

SEALED BOOKS IN THE BIBLE.

A variety of objects was found with the lead books, but the books were the greater part of the find. Most are, or have been, sealed with rings through the pages. Some have been opened at one stage in their history, but the holes for sealing rings are clear. The books vary in size. Some are very small, 1.75 x 2.75 inches; others are as large as 5 x 5.75 inches. The opened books have between six and ten pages, but it is not possible to count accurately the pages of the sealed books since they are often compressed together. Most of the writing on them is in a Palaeo-Hebrew script.

Since most of the writing is Hebrew, it is worth looking carefully at all the passages in the Bible that refer to sealed books. No matter how one interprets these passages, we need to ask what sort of book the writer was describing and whether such a book would have been a familiar object when the passage was written.

The best-known account of small sealed books in the area where the lead books were found is the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. The traditional Authorised Version of the Bible describes a book sealed with seven seals, Revelation 5.1, but there has been some confusion over whether the object described here is a book in the modern sense - with a front cover, a back cover and pages in the middle - or a scroll.

Most modern translations of this verse, for example the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, the Good News Bible, say it was a scroll. The original Greek word is *biblion*, which means either a strip of papyrus, presumably to roll up, or 'a little book'. The Latin Vulgate has *liber*, book, and so the earliest unambiguous translation understood that it was a book.

Then there is the question of which parts of the book contained the writing. The Authorised Version says the 'book' was written 'within and on the backside'; and the Jerusalem Bible says it was written 'on back and front'. This is further evidence that the object the writer had in mind was a book not a scroll, because you cannot see both sides of a rolled-up scroll. So *biblion* here really must have meant a book.

On the question of where exactly the writing was to be found on the book, one of the oldest biblical manuscripts, the 4th century Sinai Codex, has an interesting difference from other versions in its rendering of that passage in Revelation. Where other texts have *esōthen*, 'within', the Sinai codex has *emprosthen*, 'on the front', giving 'a book written on the front and on the back, sealed with seven seals.'

This is exactly the form of the lead books; they have writing and images on both front and back covers. The pages are written on one side only because the lead is

cast rather than inscribed, and the letters stand above the surface of the page and so cannot be altered.

In the vision in Revelation 5, the One who sat on the heavenly throne held the sealed book in his right hand. A mighty angel called out 'Who is worthy to open the book and break its seals?', but nobody in heaven or on earth was worthy. Then a descendent of King David, with the title 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah', was deemed worthy to open the book.

In the vision in Revelation, the new divine king was set on the throne, acclaimed by heaven and earth, and then worshipped as he held the sealed book. He received 'power, wealth, wisdom, might, honour, glory and blessing.' This is unlikely to be an imitation of Roman court ritual as is sometimes suggested; rather, it was a memory of the ancient temple ritual in Jerusalem when Davidic kings had been enthroned there. The earliest known icon of Jesus, made in the early sixth century and given to St Catherine's monastery at Sinai, shows him holding a sealed book.

A book of some sort was part of the ancient king-making ceremony in Jerusalem. Very little is known about this, but according to 2 Kings 11.12, when the boy king Joash was crowned in about 840 BCE, the high priest gave him the crown and the 'testimony'. This must have been a book or tablet of some sort, perhaps teaching that was entrusted only to the king. It is likely that this was the origin of the sealed book that the Lamb opened in the Book of Revelation.

There is also a mysterious passage about a sealed book in Isaiah 29.11-12, but nobody knows what this section of Isaiah means. The word for 'book' here is *sepher*. The prophet said that the Lord had poured out the spirit of deep sleep, *tardemah*, something that usually preceded a vision or revelation, but in this case it had the opposite effect. It closed the eyes of the prophets and covered the heads of the seers, and so the vision became *like a sealed book* to them. Those who could read could not open the seals; and those who could not read could not understand it anyway.

