The Art of the Scribe

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Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! (Job 19:23–4 New International Version)

From the beginning, Jewish scribes have sought to record important documents in ways that would endure. This was particularly true of sacred writings, which helps us understand Job’s _cri de coeur_, where he lists the various types of writing in an increasing order of permanence. The most important and beautiful creations of their art were the Torah scrolls used in worship and study, such as those discovered at Qumran. The earliest examples of the scriptural excerpts in the phylacteries (_tefillin_), which were worn on the foreheads and arms of devout Jewish males during prayer, were also found in Qumran. Writing marriage contracts and other legal documents was a more secular facet of their skill. That we can still read many of these writings more than two thousand years later attests to the remarkable skill and dedication of these ancient scribes. The dry climate of the Dead Sea region also preserved writings that perished in the more humid areas of Israel.

**Writing Surfaces**

The largest and most costly material used for the Dead Sea Scrolls was the carefully prepared parchment made from the hide of any kosher animal, including the cow, calf, sheep, goat, and even the more exotic deer and gazelle. Some of the scrolls were written on papyrus imported from Egypt, but the preferred material was locally produced leather from goats and cows that has been identified by current DNA testing.¹

Tanning, as well as the related art of making parchment, was a complicated and malodorous process performed by craftsmen employing many trade secrets, some of which remain a mystery. The fresh skin was washed and then soaked in water to cause it to swell. After the hair was scraped off, the skin was stretched on wooden frames and carefully shaved to make it as thin as possible and yet thick enough to withstand heavy use (see fig. 1). Even today the finest parchment and vellum must be shaved by hand using a large, curved knife. Then the skin was soaked in a solution of salt, barley flour, gall nuts, and lime water for many days, after which it was rinsed, stretched on frames, and again allowed to dry flat.² It was then polished smooth with pumice stone, a process that also whitened the surface. For example, _Testimonia_ is noticeably whiter than the other fragments that were on display in the Qumran and Masada exhibits (see page 22).

The most impressive examples of their craft are the small skins used to make the tefillin discovered at Qumran (see fig. 2). Because they needed to be folded into tiny bundles, the parchments were also incredibly thin, perhaps made from fetal calfskin. The writing on them is the smallest script yet discovered, yet it is still legible.³ It is obvious that the scribes took great pride in the creation of such miniature works of art as an expression of their faith. Their tiny size contrasts with the large phylacteries denounced by Jesus (Matthew 23:5).

The process of making scrolls entailed cutting two rectangles from the hide, avoiding the spine. This left a lot of waste, but only the finest material could be used. The pieces were sewn together with heavy linen thread or thinly sliced kosher animal tendons (_gittim_). _The Great Isaiah Scroll_ required seventeen sheets,⁴ or the hides of at least nine animals. The thread holes were made with a
wooden awl rather than a metal one to avoid touching the sacred texts with a substance associated with war.5

At Qumran enigmatic plaster fragments were found scattered on the ground floor of one room in the main building. Because they were found on top of ceiling debris, they likely fell from the second-story room. When reassembled, the fragments formed three tables approximately twenty inches high and fifteen feet long. These tables, originally made from a mud-brick frame covered with carefully smoothed plaster, are remarkable in that nothing like them has been found, nor are they mentioned in the documents of that period.6 The tables are so low that a scribe would have been forced to kneel in order to write on them, leading some scholars to believe that these tables were used to inspect a completed scroll in its entirety. The scribes may have written on small wooden desks, of which no trace was found (see fig. 3).

**Ink**

Two inkwells, one ceramic and the other bronze, were also found in the debris of this same room (see fig. 4). The traces of ink found within matched the composition of ink used on the majority of scrolls.7 The traditional ink was a preparation of soot from olive-oil lamps. Honey, oil, vinegar, and water were added to thin it to the proper consistency. In order for the ink to bite into the writing surface and not fade, later scribes added gall nuts to the formula. Sometimes the concentration of gall nut was so strong that the ink eventually ate completely through the parchment. The scribes probably tried their best to achieve the proper balance of the ingredients, hoping that the ink would stand the test of time. Their greatest concern was to achieve a rich, lustrous black, even if it was at the expense of a flexible, translucent ink. When the thick ink would flake off the surface, the Torah scroll was considered unfit for use, necessitating restoration in a prescribed manner in order to maintain the perfection of the sacred writings and to enable their continued use.

