

## The Concept of “Book” and “Sealed Book” in Ancient Jewish Literature

### *Sefer, Megillah, Ketab* in the Tanakh

In Biblical Hebrew the word *sefer* (ספר; cf. Assyrian *šipru*, “missive,” “letter,” “document”) can refer to both a literary composition or writing and to the physical medium on which the writing is recorded (e.g., a scroll, *megillah*, or a tablet, *luah*). Ezekiel 2:9 refers to a *megillah sefer*, a “scroll of a book” (מגילת ספר), that is, a literary composition recorded on a scroll. Because codices were not used by Hebrews in Biblical times, a “book” (*sefer*) in the context of the Tanakh is never a text recorded on a codex, but on a scroll or tablet/s. Because “books” were written on scrolls, *sefer* and *megillah* can be used at times more or less synonymously. In Ezekiel 3:2 the prophet, for example, eats “the scroll” (המגילה); one could also have said by a sort of synecdoche that he ate the *sefer*, since the latter in the sense of a literary composition was contained on the scroll.

Scrolls contained a “book” (*sefer*) in the sense of a composition or text, for instance, *The Book (sefer) of Isaiah*, which, however, at the same time means “the roll/scroll of Isaiah.” Cf. Luke 4:17: “And there was given to him the book (βιβλίον) of Isaiah the prophet. And when he had unrolled (ἀναπτύξας; variant “opened,” ἀνοίξας) the book (βιβλίον). . . .” Here we could understand *biblion* in the sense of both *megillah* (physical scroll) and *sefer* (a literary text) at once.

Synonymous with ספר is כתב, *ketab*, as in Daniel 10:21’s “book of truth” (כתב אמת). *Ketab*, literally, a “writing,” like *sefer*, can refer to both a physical object such as a scroll or tablet/s, and to a literary composition in a more abstract sense. Daniel 10:21’s *ketab emet* therefore refers to a composition recorded on a scroll (or perhaps on celestial tablets), not on a codex (again, codices were not used by Hebrews in Biblical times). In Daniel 7 we read “and books were opened” (וספרין פתיון; LXX και βιβλοι ηνεώχθησαν). These celestial books were either scrolls or tablets, not codices.

We should also mention that the Dead Sea Scrolls (CD 5:2-5) refer to the “book of the sealed torah,” ספר התורה החתום. Here again, the “book” is both a text and the scroll upon which that text is written.

### Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation

In Revelation 6:14 we read, “And heaven departed as a βιβλίον being rolled up”; obviously here βιβλίον is to be translated “scroll,” since a codex is not rolled up but closed (cf. NSRV, “The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up”). Consequently the same word is usually rendered with “scroll” in the NRSV in Revelation 5, although this is not a necessary rendering, because codices were already in circulation in the first century CE when Revelation was written, as we document below. The Ezekiel 2-3 passage is alluded to later in Revelation 10:8 where it is called a βιβλαρίδιον, which the NRSV renders “little scroll.” However, both βιβλίον and βιβλαρίδιον might refer just as much to the composition or text involved than to the physical medium which conveys it.

Revelation 5’s trope of a sealed scroll is derived from Daniel 12:4’s “keep the words secret and the book (הספר; LXX βιβλίον) sealed (חתם; LXX σφράγισον) until the time of the

end.” The same Daniel verse has informed Revelation 22:10: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book (*bibliou*), for the time is near.” Why would Revelation 5’s object be a *biblion*, and Revelation 10’s a *biblaridion*? Both terms are basically synonymous, but it may be that the rarer word in Revelation 10 is used in order to emphasize the object’s unusually small dimensions, which would be congruent with the fact that the prophet (as in Ezekiel 2-3) is instructed to eat it. It’s easier and more realistic to imagine someone swallowing a miniature object rather than a larger sized one.

#### 4 Ezra and 1 Enoch

In 4 Ezra 14:6 the Lord tells Moses, “These words you shall publish openly, and these you shall keep secret,” and in verse 25 Ezra is instructed, “some things you shall make public, and some you shall deliver in secret to the wise,” and lastly in verses 45-46, “And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, ‘Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people’” (RSV).

A pattern of simultaneous concealment and revelation is found in the Book of Revelation as well, where the author is commanded not to publish what the seven thunders have spoken, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down,” but in 22:10 he is instructed, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book (*bibliou*), for the time is near.”

