

"TEACH ME, AND I WILL BE SILENT" (JOB 6:24).

SCRIBES, SECRETARIES AND TEACHERS

IN THE PERIOD OF THE TWO TEMPLES

Abstract

Over the centuries, research on scribes has explored various directions, offering hypotheses about their roles and status based on textual evidence. Prevailing theories on Israelite scribes heavily relied on sources like the New Testament, Josephus Flavius' writings, rabbinic texts, and non-Jewish scholars, considering them reliable for understanding 1st-century AD Jewish society. However, alternative evidence was often overlooked, and contradictions between sources went unexplained. In the late 19th century, German theologians delved into the history of ancient Jewish people, examining the context surrounding Jesus, his movement, and the New Testament. Regrettably, modern approaches neglect the ancient Israelites' self-perception, favouring biased interpretations influenced by contemporary assumptions. Anachronistic views on schools, scribal training, manuscripts, and authorship further hinder understanding. To grasp the true role of scribes, a comprehensive study of ancient sources, especially the Old Testament, is imperative.



Keywords

scribes, teachers, Chronicles, Ezra, Jewish society

In the Old Testament, scribes played an important role in preserving and transmitting Israelite teachings and traditions. They were skilled in writing and reading and therefore responsible for transmitting and copying the holy texts. They were also often responsible for passing on the Law and other important teachings of the Israelite religious community. Studying the Old Testament scribes presents several issues that need to be considered.

A short history of research

First, studies in past centuries have outlined several directions of research on scribes. Although hypotheses about their roles and status vary widely, they can be categorised according to how they have been approached in the existing textual evidence. For example, most tended to consider that one of the main historically reliable sources for knowledge of 1st century AD Jewish society was from Greco-Roman, neo-Judaic society. In other words, most theories about Israelite scribes depended largely on the portrait painted of them by the New Testament, either the writings of Josephus Flavius or rabbinic texts or the roles of scholars who are not Jewish. Other evidence was frequently ignored or interpreted as a derivative of what was commonly accepted as reliable sources. Contradictions between different sources are rarely explained or, in most cases, not even mentioned.

Since the end of the 19th century A.D., there has been a growing interest in the history of the ancient Jewish people, especially in the studies of German theologians. Motivated by the understanding that Jesus, his movement and the texts of the New Testament should be considered in their historical, social and political context, scholars such as Emil Schürer, Hermann L. Strack, Paul Billerbeck, Joachim Jeremias and Adolf von Schlatter published works on aspects of ancient Jewish history and society (Schams 1998, 15). In their study of the evidence about the scribes, they worked with assumptions shaped by New Testament writings in which scribes were perceived as teachers and teachers of the Scriptures and Jewish law and as such influential in Jewish society in the first century AD. In general, these studies are based on the creation of an artificial category of teachers of the Law, which was also imposed on the ancient sources, without carefully investigating the text and the information they provided. So, the main shortcoming of many modern approaches is that they have not considered the ancient Israelites' perception of themselves as reflected in the sources. Instead, the selection and interpretation of the evidence is heavily influenced by modern assumptions and preconceptions about the scribes. Many of the views on schools, scribal training, scribal work, publication and circulation of books seem too rigid and sometimes too modern to provide an adequate foundation for understanding scribes and their role in ancient Jewish society. Another shortcoming is the under- or over-appreciation of sources about the extent to which they can provide historically reliable information about the realities of Jewish society during the Second Temple period. Finally, assumptions about the writing and transmission of manuscripts, authorship of books, or the composition

of the canon do not consider the fact that not only scribes but also some literate slaves and/or educated people could read and write (Schams 1998, 34-5). So, to outline the role of scribes one must study the ancient sources, the Old Testament and how they describe the role and importance of scribes and teachers of the Law.