**Pen**

Not surprisingly, the pen was the symbol of the scribe. Throughout the Mediterranean world, pens were usually fashioned from reeds (see fig. 5), but for harder surfaces, they were made of metal or hard stone.8 A carefully trimmed pen indicated the pride that the scribe took in his work. The minuscule size of the individual letters on the scrolls is especially impressive to anyone who has tried to write with a handmade pen, for the pen point had to be cut to a chisel shape of very narrow width. Although no pens have survived from Qumran, Jewish writings indicate that the scribes used reeds at this time.9 When repeated dipping of the pen in ink caused the reed fibers to become soaked and to grow soft, the scribe would have to retrim the point. The fact that no difference in stroke width is apparent among the finest scrolls testifies to the precision with which the scribes trimmed their pens.

**Letter Forms**

As is usual with Aramaic alphabets, Hebrew letters hang from the line rather than stand on it, as in our Greco-Roman tradition. If a top horizontal stroke is called for, it should follow this line, whereas the bottom element of the letter usually slants down to the left, further strengthening the movement of the eye to the left. The strongest element in the Hebrew letter form, today as well as anciently, is the contrast between thick and thin strokes, the result of the way the pen point is trimmed to a chisel shape. It appears that paleo-Hebrew favored a strong contrast, while a later example, The Great Isaiah Scroll, shows a more uniform balance of thick and thin elements (see fig. 6). It is written in a standard Hasmonaean formal hand of 125–100 B.C. The letters were written slowly and deliberately, in contrast to modern calligraphy’s emphasis on speed and rhythm.
Though Hebrew is read from right to left, the individual letters are written from left to right, since the pen must be pulled over the surface, never pushed. Today, Jewish scribes touch the letter with the pen immediately after completing a stroke, depositing a small amount of surplus ink on the wide stroke so that when it dries it will be even blacker and form a raised surface. This is a risky process because any smudges could render the whole page unusable. This process also contributes to the problem of flaking.

The ancient scribes were willing to risk these dangers in order to achieve the strongest possible contrast between ink and writing surface. When we consider how tiny the letters are, we can appreciate this aesthetic. Some calligraphers accentuated the letter size by designing the page to leave a generous space between lines, allowing the reader to “breathe” as his eyes moved down to the next line. This minute script must have been written in strong sunlight by scribes with good eyesight. Since advancing age brings diminished visual acuity, most elderly scribes and readers would not have been able to use these scrolls, and this made the custom of public reading on the Sabbath even more significant. When Jesus returned to his childhood synagogue at Nazareth and stood up to read the scroll of Isaiah, he was still a young man with good eyesight (see Luke 4:16–7). Most of the elders present would have already committed these scriptures to memory.

Scribes learned how to create beautiful letters by copying standard models (tikkun). A potsherd, the scratch paper of the ancient world, discovered in a rubbish heap at Qumran shows the beginning of this long learning process. Presumably a student wrote a copy of the alphabet in a painstaking manner, repeating some letters twice (see fig. 7). One can imagine him studying his teacher’s model and then trying to reproduce faithfully every curve. To ensure absolute accuracy, even competent scribes were never to write a Torah scroll without a trustworthy copy in front of them. The meticulous care required in copying documents is emphasized in the following quotation from the first-century scribe Ishmael: “My son, be careful in your work for it is the work of Heaven, lest you err either in leaving out or in adding one iota, and thereby cause the destruction of the whole world.” This scribal concern with even the smallest letters, such as the Greek iota, or Hebrew yod, was pointed out by the Savior in his vigorous defense of the literal fulfillment of prophecy (see Matthew 5:18).

A scribe was to purify himself and recite a special prayer before beginning his day of writing, and especially before writing the name of God. A shallow washbasin discovered with the remains of the tables at Qumran may have been used for this very purpose. Some scribes used the paleo-Hebrew script for the sacred name of Deity (see fig. 8) while others, such as the scribe of 4Q175 Testimonia, used four dots. Scribes in Alexandria, under Greek influence, began to write the name of God in gold leaf, a practice later condemned in the Talmud.

So diligent were the scribes in accurately transmitting sacred texts that their work forms an unbroken chain of remarkable consistency over the centuries. The copying of a Torah scroll was the greatest opportunity for a Jewish artist to express his love of beauty, for it was believed that the art of writing itself was a gift from God. According to Jewish tradition, before the creation of the world the Torah already existed, written in “black fire on white fire.” Thus the alphabet predates the world, and consequently no effort was spared in transmitting the sacred written word faithfully.

