written document, book, letter

1. Statistics
The word occurs also 4x in Biblical Aramaic.

2a. Literal Use
Although כֵּסֶר can designate any written sheet or collection of sheets in Biblical Hebrew, in most cases כֵּסֶר means ‘book’. For instance, in Eccl. 12:12: כֵּסֶר נֶפֶשׁ הָרְמָבְת אֲלֵי כֵּסֶר, ‘of making many books there is no end’. Especially, כֵּסֶר occurs in book-titles, for instance: כֵּסֶר מַלְאֹמַת, ‘the Book of the Wars of the LORD’ (Num. 21:14), כֵּסֶר הַיָּדֵם, ‘the Book of the Torah of Moses’ (Josh. 8:31; 23:6), כֵּסֶר הֶזְרִי, ‘the Book of the Just’ (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18), כֵּסֶר דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשָׁה, ‘the Book of the Acts of Solomon’ (1 Kgs 11:41), etc.

The physical object can be designated by כֵּסֶר (see e.g. Exod. 17:24; 32:32-33) but more specifically by the combination מִלְחָדָה כֵּסֶר or הַלֵּךְ כֵּסֶר alone (→ הַלֵּךְ כֵּסֶר).

However, it is not always certain that a כֵּסֶר was an object of papyrus or leather/parchment. In Ugaritic spr may designate a clay tablet and in Phoenician and Old Aramaic an inscription in or on a durable kind of stone like basalt (see section 4). There is no reason at all to suppose that in all these cases the text was copied from a scroll (pace Vander Toorn 2007, 176). In Isa. 30:8 כֵּסֶר is used in parallelism with → לְתוֹל, ‘tablet’ and the explicit addition that it had to serve ‘as a witness for ever’ suggests that this כֵּסֶר at least was made of durable stone. Obviously this recalls the לְתוֹל לְתֵבָנִים, ‘tablets of stone’, given to Moses according to Exod. 24:12 (cf. Liedke 1971, 156-7; Korpel 1990, 471-3). In Deut. 31:26 the additional teachings incorporated in the Law are designated כֵּסֶר הַתּוֹרָה, ‘Book of the Law’ and are put beside the Ark containing the tablets of the Decalogue. Because in this case too it is added that this כֵּסֶר shall be ‘a witness for ever’, the suggestion is created that the writing material was able to stand the test of time. Nothing in the text suggests that it was a scroll protected by a container, as some scholars have suggested.

A less frequent but also important meaning of כֵּסֶר is ‘letter’
(cf. e.g. 2 Sam. 11:14-15; 1 Kgs 21:8-9, 11; Jer. 29:1). Letters were written (נכתב), sealed (נתקן, → תנכֶּן), and sent (פשׂל) (cf. 1 Kgs 21:9).

Another meaning of רפס is ‘written document’ in a legal context, for instance: a ‘letter of divorce’ (Deut. 24:1, 3; Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8), or an ‘evidence of purchase’, קיסריה (Jer. 32:11, 12, 14, 16). In the latter case, a distinction is made between the sealed part of the letter (קיסריה) (vv. 11, 14) and the open letter (קיסריה עֶזֶב, v. 14).

In Late Biblical Hebrew רפס can mean ‘decree’ (Est. 1:22; 3:13 etc.).

A special case is רפס in Num. 5:23: in the case of assumed adultery the priest should write curses on a רפס and blot them out with bitter water. In this case the word indicates a sheet or scroll of papyrus. However, in Dan. 1:4, 17 רפס designates a kind of writing (Chaldaean alphabet) and in Isa. 29:11-12 ‘writing’ in general.

2b. Figurative Use

In Isa. 29:11-12 an incomprehensible vision is compared with a sealed רפס (here probably a letter) which nobody can read. In Isa. 34:4 it is predicted that the heavens will be rolled together as a רפס. Here a scroll is meant probably .

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Lachish ostraca no. 3, obverse, lines 5, 9, 10, 11; no. 5, lines 6-7, no. 6, lines 3, 14, רפס in the meaning of ‘letter’, written on an ostraco.

4. Cognates

EGYPTIAN: The Semitic loanword sōpēr ‘scribe’ is attested in literature of the New Kingdom as šu-pi-r(a) (Hoch, SWET, 364).

AKKADIAN: sipru ‘document in Aramaic’; sepēru ‘to write alphabetic script’; sepūru ‘scribe writing alphabetic script (mostly on skin) (CAD (S), 225, 304; AEAD, 99-100) are late loans from Aramaic.