Orality of Scripture

Then, another issue related to understanding the problem of the scribes, teachers and scribes concerns how we understand today what Scripture/Bible is and the orality of Scripture, or how much of the actual written content has been preserved orally. Is it the product of the scribes who put the oral traditions into writing? When talking about Scripture, modern readers think of it as a single book, printed and bound between covers, being read privately or studied in a scholarly way. The same can be said of our forefathers, who called the Israelites "a people of books", which paints an idyllic picture of a well-rounded and well-versed community, widely literate. For example, behind the "document hypothesis" associated with the biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen, which is still influential today, is the presupposition that large parts of Scripture are based on layers of written documents, the earliest dating from the time of the Davidic monarchy (10th century BC). These written documents, it is said, were woven together and edited in a cumulative writing effort. Other, more recent studies emphasize "intertextuality" in the Bible, the citation by one scribe of the written text but "fixed" by another. Other scholars consider large sections of Scripture to be the product of modern-type literati or ancient historiographers, all drawing on the resources or reflecting the values of an essentially literate culture (Niditch 1996, 1).

The role of literacy in the development of writing

Thirdly, if we talk about scribes, teachers and secretaries in the Old Testament, we must first understand the literacy of the Israelites and whether this literacy also led to the establishment of certain schools where scribes could learn to read and write. The general question of the presence or absence of schools in Ancient Israel can be analysed in the form of two adjacent, yet distinct questions: (a) the presence and character of schools for training professional scribes for the administrative service of the kingdom and (b) institutions that promoted literacy among the general population. R.J. Williams and A. Lemaire argued in favour of both, first with the emergence of schools for professional scribes, then those for the rest of the population

(Jamieson-Dake 1991, 11). R.J. Williams quoted by Jamieson-Drake says: “The report of Wen-amon, an Egyptian official sent to Byblos about 1100 BC, mentions that five hundred papyrus scrolls were delivered to the Syrian chieftain as an advance for a cargo of wood. This indicates the extent to which writing was practised there. References to Old Testament writing in the time of Moses (Jo 17:14; 24:4; 39:14,30; Dt 27:3; 31:24; cf. Jo 18:4-9) should therefore not be regarded as anachronisms. An episode from the time of Gideon, in the 12th or 11th century BC, attests to the knowledge of writing in a young man from a settlement that was captured at random (Jgd 8:14). As in Egypt and Mesopotamia, those who could write were usually royal rulers, as in the case of David’s *scribe* Seraiah (2 Kgs 8:17). We must assume the existence of schools of scribes as in neighbouring peoples. Graduates of such schools would have been known as *skilful scribes* (Ps 45:1). Isaiah could read and write in the 8th century BC, although this was not true of everyone (Is 29:12). However, by the end of the 7th century, some degree of literacy was assumed (Dt 6:9; 24:1)” (Jamieson-Dake 1991, 11).

However, literacy in the Old Testament world is a thorny issue for current biblical scholarship. On the one hand, the evidence present in Scripture is not sufficient to state with certainty that there were schools of scribes (anachronisms), especially in the Mosaic period (the term “scribe”, ebr. *soṭer*, סֹפֵר, is never mentioned in the Pentateuch), to produce the biblical text and pass it on. In the beginning, oral tradition was probably the main way of transmitting divine revelation. On the other hand, in the ancient world, it is difficult to specify the degree of literacy, because there are no reliable statistics available and no objective criteria for assessing it. Even understanding “popular literacy” is complex, so scholars propose ambiguous terms such as “limited” or “widespread” literacy (King and Stager 2001, 310). What is a literate society? Does it imply only the ability to read or write, or both? Another issue, discussed especially in studies of modern literacy, is the degree of proficiency a person should acquire in reading and writing before he or she can be called “literate” (Warner 1980, 81). To understand the importance of these questions, we need only consider how they affect how we view the issue of literacy in ancient Israel. For example, does an inscription on a ceramic object, “belonging to *someone*”, lead us to believe that the person who wrote it did not necessarily know how to read it? Or that he could have written much larger texts/inscriptions? Or that he could both read and write other texts, not only the letters of this inscription but also much longer texts? The distinction between reading and writing is a very important one, because, for example, studies of literacy and education

in other societies show that completely illiterate people and functional "literate" can recognise many letter groups, e.g., street names, names of people, etc. Then, it is known from history that in many societies where literacy was first formally taught and learned, reading skills were considered far more important than writing skills, and the purpose of literacy was primarily to teach reading. It is also known that in such cases, reading was taught at a minimal level, but learners could nevertheless be called "literate" (Warner 1980, 82). Researchers also debate whether the inventors of the alphabet used a smaller number of letters just to facilitate the spread of writing, especially since literacy spread in Syro-Palestine in a short period. Theoretically, once the alphabet was invented, writing was no longer the exclusive preserve of the priesthood or a class of scribes but could be practised by anyone, generally (Warner 1980, 82).

