

Scribes: Their Training and Their Task

Introduction

Written records are matters that the average twenty-first century American takes for granted. Constituent within this age of modernity is a very advanced and highly attainable stage of the printing press, even to the extent of many individuals having a manner of quick production printing within their own homes via the computer and the ink jet, dot matrix, or laser printer. This ease and access, however, has not always been.

It is generally accepted that writing was invented by the Sumerians of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) sometime before 3000 BC. Recent “Egyptian discoveries, [however] have been confidently dated to between 3300 BC and 3200 BC.”¹ These simple writings are line drawings of animals, plants and mountains and were attained from the tomb of an Egyptian king at Abydos, south of Cairo. Regardless of the time one accepts as the origin of writing, however, it is clear that thousands of years ago, every document had to somehow be processed on papyrus, skins, clay, or other primitive means of record preservation. (Assyrian stories such as those of the Elamite wars were actually located on walls of buildings.²) Utensils for these various modes of writing were equally as primitive. Chisels, stones, wooden styli, feathers, and other means were utilized upon these receptors.³ Each document had to be hand-written and, in the case of need for multiple copies, therefore, had to be reproduced by hand. This process “was exacerbated by the problem of the writing systems, such as cuneiform Sumerian,

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/235724.stm> Originally published Tuesday, December 15, 1998 at 19:38 GMT. Accessed April 15, 2003.

² Hayim Tadmor, edited by Mordechai Cogan and Israel Eph'al, “Ah, Assyria...Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography” in *Scripta Hierosolymitana 33* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1991), 124.

³ It should be noted that many of these methods have been preserved in modernity; some for the purpose of pure preservation, some for tradition, and others for the “sacredness” of such an act.

Akkadian, and Hittite, or hieroglyphic Egyptian.”⁴ Each of these languages presented “a far greater complexity than the [modern] alphabet...[causing] writing [to] become much more of a technical skill.”⁵ From this process arose the need for individuals to be trained in the art of recording, producing, and reproducing written texts; these individuals are typically referred to as Scribes.

The intent of this essay is to survey the purposes of the Scribe, the process of becoming a Scribe, and the evolution of the office of the Scribe. It is desired that through this documentation, a greater appreciation for and understanding of the Scribe and his work may be attained.

Working Definitions of a Scribe

A Scribe (Latin *scribere*, “to write”), in antiquity, was typically a man who “acted not only as [a] copyist but as [an editor] and [interpreter] of literature including the Bible and of the Law.”⁶ The Hebrew word rendered (סֹפֵר) was first used to designate the holder of some military office. Eventually, Scribes were “so called because they wrote out the law, or because they classified and arranged its precepts, or because they counted with scrupulous minuteness every elapse and letter it contained.”⁷ Most of the documents that are currently possessed from near eastern antiquity are academically recognized as “scribal documents, handwritten by men.”⁸ Although, these men were relatively few in number because of the literacy rate among the populations of the times, their “scarcity [in

⁴ David W. Baker, “Scribes as Transmitters of Tradition”, ed A.R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker, *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 65.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David W. Baker, “Scribes as Transmitters of Tradition”, 65.

⁷ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁸ Malachi Martin, *The Scribal Character of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (Louvain: Biblioteque Du Museon, 1958), 37.

fact,] add[ed] to their importance, the respect in which they [were] held, and their power and standing in the community.⁹ Interestingly, the word *sešh*, ‘scribe’, was among the most frequently used titles in ancient Egypt. “It is also one of the earliest recorded [titles].”¹⁰

Among the Jews, a סֹפֵר (or סוֹפֵר) was a copyist of the Law or a secretary.”¹¹

סֹפֵר is also defined as one who is engaged in work as an “enumerator, secretary, scribe or muster-officer.”¹² Further meanings connected with the verb form and the root have “the connotation of ‘to write, to set in order, [or] to count.’”¹³ This was similarly found among the Greeks where scribes actually began their careers as copyists (γραμματεύς) and eventually became “expounders of the Law (νομοδιδάσκαλος). English versions of the New Testament used the word *scribe* to translate both the Hebrew סֹפֵר and the Greek γραμματεύς.”¹⁴ While these observations are necessary, it should also be noted that there are clear “distinctions between a scribe and a calligrapher.”¹⁵ Although both use the same basic tools of the trade, “their training and requirements are very different and demand entirely different mental attitudes.”¹⁶ Calligraphers might be classified as artists; scribes, on the other hand, are rote learners. Further, “calligraphers call attention to the writing;

⁹ David W. Baker, “Scribes as Transmitters of Tradition”, 65.

