



Backstory: historical and cultural terms on the Bible and the ancient Near East

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papyrus, an aquatic plant of the sedge family that grew abundantly in the shallow waters of the Nile in the vicinity of the Delta (Job 8:11). Resembling a stalk of corn (maize), the plant was used in a great variety of ways, not only in making “paper,” but also for fuel, food, medicine, clothes, rugs, sails, ropes, and even a kind of chewing gum. In the manufacture of “paper,” the stem of the mature plant was cut into sections about twelve to fifteen inches in length; after each of these was split open lengthwise, the core of pith was removed and sliced into very thin strips; these strips were laid lengthwise on a flat surface just overlapping each other and all facing the same direction; then a second layer, placed at right angles, was laid on top; the two layers were then pressed or pounded together until they formed one fabric. About twenty individual sheets of papyrus could be joined together end to end to form a roll. From such a roll, pieces would be cut to the size needed for writing a letter, a bill of sale, a deed, or any other record.

scribe, one trained in the formal art of reading and writing, usually with competence in some area such as law, economics, or the like. In the ancient Near East the designation “scribe” covered a variety of offices, from the local copiers of documents and contracts for ordinary people to government officials invested with serious responsibilities. In the Old Testament the scribe first appears as a muster officer (Judg. 5:14) and later as a high cabinet officer concerned with finance, policy, and administration (2 Kings 22; Jer. 36:10). Jeremiah’s associate, Baruch, who recorded his words, was also a scribe (Jer. 36:32). In postexilic times (sixth century BCE) Ezra the scribe was sent by the Persian king to instruct and guide the inhabitants of Judea. In the New Testament “the scribes” occasionally appear alone, but are more often in company with other Jewish groups. In almost all cases they are opponents of Jesus (but see Mark 12:28–34). Similarly, in the early chapters of Acts the scribes and elders are opponents of Christianity (4:5; 6:12).

scroll, a roll of papyrus or specially prepared leather used for writing in antiquity (see Jer. 36). To make a papyrus scroll even strips cut from the pith of the papyrus plant were laid side by side in horizontal and vertical rows, forming the front and back side of the sheet, respectively. Water and pressure were applied to make the strips adhere. After they dried, the sheets were rubbed smooth with shells or stones. Leather scrolls were made of sheep, goat, or calf skin that had been dehaired, scraped, washed, stretched on a frame, and dried. The hair side, on which the writing was done, was scraped smooth and rubbed with a pumice stone. Rectangles of prepared leather were stitched together to make a scroll. References to scrolls and writing in the Bible include Deut. 28:58; Josh. 1:8; Ps. 45:1; Isa. 8:1; Jer. 8:8; 25:13; Ezek. 2:9–10; Rev. 5:1.