The scroll fragments on exhibit show a wide spectrum of the calligrapher’s art, spanning a period from 250 B.C. to A.D. 50, considered by many to be the golden age of the art. The oldest fragment, 4Q22 Paleo Exodus, shows us a style already ancient when it was copied (see page 16).
Preservation

These scrolls were intended to be handled and used reverently, and thus precautions were taken to ensure their longevity. The most critical problem was that the leather scrolls absorbed moisture and oils from human skin, causing permanent stains. For example, the outside of the Isaiah scroll carries the handprint stains of those who held it while reading. In response to this problem, the custom developed of using a hand-shaped pointer (yad) to avoid touching the inner written surface of a scroll. To avoid staining the outer surface, readers would use a cloth draped over their hands when handling the scrolls, a sign of reverence copied by the early Christians when handling their texts.

When not being used, the scrolls were kept on wooden shelves. Synagogue floor mosaics and glass-enclosed gold leaf roundels (see fig. 9) represent the wooden cabinet (tebbah) built to contain the Torah scrolls as quite elaborate and evocative of the Jerusalem temple facade. It could have doors or a curtain (parochet) to conceal and protect the scrolls.

When a scroll became damaged and thus could no longer be used (pasul), it was not destroyed (doing so would be irreverent) but was placed in the synagogue in a special room or closet (genizah), where it joined other worn scrolls. The copious fragments found in the Cairo Genizah have survived for centuries and were considered the greatest Jewish manuscript discovery until that of Qumran.

Some of the Qumran scrolls were found wrapped in plain linen cloth and sealed in jars. This simple but practical form of protection is perpetuated in the cloth mantle used today to encase the Torah scrolls when they are placed in the ark. The jars that were specifically designed to store scrolls show the same efficient use of material—straight-sided, widemouthed, with a broad, flat lid. Perhaps the most prized scrolls had jars custom-made for them by Qumran potters.

Many scrolls have survived the passage of centuries because of the ancient custom of hiding sacred texts during times of upheaval and war. Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan and the man who first purchased the Isaiah scroll, experienced this custom firsthand. While still a boy, he and his relatives were driven from their village in Lebanon by Turks and Kurds. Separated from his widowed mother, Samuel found refuge in a mountain monastery. When hope of survival seemed impossible, one of the monks asked him to help them “bury our books.” While bullets whistled around them, they prayed and dug a hole in a small ravine outside the monastery walls. "Those who follow after us will have our books. . . . The work of God will prevail" was the hope expressed as they sealed the aperture with pitch and covered it with stones and earth.16

Decades later, Samuel held The Great Isaiah Scroll in his hands, a scroll that had been hidden away by men with the same hope displayed by his Christian monks. Samuel believed the scroll to be an ancient document even though he could not read Hebrew and several experts had warned him it was not of ancient origin. We can be grateful that he trusted his heart as he admired the scroll’s minute yet beautiful calligraphy and miraculous state of preservation. His efforts, as well as those of others, have succeeded in bringing to light marvelous treasures of faith, preserved by the scribal arts.

How remarkable it is that ancient writings from the Judean desert have survived, even if in fragments, to our day. That they exist at all and are still legible testifies to the religious devotion of the communities who produced them as well as to the consummate skill and love of beauty.
exemplified in the scribes’ craftsmanship. It is a continuing paradox that the written word can possess such great power to move us, and yet the materials used to transmit it through the corridors of time are so very fragile.

**Notes**

1. Personal conversation with Dr. Scott Woodward, August 1997.


4. See Frank Moore Cross, David Noel Freedman, and James A. Sanders, eds., *Scrolls from Qumrân Cave 1: The Great Isaiah Scroll; The Order of the Community; The Pesher of Habakkuk* (Jerusalem: Albright Institute of Archaeological Research; and The Shrine of the Book, 1972), 3.

5. See the King James Version of Exodus 20:25, “For if thou lift up thy tool upon it [an altar], thou hast polluted it.” Today the ultra-orthodox Jews use an ivory or wood pointer (*yad*) when reading the Torah in the synagogues, as opposed to the silver pointer in more common use.


8. See KJV Jeremiah 17:1: “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond.” The New International Version rendering is “Judah’s sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point.”

9. The Sephardic scribes (Jews descended from families living in the Mediterranean area) continue to write exclusively with reed pens, while the Ashkenazi scribes (Jews descended from central and eastern Europe) write only with quills taken from turkey or chicken wing feathers.


12. See J. Simcha Cohen, *The 613th Commandment: An Analysis of the Mitzvah to Write a Sefer Torah* (New York: Ktav, 1983), 86. This custom is still observed by orthodox scribes. Muslim scribes say a prayer whenever they write the name of Allah.

