



Prophecy, History and Archaeology

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The scrolls and the Book

2. The scrolls in use

John Carder

BEFORE THE advent of printing, the Biblical books usually each took up a separate scroll. The exceptions were the so-called 'Minor Prophets' (a Christian term), Hosea to Malachi, which were often grouped on a single scroll, and commentaries, such as the Habakkuk scroll (mentioned in Part 1). The book of Esther is usually on a separate scroll, called Megillat-Esther, of which medieval copies were often ornately illustrated.

Names and groupings

Even with separate scrolls, some major groupings were recognised. Two groups were 'the Law and the Prophets' (as mentioned in Matthew 5:17, 7:12 and 22:40). The Law is the Law of Moses, sometimes simply called 'Moses' in the New Testament, and in Hebrew 'Torah', which means 'Teaching'. The term 'the Prophets' was sometimes extended to include all the books other than the Torah.

The names by which we know the books of the Bible are derived from the Septuagint, the early translation into Greek. The Torah is often referred to by the Greek word 'Pentateuch', the 'Five Books'.

Some of the Hebrew scrolls are known by the names with which we are familiar, or at least by

their Hebrew equivalents. But others are referred to by their opening words or by a word or phrase in the first sentence. Thus the book we know as Genesis is called 'In the Beginning'. The other books, or scrolls, of the Torah are named in the same way, as is shown in the box below.

The sentences or verses in scrolls, unlike the AV, are not separated as paragraphs, and are not numbered. In the absence of easy systems of numbering, the reading portions are referred to in the same way as whole books, by a word or a short phrase in the opening sentence of the section. Thus the set Torah portion which we know as Genesis 22:1-19 is called the Aqedah, 'the Binding' (of Isaac).

Features of ancient scrolls

Two special features of the ancient scrolls should be noted. There were, and are, no capital letters to indicate names or the beginning of sentences. There are only occasional gaps denoting sections in otherwise solid blocks of text. Thus the synagogue readings required a trained memory and a quick perception.

Also, the Hebrew in most scrolls is written with no indication of vowels. This is also the case with modern Hebrew; ordinary books, newspapers and advertisements have no vowel signs.

The names of the first five books, the Torah, of the Hebrew Bible are derived from the first words of each book, or the key words of the first sentence, as follows:

| | <u>Hebrew transliteration</u> | <u>Hebrew pronunciation</u> |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (Gen.) In the beginning (as one word) | <i>Bereshit</i> | Ber-esh-eet |
| (Ex.) And these are the names (two words) | <i>Ve'eleh shemot</i> | Vuh-eh-leh shem-mot |
| (Lev.) And He called (one word) | <i>Vayyikra</i> | Vay-yik-rah |
| (Num.) In the wilderness (one word) | <i>Bemidbar</i> | Buh-mid-bar |
| (Deut.) These are the words (two words) | <i>Eleh hadevarim</i> | Eh-leh hah-dev-ar-eem |

This is difficult for those brought up only on English to visualise, though it is easier to read Hebrew without vowels than English. A partial system of indicating vowels by a fuller spelling came into use during the Second Temple period.

A fuller system of vowel 'points', consisting of tiny symbols under the consonants, was adopted a century or two after the fall of the temple. It is still used in printed Hebrew Bibles, in dictionaries and in some texts for teaching Hebrew; that is, in sources where it is essential for a correct understanding of meanings and pronunciation.

As the scrolls of the longer writings, such as Isaiah, could be seven or eight metres (over twenty feet) long, it was, and still is today, etiquette for synagogue services to have scrolls rolled ready to the right place so as not to keep the congregation waiting while a great length of scroll was wound. This rule applied even to the high priest for the temple service.



A Hebrew scroll with the rollers slightly parted ready for reading

The high priest in the temple

When the temple was still standing, the high priest on the Day of Atonement had to read three portions about that day, including Leviticus 16 and Leviticus 23:26-32. After them he had to say Numbers 29:7-11. The high priest had the scroll rolled ready for the first of the Leviticus portions, but when he had finished reading them he would place the scroll under his arm and recite the verses from Numbers by memory.

Jesus in the synagogue

What are we to understand of the incident in the synagogue at Nazareth, recorded in Luke 4:16-20? Verse 17 says: "And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written . . .". It would not have been a book as we know it, as these were a later invention (more on

this in our final article, God willing). The Isaiah scroll would have been put ready on the table, rolled to the place for the weekly portion. Jesus would have opened the scroll by parting the rollers to reveal the portion.

With no numbered chapters or verses (numbering was not added until Bibles were printed), and no capital letters at the beginning of sentences, Jesus would have had to have scanned the text quickly to find the place he needed to start reading. Then "he [Jesus] closed the book [when he had finished reading], and he gave it again to the minister" (v. 20). Jesus would have loosely rolled the handles together so that the next reader could quickly open the scroll at the next portion.