¹⁰ <http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/exhibits/egypt/scribes.html>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

¹¹ “Scribes,” Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003 at <http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2003 Microsoft Corporation. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

¹² Dr. Richard Whitaker, *Brown-Driver-Briggs, BDB - Whitaker's Revised BDB Hebrew-English Lexicon*, (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, 1995).

¹³ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

¹⁴ “Scribes,” Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

¹⁵ <http://orion.msc.huji.ac.il/orion/programs/Altman/Altman99.shtml>. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

¹⁶ <http://orion.msc.huji.ac.il/orion/programs/Altman/Altman99.shtml>. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

scribes call attention to the writer. Calligraphers are free agents; they emend texts, and elongate graphs and employ variant and/or archaic forms for artistic ends. Scribes are bound agents, in a position of fides, and trust.”¹⁷ This difference could also be explained in the sense that a calligrapher could be considered an artist and might perform such tasks out of sheer enjoyment. On the other hand, the Scribe as a “civil servant.”¹⁸ was considered a ‘voice of authority.’ We may think of them as the “king’s secretaries, writing his letters, drawing up his decrees, [and] managing his finances.”¹⁹ They were also thought of as “bureaucrat, poet, and scholar.”²⁰

In antiquity, ‘the voice of authority’ was not “a metaphor to be tossed about by literary critics, but a concrete, visible reality. For more than four of the five thousand year history of writing, writing systems were phonetic-based; their purpose was to record the voice of absent authority -- be it poet or priest, judge or king.”²¹ The Scribe, therefore, was an essential element in the processes of communication, historical recording, legal transactions, and many other types of transmitted societal efforts and in many ways deserved the entitlement, ‘voice of authority.’”

Of particular interest to this essay, a Hebrew Scribe had the above mentioned tasks as well. Indeed, his purpose WAS more specific than simply that of communicating the Law and the traditions. Although he was, in fact, originally “a copyist of the Law or a secretary... the [Hebrew] scribe was [also] a literary man preoccupied with the letter of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 17.

¹⁹ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

²⁰ Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures*, 18.

²¹ Quoted from the "Preface" to Rochelle I. Altman, *Absent Voices: The Story of Writing Systems in the West*. forthcoming, 2000.

the Law and was [highly] learned in Scripture.”²² The Hebrew Scribes (סֹפְרִים) specifically were “any of a group of Jewish scholars who interpreted and taught Biblical law and ethics from the 5th century BC to about 200 BC. Understood in this sense, the first of the סֹפְרִים on record was the Biblical prophet Ezra (even though the word previously designated an important administrator connected with the Temple but without religious status.) Ezra and his disciples initiated a tradition of rabbinic scholarship that remains to this day a fundamental feature of Judaism.”²³ There is some evidence that in this sense, “the סֹפְרִים disappeared about the 2nd century BC,”²⁴ although there was certainly a resurgence of the title as well as the role in years following.

“The סֹפְרִים arose to meet a specific need of the Jewish people. Under foreign rule, the Jews enjoyed cultural autonomy and were allowed to govern themselves under the constitution of the Law of Moses. The סֹפְרִים became experts in the Law, applying the idealistic aspirations of the Torah and oral tradition to the exigencies of daily life. Many of their ordinances were formulated to safeguard, or form a ‘fence’ around, the Torah.”²⁵

The Task of a Scribe

“Comparatively little is known about the roles of scribes and scribal training in Israel [yet] Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources [give much information regarding the]