A relation with genuine Akkadian šapāru ‘to send’, but also ‘to send word, to send a report, a message, to write’ (CAD [S] 1,
430-448; AHw, 1170-1) and its derivatives, among them šiprētu ‘sealed document’ and šipru ‘report, message’, is likely, despite the irregular correspondence between the sibilants (AHw, 1170; HALAT, 723; HAHAT, 898-900; Klein, CEDHL, 455; Tawil, AL-CBH, 266). In Akkadian the semantic notion of writing was taken over by šaṭar ‘to write’ and its derivatives, e.g. the nouns šaṭar ‘copy, exemplar, text, inscription, writing’, šiṭirtu ‘inscription, text’, šiṭru ‘text, document, inscription’, cf. CAD (ˇS) 2, 221-41; (ˇS) 3, 144-7.

It is possible that Ugaritic and other Canaanite dialects received the Akkadian šapāru and šipru via Assyrian or Hittite which both pronounced š as s. See, however, the counter-position taken by Muffs 1969, 207 and Mankowski, ALBH, 121-3.

UGARITIC: spr has many different meanings, among them ‘register, list, written document, letter’ (Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DULAT, 767-9).

PHOENICIAN, PUNIC: spr ‘inscription’ (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, 799-801; Krahmalkov, PPD, 347).

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: spr ‘has many different meanings, among them ‘writing, inscription, document, contract, letter’ (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, 799-801; Porten & Lund, ADE, 243). Also a literary text like the Book of Balaam, son of Beor, written in ink on the whitewashed wall of a sanctuary in Sukkoth (Deir ‘Alla), was called a spr (Ahūtuv, EFP, 435).


JEWISH ARAMAIC: spr ‘book, Bible’ (Sokoloff, DJPA. 387).


OLD ARABIC: Sabaean sfrt ‘measure’ (Biella, DOSA, 342).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: sifr ‘book, writing’ (Lane, AEL, 1371) is probably an Aramaic loanword. Genuine Arabic cognates might
be sabara and ścibara ‘to measure’ (Lane, AEL, 1293, 1495).

Modern Arabic: Mehri śebūr ‘to measure’, šēbēr ‘span of outspread fingers’. Palestinian Arabic sefer ‘book’ is no doubt a loanword (Barthélemy, 344).


5. Ancient Versions

Nobody and the other versions: The offers several translations, among them βίβλος ‘scroll, book, letter’, diminutive βιβλίον, γράμμα ‘written character, letter, book’, ἐπιστολή ‘letter’ (Muraoka, HIS, 105; Lust et al., GELS-L, 80, 92, 175). All other ancient versions show a similar awareness of the wide semantic spectrum of רְשׁוֹן.

6. Judaic Sources

The word occurs in many texts from the period of early Judaism on, cf. Jastrow, DTT, 1017-8; DCH, vol. 6, 189-93.

7. Illustrations

For some excellent photographs of early Hebrew manuscripts, see e.g. Parry & Qimron 1999; Tov 2004, Plates 1-21.

8. Archaeological Remarks

Because of the unfavourable climatic conditions in Israel most writings on papyrus and leather have been lost due to climatic circumstances. Thus far only one Hebrew papyrus from the preexilic period has been recovered (Aḥituv, EFP, 213-5) although papyrus must have been the most common writing material. Even Byblos which lended its name to βίβλος harvested papyrus from Lake Hule in what is now Israelite territory. Only in the dry climate of the Judean Desert have parchment and papyrus survived, hidden in jars and caves. Writings on stone and shards had a better chance to be preserved. It is sometimes stated that scrolls of leather or parchment were used from the second century BCE onwards only (cf. Smelik 1990), but this is not entirely certain anymore (→ ְשֶׁפֶל).
9. Conclusion

In distinction to →וגל ‘board, tablet’, the biblical word הָסָכָה was mostly used for documents written on less durable materials (papyrus or parchment). However, the older cognates as well as a few passages in the Hebrew Bible prove that it cannot be excluded that in an earlier period a הָסָכָה might also have been written on clay tablets or even on natural stone.

The semantic sphere of הָסָכָה must have been rather broad, the basic meaning being apparently ‘written text’. In Biblical Hebrew texts possible translations are ‘book’, ‘letter’, ‘record’, ‘document’. הָסָכָה can also be used in the title of a book. For documents consisting of several sheets of papyrus/parchment glued/sewed together there was a special designation, מַגָּל הָסָכָה, or merely →מַגָּל).

10. Bibliography

Because the dictionaries do not differ much with regard to the determination of the various meanings of the word, only a selection is referred to below.


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K.A.D. Smelik

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