with a mud plaster. The chances are that this will have disappeared, but be on the alert for it anyway (Anita Walker, "Principles of Excavation," in *A Manual of Field Excavation: Handbook for Field Archaeologists* [ed. William G. Dever and H. Darrell Lance; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1978] 13).

[42] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 34-39.

understanding of the poetry is further supported by the syntax of Job 14:17, which Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor have cited as an example of a converted imperfect verb (ותטפל) following a nonfinite verb (חתם). They regard these two verbs as referring to "a single, perfective whole."[43] Thus, although some commentators have regarded the sealing and plastering in 14:17 as two unrelated images,[44] the conventions of Hebrew poetry and syntax point to the conclusion that the sealed bag represents the first part of a process that is completed by the plastering in the second half of the verse. Like the precious metals that were sealed in a bag and then buried beneath floors or walls, Job's transgression must first be sealed before it can be plastered over.

What is perhaps even more significant, this new understanding of the sealed and plastered-over bag invites us to reconsider how this image functions in Job's fourth speech, especially its concluding address to God. For one thing, by correlating 14:17 with the buried hoards of metal, we discover an image that evokes not surveillance and punishment but rather concealment and postponement. Other readings of this verse that assume that Job's transgressions are being tallied for subsequent punishment ignore the fact that *from Job's perspective he is already being punished for transgressions unknown*: "How many are my iniquities and sins? Make known to me my transgression and sin! Why do You hide Your face? Why do You treat me as Your enemy? (13:23-24).[45] Job's complaint in chaps. 13–14 is not that God has recorded his sins but that there is no process by which God will formally charge him and give Job a chance to refute the charges. Despairing that such a process will ever be possible, Job hopes for a continuance, a postponement until the conditions for a fair trial are met (see 13:21-22). Whatever transgressions Job may have committed—and Job "is not admitting to anything!"[46] —let them be shelved until the day when it is possible for them to be examined. Such postponement seems to be implied by the sealed bag depicted in Job 14:17, an artifact that was buried during times of distress and recovered after the crisis had passed. The image does not assume guilt or innocence; it neither condemns nor exonerates Job. It simply depicts his alleged transgressions as removed from God's terrible gaze.[47]

[43] See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) §33.3.1d. Strangely, this example occurs in the section devoted to converted imperfect that follows perfect verbs, but, as the authors discuss a few paragraphs later, the point is also valid for converted imperfects that follow nonfinite verb forms, such as the participle (see §33.3.5).

[44] See Tremper Longman III, *Job* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 214; Hartley, *Book of Job*, 238.

[45] As already noted, this assumption is exactly the opposite of the scenario Job imagines in v. 16b, wherein he hopes that God "would *not* keep watch on his sin." (One wonders how Job would respond to the scholars who are ready for his sins to be recorded and punished!)

[46] Clines, *Job 1–20,* 334.

[47] Compare the expulsion in Leviticus 16 of the scapegoat, laden with Israel's sins, into the wilderness, where they would be "beyond the reach of God . . . outside of the range of his supervisory

One aspect of this interpretation that may seem counterintuitive at first is the comparison it draws between Job's alleged sin and hidden treasure; it seems strange that God should cover up sin as one might conceal precious metals. Yet such imagery is not unique to Job 14:17 in the Hebrew Bible or even in the Book of Job, where we find treasure used as a metaphor for far less precious concepts. In Ps 39:12 (Eng. 11), for example, the psalmist declares that in rebuking people's sin (עון), Yhwh consumes their "treasure" (חמודו) like a moth, and Job, in his initial speech, observes that the wretched "wait for death but it's not there; they dig for it more than treasure" (ממטמונים) (3:21). This last example is especially instructive because it shows that the point of the metaphor is not to equate death and treasure but to show how these dissimilar objects can inspire the same desperate pursuit. Likewise, the correlation of sin and buried treasure implied by Job 14:17 focuses our attention on what connects these different items, namely, their concealment.[48]

If this emphasis on concealment in 14:17 sounds familiar, it is because just four verses earlier Job expressed his desire to be hidden from God until the divine anger abated: "If only you would hide [תסתירני] me in Sheol / And conceal me until your anger relented" (v. 13). Indeed, one of the advantages of the present interpretation is that it connects v. 17 to the theme of concealment, which is especially prominent in this fourth speech by Job.[49] Besides functioning as a visual *inclusio* with Job's wish in v. 13, v. 17 picks up on words and motifs from the beginning of Job's address to God and thus adds to a bracketing that frames the address as a whole. This effect is apparent already in the repetition of עון, חטאת, and פשע, a cluster of words that occurs in 13:23 and again in 14:16-17, and also in Job's description of call and response in 13:22 (וקרא ואנכי אענה) and 14:15 (תקרא ואנכי אענך). Looking at Job's fourth speech as a whole, we can further note, as do many commentators, that Job's desire in 14:17 for God to plaster over (תטפל) his iniquity echoes Job's claim in 13:4 that his friends are "plasterers of lies" (טפלי־שקר).[50]

powers. Once God could no longer see them, it is as if they ceased to exist" (Anderson, *Sin: A History*, 23). This comparison is not to overlook the important differences between the Lev 16:21-22 and Job 14:17 but only to show how both texts assume what Anderson calls the "thingness" of sin, and they also share the assumption that sin can be hidden from God's purview.