²² "Scribes," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

social position, roles, and education of Scribes.”²⁶ Because literacy was not widespread in the Near Eastern agrarian society (or any other part of the world at that time,) “Scribes, nearly always men²⁷, had to undergo [rigorous] training, and having successfully completed a curriculum, became entitled to call themselves ‘scribes’.”²⁸ Obviously, these men were trained in the skill of accurately writing and reading. Furthermore, as laws and transactions required some method of recording (and sometimes, interpretation), a practice was necessitated “whose business [was] the study and knowledge of the law.”²⁹ By default, “the more highly esteemed the Law became in the eyes of the [Hebrew] people, the more its study and interpretation became a lifework by itself, and thus there developed a class of scholars who, though not priests, devoted themselves assiduously to the Law. These became... the professional students of the Law.”³⁰ In fact, “New Testament references to ‘scribes’ (often in connection with the Pharisees) are [in reference] to doctors of the law, or jurists who gave legal advice to judges entrusted with administration of the law.”³¹

“Historically, the סֹפְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה are of [another] great importance, not only for having initiated rabbinic studies but also for having fixed the canon of Old Testament Scriptures and, as copyists and editors, for their energetic efforts to safeguard the purity of the original text.”³² Their importance and stature remained. “In the Jewish epitaphs in Rome,

²⁶ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach*, (Willmington, DE: Michael Glazer, Inc., 1988), 242.

²⁷ It should be noted that there were some women scribes, although there is little reference to them. More information can be gathered in Dr. David Baker’s article, ‘Scribes as Transmitters of Tradition in Faith, Tradition, and History’ (See Bibliography.)

²⁸ http://iraqipages.com/iraq_mesopotamia/scribes_in_ancient_mesopotamia.htm. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

²⁹ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T7709>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Scribes," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

³² Ibid.

dating from the latter days of the empire, γραμματεὺς are frequently mentioned; and the Babylonian scribes of the 5th and 6th centuries were the authors of the most monumental work of rabbinical Judaism--the Talmud.”³³ To this present day, the work of the modern סֹפֵר remains important. Jewish houses of worship and synagogues are often in need of Torah Scrolls. These documents are hand written by a singular סֹפֵר who may take up to a year to complete his task. He typically will prepare his scrolls and his ink and, at completion, may ask \$20,000 to \$35,000 (US- 2003 prices) for his finished work.

The Initial Schooling and Preparation of a Scribe

The craft of the Scribe necessitated the establishment of some system of teaching within which to train them. “The training of the scribes is well documented.”³⁴ “Apart from mathematics, the Babylonian scribal education³⁵ concentrated on learning to write Sumerian and Akkadian using cuneiform and on learning the conventions for writing letters, contracts and accounts.”³⁶ Further, because of the trading that would take place among nations from time to time, it became important for the scribe to have knowledge not only of his native language but also the languages of surrounding nations. It was not uncommon for these trainees to have education in three of four languages. This training began at an early age in the “*é-dubba*, the 'tablet house'. Although the house had a headmaster, his assistant and a clerk, much of the initial instruction and discipline seems

³³ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T7709>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

³⁴ <http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/exhibits/egypt/scribes.html>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that these Babylonian Scribes were under the protection and oversight of a Sumerian goddess Nisaba. In later times her place was taken by the god Nabu whose symbol was the stylus (a cut reed used to make signs in damp clay). Information gathered from http://iraqipages.com/iraq_mesopotamia/scribes_in_ancient_mesopotamia.htm. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

³⁶ http://iraqipages.com/iraq_mesopotamia/scribes_in_ancient_mesopotamia.htm. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

to have been in the hands of an elder student; the scholar's 'big brother'.³⁷ Egypt's main initial training came from a book of cursive hieroglyphs called '*The Book of Kemyt*' "Two important features of the Egyptian scribal training were, first of all, it was mainly taught in cursive.³⁸ Further instruction was necessary for writing the type of hieroglyphs that were used on the monuments. Learning was accomplished through copying words and sentences rather than starting with the individual signs.^{39,40}