The earliest evidence of writing and scribes in Ancient Israel (pre-exilic period)

Historically, the earliest writing, produced by educated elites, was discovered in Uruk/Warka (Biblical Erech) on the Euphrates and dates from 3100 BC (King and Stager 2001, 300). Soon after, there is evidence from Egypt in the Nile Valley. Both cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing flourished over the next three millennia, although orality continued to be the simplest and most widespread method of preserving and transmitting information and traditions. The Mesopotamians and common Egyptians were not literate on a large scale. Researchers say that no more than one percent of the ancient world's population was literate (King and Stager 2001, 302).

According to Naaman Nadav, hieratic figures and signs, of Egyptian origin, therefore, appear in the epigraphic documents of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the 8th-7th centuries BC, but not in the documents of Israel's neighbours. Moreover, Orly Goldwasser (1991, 251-2) has shown that they must have entered Hebrew writing much earlier, during the united monarchy of kings David and Solomon, i.e. in the 10th century BC, especially since after the decline of the Egyptian Empire, many Egyptians or Canaanite scribes trained in the language of the Egyptians lost their service at the imperial court and may have offered their scribal and administrative knowledge to the newly emerging powers in the area, first to the Philistines and then to the Israelites. So Naaman concludes, writing was already in use at the Jerusalem court in the 10th century BC (Nadav 1996, 22).

The second testimony is the account of Pharaoh Shishak's campaign against Jerusalem in the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign, which mentions the surrender of Solomon's golden shields and their replacement by copper shields (1 Kgs 14:25-28), testimony that must have been taken from an extant written text, a written record. Otherwise, the memory of the Egyptian campaign, which was fought in Shishak's later years, nearly 300 years before the Deuteronomistic history was told, would have been long forgotten. This would be clear evidence of the existence of writing at the royal court in Jerusalem (Nadav 1996, 22).

Thirdly, there are lists of scribes who knew how to write included in the narratives about David and Solomon which must have been taken from the archives (e.g., 2 Sm 8:16-18; 20:23-26; 23:8-39; 1 Kgs 4:2-19; 9:15-18). The introduction of the scribal profession to the court of David and Solomon is recorded in three of these lists (2 Sm 8:17; 20:24-25; 1 Kgs 4:3). From 2 Sm 8:16 and 20:24-25 (*cf.* 1 Chr 18:15-17), we learn that Jehoshaphat, son of Ahilud was a recorder (heb. *mazkir*, מִזְכִּיר), secretary to the king, one of the dignitaries in King David's court, probably the one who reminded (heb. *zakar*, זָכַר) the king of important matters of the kingdom, and Seraiah was a scribe or secretary (heb. *sofer*, סוֹפֵר) (2 Sm 8:17). To the list of secretaries who most likely knew the art of writing is also added Adoram the one in charge of the forced labor (heb. *mas*, מַס) and Sheva the secretary (heb. *sofer*, סוֹפֵר) (2 Sm 20:24-25). From 1 Kg 4:3-6, we learn that in Solomon's time, there were the following rulers who knew the art of writing: Elihoreph and Ahijah the sons of Shisha were secretaries (heb. *soferim*, סוֹפְרִים), Jehoshaphat, son of Ahilud, was a recorder (heb. *mazkir*, מִזְכִּיר) and Adoniram, probably the same as Adoram, was in charge of the forced labor (heb. *mas*, מַס).

The Chronicles books preserve several testimonies about the existence of scribes in the pre-exilic period. 1 Chr 2:55 contains the first reference to a family of scribes and the profession of scribes: "The clans also of the scribes (heb. *mišpehot soferim*, מִשְׁפְּחוֹת סוֹפְרִים) who lived at Jabez...", since other professions (carpenter, mink workers and potters) are also mentioned in 1 Chr 4. The text suggests that writing was learned in the family and passed on from generation to generation, a practice that is also found in the context of the Ancient Near East, as the legend of Ahiqar shows. Ahiqar trained his grandson, because he had no son, and expected him to succeed him in his position at the royal court (Schams 1998, 58).

