

By Alan Millard

## Reading and Writing In the Time of Jesus. (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000)

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*There was much more writing in Palestine during the Gospel period than has been commonly allowed.*

Today the Bible is widely available in a single volume, easy to use and often small enough to slip into a pocket. We do not realize what an advantage we have in comparison with people of the first century. The normal form of the book then was the scroll; a book with pages, the codex, was used at that time mainly for note taking. It developed to become the normal book form over the next two or three centuries. This means that a Jew who owned a Bible in Jesus's time would have had an armful of scrolls. Since every copy was made by hand, books were not cheap, although we should not exaggerate their cost; a copy of a lengthy book like Isaiah might take a professional scribe three days or so to make, so the price would be his wages and the cost of the materials. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that many individual Jews would own a complete set of the Scriptures, but according to Luke 4, a small town like Nazareth had a copy of Isaiah in its synagogue, so undoubtedly it held rolls of the Torah and, it is likely, the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

Luke reports that in Nazareth Jesus read from Isaiah and his frequent quotations from Scripture show his familiarity with it. The only reference to his writing is in the episode of the adulteress when he "started to write on the ground with his finger" (John 8: 1-11). What was the situation in first century Palestine? How widespread was writing? In the common opinion of New Testament scholars, the Gospels were written about A.D. 70, or a little later, after the Fall of Jerusalem. One reason for their writing, it is supposed, is the loss of eyewitness testimony.

Until that point, much of the knowledge of Jesus's words and deeds depended on oral tradition: people passed on what they had heard and seen by word of mouth. It is further asserted that writing was restricted to government and religious circles and would have had no place among the peasantry of Galilee: "writing was in the hands of an elite of trained specialists, and reading required an advanced education available only to a few." It is my contention that archaeological discoveries and other lines of evidence show the contrary: writing and reading were widely practiced in the Palestine of Jesus's day. However, I would not suggest everyone could read or write; nor were those who could read necessarily able to write.

The major discovery in this area in the twentieth century was, of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here are scores of books written and used by members of an exclusive Jewish religious sect in the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. They reveal not only continued copying of the sacred Scriptures but also of other books and the creation of new ones. The members of the sect were expected to read the Law regularly. We shall return to the Scrolls. It was the extreme aridity of the region that preserved the Scrolls, though many were very badly damaged. The same unusual atmospheric conditions preserved documents hidden at the time of the Second Jewish Revolt, led by Bar Kochba in A.D. 132-135. Refugees from the Roman forces

took these documents with them when they sought refuge in remote caves near the Dead Sea, further south than the Qumran area where the Scrolls were discovered.

Some pieces of biblical scrolls were found, so they were obviously valued, and also a variety of letters and legal deeds. Some of the letters are from Bar Kochba, or addressed to him. One archive, belonging to a lady, had been carried in an old wineskin. The deeds are written in Greek and Aramaic; they concern ownership of property, debts, and marriage and divorce settlements. Some of them date from the middle of the first century or just after and so exemplify the sort of legal documents that were being written in the Gospel period. One deed of divorce is similar in many ways to the traditional Jewish ketubah and also to a deed of divorce between two Idumaeans of the second century B.C., written on a potsherd found at Marisa in Judaea. Outside the peculiar circumstances of the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea desert, papyrus documents do not survive in Palestine: they rot in the damp soil. The fact that they are not discovered, however, does not mean they did not exist! The deed of debt among the Second Revolt documents can be taken as an example of the debt notes Jesus had in mind when he told the parable of the Shrewd Manager who instructs his master's debtor: "Take your bill, sit down quickly and write" half the amount (Luke 16: 6,7). The possibility of ordinary men doing that is taken for granted. Even if people could not write, they would know of writing and sometimes face it and its power.

Josephus reports that when the First Revolt broke out, one of the rebels' primary targets was to burn an archive building in Jerusalem that stored the records of debts (Jewish War 2.247) - the rebels knew the power the records could have over them. The second century legal texts from the Bar Kochba caves include several which are signed by the scribe and by witnesses. Some witnesses signed with flowing, easy script, some with laboriously written letters; the scribe signed on behalf of some who could not write. The documents from the Second Revolt include some on wooden tablets. Wooden tablets, coated with wax, were normal writing materials across the Roman Empire. Examples have been excavated where unusual conditions have prevented the wood from rotting in different parts of the Roman world, including London. Recently, attention has been drawn to another type of wooden tablet, thin slats, like pieces of veneer, on which notes and messages could be written. Hundreds have been uncovered at the fort of Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall. They were buried early in the second century. All ranks in the army used them, from the garrison commander and his wife to infantrymen and slaves. A part of such a tablet was also found with the Bar Kochba manuscripts.

Although writings on papyrus, leather, and wood cannot survive in most places - the archives of the ancient city of Rome, for example, are lost - other specimens of writing can. In Palestine, hundreds of small bronze coins minted by the Jewish kings in the first century B.C. come to light each year. Those struck for Alexander Jannaeus carry his name and titles written in Hebrew and Greek or Hebrew and Aramaic. The coins of Herod and his sons have only Greek legends, and the same is true for the coins of the Roman governors. Every dutiful Jew paid the annual half-shekel Temple Tax, and the Temple authorities demanded that it be paid in the silver coins of Tyre, which also bore Greek words. However, when the First Revolt broke out, the rebels put Old Hebrew letters on the coins they minted. The currency of Greek beside Aramaic and Hebrew in the first century is also evident from public notices set up in Jerusalem in Greek.