The training for a Hebrew scribe began, probably, about the age of thirteen. The boy would travel to Jerusalem and apply for admission in the school of a rabbi. "After a sufficient period of training, probably at the age of thirty, the probationer was solemnly admitted to his office. After his admission there was a choice of a variety of functions, the chances of failure and success. He might give himself to any one of the branches of study, or combine two or more of them."⁴¹

Scribal education at these schools in the ancient near east was often very difficult. Students usually would copy works not from other scrolls which they were looking at but from dictation orated to them by their instructor. Because of the great desire and competition among Mesopotamian students to earn the favor of the teachers, they had to "flatter or bribe [their teachers] with gifts from time to time to avoid a beating."⁴² (Their difficult circumstances were recorded both in texts and other representations.) "It is

³⁷ http://iraqipages.com/iraq_mesopotamia/scribes_in_ancient_mesopotamia.htm. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

³⁸ Cursive was the most common form of writing from the beginning.

³⁹ Students had to master over 700 signs, some of which were representing objects or ideas (determinatives and ideograms); others represented sounds (phonograms.)

⁴⁰ http://members.tripod.com/Duat_Ramesses/scribes.htm. Accessed on April 18, 2003.

⁴¹ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁴² http://iraqipages.com/iraq_mesopotamia/scribes_in_ancient_mesopotamia.htm. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

perhaps no accident that the ancient Egyptian word for ‘teach,’ *seba*, also means ‘beat’⁴³ or “torture.”⁴⁴ One teacher, Amenemope, wrote to his students, ‘pass no day in idleness or you will be beaten’.⁴⁵

A scribe was usually trained by another scribe. It often took place in the family business. It was only after his training that a scribe would ascend “through the ranks of office”⁴⁶ becoming a doctor of the law, an arbitrator in family litigations, the head of a school, [or] a member of the Sanhedrin. [Otherwise,] he might have to content himself with the [more humble] work of a transcriber, copying the law and the prophets for the use of synagogues, or [of] a notary, writing out contracts of sale, covenants of espousals, bills of repudiation.”⁴⁷ Obviously, the place of those who were more fortunate was attractive enough to rate honor and respect. It should be noted that although the training of young scribes was thorough, strict and harsh, “most workers envied the scribes for their easy way of life. They were well rewarded for their work.”⁴⁸

The Hebrew Scribe did (does) not consider himself simply the possessor of a task; his is a calling from God Himself. A סֹפֵר will involve himself in a daily ‘ritual cleansing’ prior to engagement in his task of writing the Scriptures. This ritual also goes to the extreme of another ritual cleansing of the hands when he has to leave his work to relieve himself or to eat.⁴⁹

⁴³ <http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/exhibits/egypt/scribes.html>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁴⁴ http://members.tripod.com/Duat_Ramesses/scribes.htm. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

⁴⁵ http://members.tripod.com/~ancient_egypt/pas.html. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

⁴⁶ http://members.tripod.com/Duat_Ramesses/scribes.htm. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

⁴⁷ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁴⁸ http://members.tripod.com/~ancient_egypt/pas.html. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

⁴⁹ This information came from a dialogue with a Jewish Rabbi in Akron, Ohio as he was explaining the work of the Scribe as he prepares the Scripture.

The Evolution of the Scribe

As has been previously mentioned, a Scribe “originally was a copyist of the Law or a secretary but eventually [he] became an official roughly equivalent to a town clerk or sometimes a secretary of state.”⁵⁰ In the first century סֵפֶר were engaged as the preservers of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. Unfortunately, although these Scribes since “Hezekiah’s time transcribed old records, and became a class of students and interpreters of the law, [they eventually reached a point of] boasting of their wisdom.”⁵¹

In fact, “the extraordinary honors bestowed on these scholars on the part of the people are expressed in their honorary titles. Most common was the appellative ‘rabbi’ = ‘my lord’”⁵² “From their students the rabbis demanded honors even surpassing those bestowed on parents. ‘Let the honor of thy friend border on the honor of thy teacher, and the honor of thy teacher on the fear of God.’⁵³ ‘The honor of thy teacher must surpass the honor bestowed on thy father; for son and father are both in duty bound to honor the teacher.’⁵⁴ Everywhere the rabbis demanded⁵⁵ the position of first rank.”⁵⁶ Certainly a transformation and evolution had occurred from a humble beginning brought about by necessity to an exalted position in high society..