1 Chr 24:6 mentions Shemaiah the scribe who oversaw the ordinance of the priests and Levites and their duties at the future Temple: "the scribe Shemaiah, the son of Nethanel, a Levite (heb. *hassop̄er min-halleṽi*, מִן־הַלֵּוִי הַסּוֹפֵר), recorded them in the presence of the king and the princes". Festively present were the king, the chieftains of the people, the priests Zadok and Ahimelech, and the heads of the families of the priests and Levites. The Shemaiah seems to be one of the high religious rulers, a specialist in the art of writing, closely connected with the administration of the royal court and is the only place in Chronicles where the scribe is also a Levite.

1 Crh 27:32 mentions Jonathan, David's uncle, who was also a scribe: "Jonathan, David's uncle, was a counselor, being a man of understanding and a scribe (heb. *soṭer*, סוֹפֵר)".

2 Chr 24:11 speaks of the presence of the scribes on the occasion of the repair of the Temple during the reign of Joash: "And whenever the chest was brought to the king's officers by the Levites, when they saw that there was much money in it, the king's secretary (heb. *soṭer hammelekh*, הַמֶּלֶךְ הַסּוֹפֵר) and the officer of the chief priest would come and empty the chest and take it and return it to its place. Thus they did day after day, and collected money in abundance."

2 Chr 26:11 (cf. 2 Kg 25:19) also mentions Jehiel the scribe, and another class of specialists in the art of writing, the "teachers": "Moreover, Uzziah had an army of soldiers, fit for war, in divisions according to the numbers in the muster made by Jeiel the secretary (heb. *hassoṭer*, הַסּוֹפֵר) and Maaseiah the officer (heb. *haṣoṭer*, הַצֹּטֵר), under the direction of Hananiah, one of the king's commanders". Jeiel was one of King Uzziah's secretaries responsible, together with Maaseiah, for the assembly of the people and the organization of the royal army. *Sheṭer* is frequently used in the Pentateuch to designate different types of Israelite officials or rulers (e.g. Josh ch. 5). Because it is related to the Akkadian *shataru* ("to write") it suggests the idea that "teachers" were scribes with administrative responsibilities, charged with keeping track of the number of bricks made by the Israelites (Ex 5). This interpretation is also supported by the Syriac translation which equates the *šoṭer* with *saṗra*, a term commonly used with the meaning of "scribe". The obligation to keep written records of work indicates that at least some of the Jews were literate (Băltăceanu and Broșteanu 2019, 173).

2 Chr 34:8-21, a theological rewriting of 4 Kgs 22, presents the personality and role of Shaphan, son of Azaliah, son of Maaseiah and Joahaz the recorder (ebr. *mazkir*, מַזְכִּיר) (2 Chr 34:8). Shaphan is called "scribe/writer" (סוֹפֵר) in 34:15

and “the king’s scribe” (heb. *soḇer hammelekh*, סוֹפֵר הַמֶּלֶךְ). The other ruler, Joahaz the recorder was also part of the king’s administration and knew the art of writing. Shaphan also has financial and administrative duties in the Chronicles (vv. 9,17), along with Joahaz.

2 Chr 34:13 is the second scriptural reference in the Chronicles to the scribal guild (*cf.* 2 Kgs 22:3-7, which, however, does not mention the Levites at all), besides those referring to individual scribes, a text which refers to the repairs of the Temple under King Josiah: “all these (the sons of Merari and Kohath – our note) were over the burden bearers and directed all who did work in every kind of service, and some of the Levites were scribes (heb. *soḇerim*, סוֹפְרִים) and officials (heb. *shōṭerim*, שׁוֹטְרִים) and gatekeepers”. Among the roles of the Levites was that of scribes, in addition to overseeing the work of the Temple. However, according to Christine Schams, there is nothing in the Chronicles that expresses or implies such a classification of the roles of the Levites. This suggests the idea that the passage reflects the postexilic realities of the author’s day, especially since the other list referring to their primary role at the Temple differs. According to 1 Chr 23:4, the Levites first perform the functions of overseers (heb. *shōṭerim*, שׁוֹטְרִים), then judges (heb. *shōḇetim*, שׁוֹבְטִים) and gatekeepers, musicians, rather than scribes, and overseers, as stated in 2 Chr 34:13. Schams states that 2 Chr 34:13 should be considered a gloss of a later editor, witnessing the organization of the Levites in the postexilic period, and suggests that at a later stage in the Persian period a class or group of scribes, possibly Levites, may have existed in association with the Jerusalem Temple (Schams 1998, 68-9).