[48] In fact, one could argue that the effectiveness of the comparison lies precisely in the dissimilarity of sin and treasure. Insofar as the dissonance between the two images "defamiliarizes" them, it demands the attention of the reader. According to Victor Shklovsky, such "defamiliarization" is the very purpose of art: "we find everywhere the artistic trademark—that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created 'artistically' so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception" ("Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* [ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965] 3-24, here 21-22).

[49] In fact, the motif goes back to Job's first speech; see 3:10, 16.

[50] The repetition of this root underscores its importance and makes all the more problematic interpretations that ignore its contribution to the image developed in 14:17. Besides offering some

To these examples we can add the theme of concealment. At the beginning of his direct address to God, Job describes their estrangement as eaeh being hidden from the other (אסתר in 13:20 and תסתיר in 13:24), and to this mutual concealment Job returns at the end of his address, when he desires to be hidden from God's anger (תסתירני in 14:13) and for his sin to be sealed in a bag and plastered over. Finally, this theme of concealment takes on further significance when we remember that chaps. 13 and 14 are the last time that Job addresses God at length. With the exception of three short outbursts, for the rest of the book Job avoids speaking directly to God, as if doing his part to remain hidden from God.

Job's desire for himself and his alleged transgressions to be concealed is understandable when one considers the images from this speech that represent the alternative. Far better to be sealed in a bag and hidden behind a plaster wall than suffer the fates described elsewhere in chaps. 13–14: desiccated straw (13:25), a moth-eaten garment (13:28), a withered flower (14:2), and dried up rivers (14:11). Such fates continue after the image of the buried hoard in 14:17; after the disjunctive אולם ("But . . .") in v. 18 to mark the shift in imagery, Job goes on to describe crumbling rocks, worn down stones, and eroded earth as signs of lost hope. Significantly, what connects all of these images of ruin, before and after the sealed bag in 14:17, is that their destruction is somehow related to their *exposure* to the elements. Unshielded from their harsh environment, these rocks, flowers, and rivers suffer the attrition that Job seeks to avoid through his concealment.

IV. Conclusion

I conclude by returning to the scholarly dilemma mentioned at the beginning of this article, namely, the question whether כי־עתה in 14:16 continues Job's fantasy of rapprochement or represents the moment when Job snaps out of it and confronts again his bleak present reality. I think the preceding analysis of v. 17 offers support to the former interpretation. By connecting the verse to the hoards of metal that were buried during times of calamity, I have tried to show that the image of the sealed and plastered-over bag is above all a symbol of concealment, and it continues a motif that Job has developed throughout his fourth speech. In particular, v. 17 represents visually the wish that Job expressed in v. 13, when he longed to be hidden in Sheol until the calamity of God's anger had passed. By recognizing the way that these two verses bracket the verses in which Job imagines renewed intimacy with God, we can see that vv. 16-17 do not represent a break in Job's fantasy but rather its fitting conclusion. Moreover, this bracketing imitates the fantasy itself: the concealment of v. 13 and v. 17 provide the "cover" for the mutuality that occurs in v. 15 when God calls and Job answers and God once again desires the

ironic wordplay—in 13:4 Job is exasperated with his friends' "plastering" (cf. Ps 119:69), but in 14:17 "plastering" is what he desires from God—the repetition of the verb is emblematic of a larger transition in the speech. Just as the subject of the verb טפל switches from the friends to God, so Job in the fourth speech turns away from his friends and addresses God directly.

divine handiwork in Job. It also points to a paradox that lies at the heart of this passage: Job's hiddenness from God is the precondition for Job's renewed dialogue with God. Even as Job seeks refuge, he has not abandoned the idea of relationship with God, whom he poignantly imagines as the one who will provide protection. As the subject of תסתירני in 14:13 and תטפל in 14:17, God is still the one to whom Job looks for relief from his suffering, even though God is also the one responsible for that suffering.[51] It is a contradiction not unlike Job's desire in v. 16 for God to number his steps but not keep watch over his sin,[52] and perhaps it is also this contradiction that ultimately convinces Job of his impossible situation and leads him to (largely) abandon direct address to God for the rest of the book.

[51] Fohrer notes this theological tension in his comments on 14:13: "Dieser Gedanke wird dahingehend abgewandelt, daß Gott selbst den von seinem Zorn verfolgten Menschen verstecken soll, um ihn zu schützen. Der einsichtsvolle Gott möge ihn vor dem grundlos and unbegreiflich zürnenden Gott schützen" (*Das Buch Hiob*, 257). Similarly, Clines writes that "here Job imagines God hiding someone from God himself. The very thought of a God beyond the God he is now experiencing is a concession to the possibility that God is not all he seems to be, and that the future does not have to be a simple extension of the past" (*Job 1–20*, 330).

[52] See Newsom, "Book of Job," 442.