The 'book' of Revelation 5

At first sight, Revelation 5:1 seems to suggest a 'book' that is different in its physical layout from the usual scrolls: "And I saw in the right hand of Him That sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals".

From the Greek it is clear that a scroll is meant, but from the English of the AV it appears to be unusual in being written on both sides. But note that John wept because nobody could read the writing inside (v. 4), that is, until he whose right it was broke the seals. Until then the scroll was sealed in the same way as that of Isaiah 29:11.

John's vision is of a scroll written on one side, with that side rolled to the inside, as was usual, and sealed on the outside, the backside, with seven seals. There were no commas used in the Greek of the first century, and the comma shown in the AV is misleading, suggesting that the document was written on both sides.

Other scrolls

Non-Biblical scrolls from shortly after the date of the Revelation have been found having some similar features. They are legal documents, meant to be kept sealed to prevent alterations, and to be opened only when required as evidence.

A famous find was a group of documents, the possessions of a Jewish woman, by name Babatha, at the time of the Bar Kochbar revolt (A.D. 132-135). She with others hid in a cave near Ein Gedi from Roman soldiers, was besieged by them and presumably died there. Babatha had with her in the cave the marriage contracts of herself and her daughter, and other prized documents, in a basket that was found in a crevice by Israeli archaeologists in 1962.

Babatha's contracts did not have wax seals, but were stitched into a tight roll. The first part of the scroll was left free as a kind of tab, on which there were the signatures of seven witnesses, each written beside one of the stitches. Individual features of Babatha's contracts were that they were written in Greek on papyrus and that the text was written down the length of the scroll.

Some modern aspects

Synagogues were an outgrowth of the temple, and have some features reminiscent of the temple. Alluding to the ark mentioned in Exodus 40:20,21, the synagogue scrolls are kept in a small

cupboard called an Ark (*Aron*), which is usually covered by an elaborately embroidered curtain, 'the veil'.

The scroll itself is covered or carried in a silk or linen mantle. 'Crowns' in the form of silver pomegranates are placed over the tops of the rollers. A group of such Torah crowns stands on the stone cenotaph in the so-called David's Tomb on the southwestern hill of Jerusalem. A silver 'breastplate' and small bells are sometimes draped on chains over the crowns and rollers. Pomegranates, bells and the breastplate are, of course, reminiscent of the regalia of the high priest, the tabernacle and the temple.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Gleanings from the Land

Watermelons

As they journeyed through the hot dry wilderness, the children of Israel, according to Numbers 11:5, longed for some of the produce of Egypt, including melons. The Hebrew word *abattichim* (plural) occurs only here in Scripture and is usually regarded as referring to the watermelon.

In Britain today (and presumably in other Western nations too) various kinds of melons are available all the year round, and this sometimes includes watermelons, distinguishable by their dark green rind (or striped green and yellow in some cases) and red, juicy flesh. During the summer in Israel watermelons can be seen piled high on roadside stalls, and the juicy flesh is highly prized for the refreshment it provides in the baking heat. I still recall a self-service restaurant at Jericho where the Arab proprietor cut huge slices of watermelon with a large knife for our party of thirsty coach travellers.

In the 1920s Jewish settlers on the coastal plain began to develop improved strains of watermelon from a variety already being grown locally,

and (interestingly in view of Numbers 11:5) thought to be of Egyptian origin. Today many watermelons are grown in the Jordan valley and the Arava (the valley running from the Dead Sea down to the Gulf of Eilat) using irrigation. Far superior in flavour, however, are those grown in Galilee without the use of irrigation; they ripen slowly and absorb less water, resulting in a higher sugar content. Agricultural scientists in Israel are working on new varieties, including a smaller one, suitable for a small family.

A sabbatical year

One of the provisions of the Law of Moses was that the land of Israel should have "a sabbath of rest" every seventh year, during which the land would not be cultivated, and even "That which groweth of its own accord" should not be harvested (Lev. 25:1-7). The Israelites had to rely on God to provide a harvest in the sixth year so bountiful that they would have enough provisions to last them until the harvest of the eighth year.

Such a year is today referred to as a *shmita* year, from the

Hebrew word for release (*shemittah* in *Young's Concordance*). This noun and the related verb occur several times in Deuteronomy 15 regarding the releasing of people from debts, which was also commanded for each seventh year. The current Jewish year, which began in September, is a *shmita* year.

Neot Kedumim News, the newsletter of the Biblical Landscape Reserve situated at Modi'in in Israel, says that the Reserve is observing the *shmita* year and will not therefore be carrying out the agricultural activities that are normally part of its work of demonstrating to visitors what the Land was like in Biblical times. The newsletter makes the point that this provision in the Law of Moses is the first known provision for the replenishment of the soil, allowing it to provide for the needs of subsequent generations. It also helps overcome one of the problems of irrigation, the gradual accumulation of sodium and calcium, which makes the soil very alkaline and affects fertility. One of the major causes of the decline of ancient Mesopotamia, home of Babylon and Assyria,