These cases, taken together, lead to the conclusion that writing was introduced into the court of Jerusalem in the 10th century BC, in the time of David or Solomon. The scribes worked in the Jerusalem court as private secretaries to the king and as rulers in the administration of the united kingdom, implying the existence of a royal court (Nadav 1996, 22).

The fourth testimony is several biblical descriptions, from different times and different genres (e.g., historiography, prophecy, odes). They describe David as the conqueror of Jerusalem and founder of the royal dynasty that lasted until the end of the Jewish monarchy in 586 BC. The Tel Dan stele tells us that the kingdom of Judah was called Bet-David, “the house of David”, in the second half of the 9th century BC. Incidentally, the eponymous/dynastic name “*Bit-someone*”, “house of *someone*” is typical

of many of the new West Semitic kingdoms that emerged in the Fertile Crescent in the early 1st millennium BC (Nadav 1996, 22).

Scriptural evidence concerning scribes (postexilic period)

Gradually, beginning in the 8th century BC, writing began to spread throughout Ancient Israel, from the royal court to the common people. Scholars agree that most biblical texts date from the late 8th century to the 4th century BC. However, this does not mean that much of the Israelite population was literate. Also, clay bubbles, inscribed personal seals, seal impressions, inscriptions on vessels, ostraca, and inscribed weights date from the 8th-7th centuries BC and later. All these and the thousands of seal inscriptions such as, לְמֶלֶךְ, *lmlk* ("belonging to the king") or *l-someone* ("belonging to someone") on vessel handles attest to the role that literacy played in the economic sphere of the 8th century BC (King and Stager 2001, 312).

Most studies of the scribes have given great importance to the books of Ezra-Nehemiah because these books contain much information about Ezra, who is called "scribe" (ebr. *soṭer*, סוֹפֵר), whereas in the rest of the material on the status and roles of the scribes in this period the information is extremely scarce. Furthermore, the significance attributed to these books is a consequence of the consistency with which modern scholarship has made Ezra the scribe the archetypal Torah scribe.

The figure of Ezra is presented at length in Ezra ch. 7, where we learn that he was "scribe skilled (ebr. *soṭer mahir*, מוֹהֵר סוֹפֵר) in the Law of Moses" (v. 6). He is also said to have come from Babylon and to have been sent by King Artaxerxes to Jerusalem (v. 6), and in the letter the king gave him Ezra is said to have been "the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD" (Heb. *hakkohen hassoṭer*, *soṭer divre mitzvot-YHWH*, הַכֹּהֵן הַסּוֹפֵר סֹפֵר דְּבָרֵי מִצְוֹת־יְהוָה) (v. 11) or "priest, teacher/scriber of the law of the heavenly God" (ebr. *kahana saṭar data di-'elah shemaayya*, כַּהֲנָא סֹפֵר דְּתַא דִּי-אַלְהָ שְׁמַיָּא). Ezra's designation with the title "scribe skilled" is ambiguous and may refer either to his dexterity as a scribe/writer, to his knowledge and expertise in writing, or both, or be part of his official title, indicating that he was in charge of Israelite affairs at the royal court (Schams 1998, 53).

Ezra 4 contains several references to Shimshai the scribe, of Persian origin (vv. 8, 9, 17, 23), one of the most important men opposing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem after the return of the Israelites to the land. He is called "scribe/secretary" (heb. *soṭer*, סוֹפֵר) and writes a letter to King Artaxerxes I accusing the Jews of a

possible rebellion if the Temple were rebuilt and of "tax strikes" (vv. 12-13).