In Revelation 6.1-7 the Lamb on the throne opened the seals of the book one by one, and as he broke each seal a sequence of events took place on earth. The four horsemen of the apocalypse rode out from heaven as the first four seals were broken. The fifth seal revealed the martyrs waiting for justice, and the sixth brought the earthquake that warned of the day of judgement. The seventh seal brought seven more angels to warn of the coming judgement, Revelation 8.1-20.

Then a mighty angel came from heaven, holding in his hand the little book with all its seals opened, Revelation 10.2. The Greek here is *biblaridion*, which could be a small scroll or a little book. The Vulgate has *libellus*, a small book. In the vision, John heard the angel call out like seven thunders, but he was told not to write down

what he heard. He learned that the mystery foretold by the ancient prophets was about to be fulfilled. The angel told John to eat the opened book, in other words, to remember what was written there but to keep it secret. It was sweet as honey, but had a bitter aftertaste. Then the angel gave him a new revelation for the whole world.

Origen, a Christian writer in the early third century CE, in his book *Against Celsus* 6.6 linked the writing that John ate to a scroll eaten by the prophet Ezekiel. He received a vision in about 600 BC, and Ezekiel 2.9-10 says that a hand from heaven gave him a rolled up writing, written on both sides. This may be why people have thought that the *biblion* in Revelation was a scroll. The Lord told him to eat it, a way of saying that the teaching had to be absorbed and not disclosed. The writing tasted like honey. Origen said that both visions symbolised secret teaching which could not be revealed to unworthy people. The Lamb who had approached the heavenly throne in Revelation was deemed worthy to open to book, in other words, to know the secret teaching.

A sealed writing was linked to the ancient prophecies. About 150 years before Ezekiel's vision, Isaiah had called for his teaching to be sealed up and kept only for his disciples. His words had been rejected by many, and Isaiah 8.16 says that he had his teachings sealed away. This was about 730 BCE. He warned that his people would then live in darkness and distress. The sequence of his book implies that the time of darkness would end when a new king of the house of David established the kingdom again, Isaiah 9.2-7. The Christians linked this prophecy to the birth of Jesus, Luke 1.32-33. They also linked it to Jesus entering Jerusalem six days before he died, when the crowd greeted him as the long-awaited Davidic king who would bring [back?] the old kingdom to Jerusalem, Mark 11.9-10.

Just before Isaiah sealed up his teaching, the Lord told him to write the name of his unborn child on a tablet as a sign. Two more prophecies followed, and then Isaiah told his disciples to seal up his teaching. Later interpreters understood that Isaiah wrote on a metal tablet because Isaiah 3.23 uses the same word for one of the women's trinkets he condemned. In the Aramaic and Latin translations, this object was a polished metal mirror, suggesting that Isaiah's writing tablet may also have been metal, and that his teaching was sealed away on metal tablets. .

The last reference to a sealed book in the Hebrew Bible is in Daniel 12. The present version of Daniel was compiled in the mid-second century BCE, when the Jews were fighting to regain their independence from the Syrians. Daniel received prophecies from angels, who told him to seal them in a book, *sepher*, until the time of the end, Daniel 12.4. The prophecies told of the future struggles and triumphs of his people over their foreign rulers. The scene in Daniel 12 is very like the scene in Revelation

10, and John must have had Daniel's prophecy in mind. The angel told him that the earlier mysteries announced by the prophets were about to be fulfilled.

Sealed books, and perhaps even sealed metal books, were known to the readers of the Hebrew Bible and they were linked to prophecy, to secret teaching, and to the Davidic kings. They preserved teaching hidden away in the times of darkness when enemies triumphed, and they would be opened when the kingdom was to be restored.

This is *the only known context* for sealed books in the Hebrew tradition. It may be that the sealed lead books found recently prove to be evidence for a hitherto unknown situation or group of people; but until then, one working hypothesis has to be that these artefacts are from the Hebrew Christians, who were among those resisting the Romans in the years immediately after the time of Jesus. They were waiting for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. When his disciples asked Jesus in Acts 1.6, 'Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' they may not have meant a spiritual kingdom.