It would seem that the precise number of 4 Ezra’s seventy *esoteric* or sealed books (sealed in the sense of hidden, that is, from the general public’s gaze) has been influenced by Daniel 9:24’s “*seventy* weeks of years,” which are required “to *seal* both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place” (RSV). There would seem to be some connection with 1 Enoch’s Animal Apocalypse as well, wherein the deeds of seventy shepherds who preside over seventy periods of salvation history are recorded in celestial books that are sealed.

1 Enoch 89:71, “And the book was read before the Lord of the sheep, and He took the book from his hand and read it and sealed it and laid it down.” 1 Enoch 90:20: “And I saw till a throne was erected in the pleasant land, and the Lord of the sheep sat Himself thereon, and the other took the sealed books and opened those books before the Lord of the sheep” (R. H. Charles version). 1 Enoch 89:71 speaks of a single sealed book, but in 90:20 this has become plural. Similarly, 1 Enoch 81:1-2’s “heavenly tablets” become singular in 81:2’s “the book.”

Joseph Blenkinsopp refers to sealed books that will be opened at the end of time, an idea found in 4 Ezra 6:20, “and when *the seal* is placed upon the age which is about to pass away, then I will show these signs: the *books shall be opened* before the firmament, and all shall see it together.”<sup>1</sup> Blenkinsopp in the same passage also refers to the sealed celestial letter that descends to earth and becomes a large book in Odes of Solomon 23

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), p. 23.

and to 3 Enoch 27's *sealed case* that contains the books to be used at the Great Judgment.

According to Blenkinsopp, it is probable that 4 Ezra 14 refers to physically sealed books.<sup>2</sup> Complementary to this view is that of Stephen Pfann who holds that what 4 Ezra describes are books written in hieratic script.<sup>3</sup>

We should not forget that the Book of Daniel, in whose 12<sup>th</sup> chapter one encounters the notion of a sealed book, pertains to a military conflict (between the Maccabees and Antiochus Epiphanes) that set the tone for the later Jewish War (66-70 CE) and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE) as well.

### The Pinax

Rabbinic disciples wrote down notes of their masters' teaching on writing tablets that were later placed together in the form of notebooks that virtually resembled short codices. This format was known as the *pinax* (plural, *pinakes*). Among the Bar Kokhba letters was a message written on four separate pieces of wood that could be compared to a *pinax* notebook whose separate pages could be combined together.<sup>4</sup>

The main difference between the *pinax* and the codex is that the separate pages or tablets of a codex "would . . . be held together at one and the same axis," while those of the *pinax* were "held together . . . at both sides."<sup>5</sup> Because tablets were so thick, *pinakes* contained only a few to a handful of plates.

### The First-Century CE Origins of the Codex Format

Graham N. Stanton documents that Martial (*Epigrams* i.2 and xiv.184–92) mentions parchment codices of the works of Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Livy, and Ovid, and comments: "In Martial's terse two-line mottoes about these 'pocket editions' there is no hint that they are mere novelties, or a recent innovation."<sup>6</sup> Stanton also mentions that "P. Petaus 30 . . . (second century) . . . refers to eight parchment codices which were purchased, and six more which were not. . . . As with Martial, there is no suggestion that these readily portable codices were an innovation. . . ." <sup>7</sup> Stanton concludes:

Taken together, the extant and the literary evidence suggest that codices for substantial writings were not unknown in non-Christian circles in the latter half of the first century, i.e. at the time of the composition of the New Testament writings.<sup>8</sup> . . . At this time it is most unlikely that invention of the codex format by

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Pfann, "The Use of Cryptographic and Esoteric Scripts in Second Temple Judaism and the Surrounding Cultures," in Gabriele Boccaccini; Jason M. Zurawski, eds., *Interpreting 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch* (London/NY: T&T Clark, 2014), pp. 192-195.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), p. 276.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge/NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Christian scribes would have been imitated and developed by non-Christian scribes, albeit in a limited way. . . . Christian and non-Christian scribes may have begun to experiment with more substantial notebooks, i.e. codices, at about the same time, but quite independently; only in Christian circles did an addiction to the new format take hold and become the norm rather than the exception.<sup>9</sup>

Stanton's reconstruction makes it possible for Revelation 5's βιβλίον to refer to a codex just as much as to a scroll. In either case, Revelation's trope of a sealed book possesses a venerable continuity with even earlier Jewish antecedents in the Tanakh and 1 Enoch and with roughly contemporaneous sources such as 4 Ezra.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 180-181.