Nehemiah 13:13 mentions another scribe, Zadok, "and I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe (Heb. *Zadok hassoṣṣer*, צִדְקָה הַסּוֹסֶרֶס). We learn nothing clear about the roles of the scribes in charge of administering the tithe, but probably the scribe was the one in charge of record keeping and accounting. Nor is it clear whether the scribe Zadok was a priest, a Levite, or neither. Secretaries who were not Temple-serving priests may have retained privileges in the Temple administration in Jerusalem. Sanctuaries were part of the fiscal administration of the Persian provinces, and most likely the Jerusalem Temple was in the same category. Therefore, it seems that the Temple would have collected taxes for the Hasmonean sovereigns and the Temple rulers. Zadok the scribe seems to fit best into the category of rulers who collected and/or administered taxes, including tithes, for the Temple servants (Schams 1998, 58).

Extrabiblical (archaeological) evidence from ancient Israel on scribes

As we have seen, scribes were important rulers in the bureaucracy of ancient Israel and other neighbouring peoples. Unfortunately, to date, no Hebrew seals are known to have been used by scribes from the First Temple period. Instead, we know of two seals of Moabite scribes: that of "Kemos'am, (son of) Kemosel, scribe (*hšpr*)" and "Amoz scribe (*hšpr*)", as well as one in Aramaic, "*Hwdw* scribe (*špr*)" (Avigad 1976, 8).

The Samaria Ostraca, ceramic vessels inscribed with texts of an administrative nature, are rare examples of writing from the northern kingdom of Israel, composed before the fall to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Yohanan Aharoni dates them to the 8th century B.C. from the time of kings Jehu, Jehoahaz and Jeroboam II (Aharoni 1962, 67). They contain lists of wine and olive oil brought from neighbouring villages to the city of Samaria, or records of taxes or tribute in kind sent by villagers to Samaria. The main problem with these ostracises in terms of writing is their role. The answer depends on the role of the person whose name is preceded by the Hebrew preposition *lamed* (ל) in ostrace, i.e. "ל-someone", since the preposition *lamed* has a variety of meanings: "for, to, of, belonging to". According to Y. Yadin, the other names mentioned after the first person (to which the preposition *lamed*, "ל-someone" is prefixed) are generally interpreted as the names of the senders (Yadin 1959, 184). Therefore, the first name in the ostraca would be the one to whom these gifts were sent. The ostraca themselves seem, according to Yadin, to be records written by a secretary of the royal

court on receiving gifts/taxes, and the first name mentioned after the place name would thus indicate the main owner of the property, while the others would be collaborators of the latter (Yadin 1959, 187). But Yohanan Aharoni says that the persons whose names are preceded by *lamed* were the payers of taxes, not their collectors (Aharoni 1962, 67). Either way, even if the people who wrote the ostracians were rulers at the royal court or wealthy taxpayers, they show us the existence of literacy in the 8th century BC. Here are some names of scribes from the 8th century BC as they appear in the ostracization of Samaria: Shemariah (שִׁמְרִיָּה) (Samr 1), Biriam (בִּרְיָה) (Samr 1), Gaddiyaw (גַּדְיָה) (Samr 2, 4, 5, 6, 7), Aza (אָזָה) (Samr 2), Shemida' (שִׁמְדָּה) (Samr 3), Baala' (בַּעֲלָה) (Samr 3), Qotz (קֹצִי) (Samr 4, 5, 6, 7), Geba (גִּבְעָה) (Samr 8), Abinoam (אֲבִינוֹם) (Samr 8, 9, 10), Yahit (יָחִית) (Samr 9, 10) etc. (Hesser 2008).

At Tel Arad (Southern Kingdom) other ostraca have been discovered bearing the names of scribes. The biblical Arad, an Iron Age fortress, controlled the main road to Edom and was both an administrative and military outpost. Approximately two hundred ostraca have been found at this archaeological site, over half of which are inscribed in Hebrew and date from the late 7th or early 6th century BC. Eighteen ostraca are addressed to Eliashib, the chief of the fortress, authorizing him to provide rations (wine, oil, flour) for Cypriot or Greek mercenaries from the army of the kingdom of Judah (King and Stager 2001, 314). Apart from Samaria and Tel Arad, scribal testimonies have been discovered in the ostraca of Ḥorvat Uza, an archaeological site located in the northeastern part of the Negev desert (cent. VII-VI BC), Yavne Yam/Meṭad Ḥaṣavyahu, an archaeological site located in Shephelah, about 15 km south of modern Tel Aviv (7th century BC), and Tel Lachish, (7th-VI BC).