These men were obviously a group of highly trained, highly literate people⁵⁷ living in “a time when only the elite and the urbanites were literate.”⁵⁸ Further, they were

⁵⁰ "Scribes," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁵¹ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁵² <http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T7709>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁵³ 'Abthoth 4 12

⁵⁴ Kerithoth 6 9

⁵⁵ Matthew 23:6; Mark 12:38; Luke 11:43; 20:46

⁵⁶ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T7709>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁵⁷ “They appear as an organized group only in the Synoptic Gospels.” Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society; A Sociological Approach*, 241.

⁵⁸ <http://orion.mssc.huji.ac.il/orion/programs/Altman/Altman99.shtml>. Accessed on April 19, 2003.

often observed in a position of great power. However, “there was also a subordinate class of scribes⁵⁹, most of whom were Levites. [These, too,] were engaged in various ways as writers.”⁶⁰ “Eventually scribes made up an entire level of the bureaucracy. They [probably] had the only profession in the country whose members were aware of almost all that was going on in the empire. Personal letters, diplomatic communications, wills and other legal documents, official proclamations, tax records, administrative, economic, and religious documents, and so forth, all went through their hands. Indeed, even the closing phrase of ancient letters, ‘May you be well when you hear this,’ implies that it was in actuality the scribes who not only wrote but also read communications between two people.”⁶¹ Furthermore, “all high-ranking people were scribes before entering into [their] higher profession, including the King. The highest administrative titles [do not] allude to writing, but we know from statues and other representations that such people were once scribes. They [certainly] had gone beyond the level of achievement at which writing was their main occupation, but they never [in fact,] bypassed it.”⁶²

Eventually, these men evolved into the ranks of the Pharisees and the Sadducees⁶³ and “served in the great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, the chief Jewish legislative and judicial body.”⁶⁴ While the general portrayal of these men as presented in the New Testament is of a negative light, it should be noted that some “were men of a different spirit, and showed themselves friendly to the Gospel and its preachers. Thus Gamaliel advised the

⁵⁹ Such, for example, was Baruch, who "wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord" Jeremiah 36:4,32

⁶⁰ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/ebd/view.cgi?number=T3241>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁶¹ <http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmnh/exhibits/egypt/scribes.html>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁶² http://members.tripod.com/Duat_Ramesses/scribes.htm

⁶³ The Pharisees and the Sadducees shared different and often opposing interpretations of the laws of Judaism. In the 1st century the scribes were the preservers of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple.

⁶⁴ "Scribes," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

Sanhedrin, when the apostles were before them charged with ‘teaching in this name,’ to ‘refrain from these men and let them alone.’^{65,66}

“The ascending scale of rab, rabbi, rabban, presented so many steps on the ladder of ambition. Other forms of worldliness were not far off. The salutations in the market-place⁶⁷, the reverential kiss offered by the scholars to their master or by rabbis to each other the greeting of Abba, father⁶⁸, the long robes with the broad blue fringe⁶⁹ --all these go to make up the picture of a scribe’s life.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

Certainly we have presented a brief survey of both a class of people and a trade that far outgrew its original intended purpose. These ‘scribes’ were viewed as

“‘professional administrators’, with the focus changing from the mere fact of their literary skills to the broader question of the function of those skills within society.”⁷¹

There are still some, however, who recognize the original function of this office and who still practice it today. From this, a discerning reader should be able to gather that the end product of an evolution does not negate its originally intended purpose and place.

Therefore, one’s respect for the ministry and task of the סֹפֵר should be restored and a new value for his work should be gained.

⁶⁵ Acts 5:34-39; 23:9

⁶⁶ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/ebd/view.cgi?number=T3241>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁶⁷ Matthew 23:7

⁶⁸ Matthew 23:9

⁶⁹ Matthew 23:5

⁷⁰ <http://www.searchgodsword.org/dic/sbd/view.cgi?number=T3768>. Accessed on April 17, 2003.

⁷¹ David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach*, (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1991), 9.

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