Writing survives in a second source in Herodian Palestine: burials. In first century Jerusalem, it was customary to leave a relative's body in the family tomb for a year and then collect the bones and put them into a box, an ossuary. That saved space in the tomb! Some ossuaries were wooden and have decayed; many were stone and remain. On numerous stone ossuaries, the names of the dead were scratched with something pointed, perhaps a nail, or scribbled in charcoal. The names and the titles a few bear are a fascinating study in themselves. Most of the names found in the Gospels are represented, showing those were current names in the first century. The ways the names are written make it clear these notices were, for the most part, not the work of professional scribes coming into the tombs for the mere purpose of inscription, but of family members concerned with the identification of their relatives.

Papyrus and leather sheets or scrolls, wooden tablets, and slats all had to be manufactured. One writing material was free and readily available: the potsherd. Ancient crockery was usually simple earthenware, terracotta, which broke easily. Pieces lay scattered in the streets and courtyards of towns and villages,

hence, free scrap paper. One could scribble an ephemeral note or message on a suitable sherd and then throw it away. The Hebrew alphabet on a potsherd found at Khirbet Qumran is a good example. Many such inscribed potsherds, ostraca, were found in the excavations at Masada; these were left by the Jewish rebels who held out against the Romans until A.D. 73. There are notes in Greek about supplies of barley and in Hebrew about deliveries of bread. Lists of persons include "the Gadarenes" and "Bar Jesus." Small sherds carry single names with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and dozens have a Hebrew letter, a Greek letter and an Old Hebrew letter. These were probably coupons for a rationing system during the siege. That is the most likely explanation, too, for the sherds bearing a single name which the excavator Yigael Yadin, basing himself on Josephus's report, surmised might be the lots the last defenders of Masada drew to decide who should kill the last of them.

All these discoveries were made in Judaea. Was Galilee different? One scholar has asserted: "even the simplest technology, such as writing, was unavailable." Relatively little material from the first century has been excavated there, largely because sites continued to be occupied and later remains have destroyed or covered the earlier ones, as at Capernaum. Only at Gamla in the Golan has a first century town been extensively explored. Yet with the construction of Sepphoris and then of Tiberias, with the border between Galilee and the Golan at Bethsaida and the frontier with Hippos and Gadara a little further south (places put under the governor of Syria after Herod's death), there would have been quite a lot of writing going on. Besides instructions for builders and supplies for the royal palaces and villas of the nobles, delivery notes and lists, and accounts of payments made, there were the normal records of the tax collectors and customs officials. Could people who heard Jesus preaching have written what they heard? The wax tablet notebooks were often compact, fitting into the palm, perhaps hung at the belt, at hand for writing striking words like "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," or "I and the Father are one." Tax collectors, for example, like Matthew, would have their tablets with them. People wrote letters, and comparison with Egypt shows they wrote about all sorts of things: a boy demanding his father's attention, a military report. Therefore, we might imagine priests or their agents in Galilee sending written reports about Jesus of Nazareth to their colleagues in Jerusalem.

There's a difference between taking notes, writing reports and letters, and writing a book. Would anyone have collected notes of Jesus's words into a book in his lifetime? Gospel experts make statements such as "in the earliest period there was only an oral record of the narrative and sayings of Jesus." Claimed as support is a rabbinic rule that banned writing of a teacher's words or anything with religious content, apart from the Scriptures, lest other compositions be confused with the sacred texts. In fact, rabbinic sources did allow written notes of a teacher's words on tablets. Now a remarkable and peculiar document among the Dead Sea Scrolls upsets that argument. Fragments of six copies have been identified of a book containing the rulings of an unnamed authority. The text is known as MMT (Miqsat Ma'aseh haTorah - "Some of the Teachings of the Law"). It is written in the first person plural, but whether that is a sign of a group of teachers or a use of the "royal plural" by the highest authority in the group is uncertain. The rulings are set down to contradict the tenets of another party, a party which can be identified with those who later became the dominant rabbis in Judaism. The attitude taken by the author(s) is similar to the attitude of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard it was said...but I say to you." A leading Dead Sea Scrolls's scholar does not doubt that the document was written at the time the rulings were made.

These lines of evidence and others could be adduced: all lead to the conclusion that there was much more writing in Palestine during the Gospel period than has been commonly allowed. When Luke says that he sought out the most reliable sources while compiling his Gospel, we may suppose that he could read notes made by eyewitnesses at the time Jesus spoke. None survive; their existence is a surmise, yet the common currency of writing makes it plausible. The shared material of the Synoptic Gospels ("Q") could well derive from a very early written text. The letters of Paul and others prove writing was current in the early decades of the Church's existence, and the importance of written texts in the Church is evident from the number of papyrus fragments from the mid-second century onwards found in middle Egypt. (There is no reason to believe the Church in Egypt was peculiar in having these written texts; their survival there is purely accidental: others would have circulated across the Roman Empire and further east.) Far more weight should be given to the role of writing than has been done hitherto in preserving knowledge of the words and deeds of Jesus.

*Alan Millard gives a fuller account of the evidence for his contentions in Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus, Sheffield Academic Press (2000).*