Ten bullae (*bullae*) from the province of Yehud were preserved in the postexilic period along with other bullae and two seals. They have been dated to the late 6th century BC and can therefore be linked to the Persian province of Yehud, i.e., to the early postexilic period. Two of them are of interest. The 6th Bull, originating from an official context, provides evidence of the employment of scribes in the Persian administration of the province of Yehud. It speaks of a certain "Jeremai the scribe" (ebr. *liremai hassop̄er*, לִירְמֵי הַסּוֹפֵר, "belonging to Jeremai the scribe"). The name Jeremai is the hypochoristic of Jeremiah and appears only once in Scripture, as the name of a person who separated from his foreign wife because of the preaching of Ezra the scribe (Ezr 10:33). We do not know if it is the bull of the person mentioned in Ezra. The scribe was probably employed in an administrative position in the Persian province of Yehud under the

rule of Elnathan (Ezr 8:16) (Avigad 1976, 8). The second, the 14th scroll, written in Aramaic, is of a woman, "Shelemith, servant of the governor Elnathan" (Heb. *liṣelomit 'amat Elnatan paḥawa*, לְשִׁלְמִית אִמַּת לִנְתָן פַּחְוָא). In 1 Crh 3:19, it appears as the name of the daughter of Zerubbabel, governor of Judah. The term *ama^h* usually appears in Scripture with the meaning "handmaid", and in the Talmudic period, it was borne by the master's concubine who usually held the rank of second wife (Avigad 1976, 12). But W.F. Albright says that the Hebrew *ama^h* would have been a title like *'ebed*, "servant/servant", found on the seals of high officials of the Israelite royal court. In other words, seals containing the title *ama^h* would belong to female deputies (or other distinguished women) in royal or noble service. In support of this claim, Albright cites two parallels in Babylonian cylinder seals, whose owners were designated as servants of individuals, apparently kings. But it turns out that these seals contain no title, and there is no reliable evidence that the "masters" there were indeed kings. Thus, these seal cylinders offer nothing concrete to clarify the nature of the servants on the Ammonite seal cylinders (Avigad 1976, 12-3). But what might have been the job of the Selomite? Since the 14th bull was the only private seal found in this collection it would indicate that she would have overseen the archive, or rather the administrative centre to which the archive belonged. Furthermore, she also kept a provincial seal for sealing official documents. Thus, it would have played an important role in the administration of the province of Yehud. Despite the inferior status of women in the Ancient Near East, she would have enjoyed many civil rights. For example, in the Elephantine papyri, contemporaneous with the 14th Bull, the Israelite woman had almost equal rights with men in matters of property, could sign contracts, appear in court, and the like. But nowhere in the Old Testament or other external sources is there any indication of female rulers. However, there is evidence in Babylonian sources that women were in high positions as judges and scribes, but in none of these cases were female servants involved (Avigad 1976, 31-2).

Finally, in the New Testament era, we have several names of scribes discovered on ossuaries: Yehuda the scribe, Yehuda son of Eleazar the scribe (Jerusalem) and Joseph, son of Hananiah the scribe, and at Masada, ostraca were discovered on which was inscribed Eleazar son of the scribe (Mas 667) (Evans 2003, 56).

Conclusion

Although the study of scribes, teachers and scribal scholars has been influenced in past centuries by New Testament writings and anachronistic preconceptions of them, archaeological discoveries, sociological research and Old Testament books attest to their existence since the time of King David (2nd century AD). At first, they were rulers and administrators in the king's court, i.e., they were part of the educated elite, then literacy spread among the Israelite population, and so scribes multiplied. Scripture most likely begins to be written down from the oral tradition from the 1st century onwards. 10th century BC, but mainly during the 8th-6th centuries BC.

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