

written document, book, letter

סֵפֶר

1. Statistics

Torah: 18. Nebiim: 110. Ketubim: 55. Total: 183.

The word occurs also 4x in Biblical Aramaic.

2a. Literal Use

Although סֵפֶר can designate any written sheet or collection of sheets in Biblical Hebrew, in most cases סֵפֶר means ‘book’. For instance, in Eccl. 12:12: קֵץ אֵין הַרְבֵּה סֵפָרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ, ‘of making many books there is no end’. Especially, סֵפֶר occurs in book-titles, for instance: סֵפֶר מִלְחָמַת יְהוָה, ‘the Book of the Wars of the LORD’ (Num. 21:14), סֵפֶר תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה, ‘the Book of the Torah of Moses’ (Josh. 8:31; 23:6), סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר, ‘the Book of the Just’ (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18), סֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי שְׁלֹמֹה, ‘the Book of the Acts of Solomon’ (1 Kgs 11:41), etc.

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

However, it is not always certain that a סֵפֶר 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 סֵפֶר is used in parallelism with לִיָּה, ‘tablet’ and the explicit addition that it had to serve ‘as a witness for ever’ suggests that this סֵפֶר at least was made of durable stone. Obviously this recalls the לְחֵת הַאֲבֶן, ‘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 סֵפֶר 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 סֵפֶר shall be ‘a witness for ever’, the suggestion is created that the writing material was able to stand the tooth 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 סֵפֶר is ‘letter’

(cf. e.g. 2 Sam. 11:14-15; 1 Kgs 21:8-9, 11; Jer. 29:1). Letters were written ($\sqrt{\text{כתב}}$), sealed ($\sqrt{\text{חתם}}$, \rightarrow חותם), and sent ($\sqrt{\text{שלח}}$) (cf. 1 Kgs 21:9).

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

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

A special case is סֵפֶר in Num. 5:23: in the case of assumed adultery the priest should write curses on a סֵפֶר 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 סֵפֶר designates a kind of writing (Chaldaeian 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 סֵפֶר (here probably a letter) which nobody can read. In Isa. 34:4 it is predicted that the heavens will be rolled together as a סֵפֶר. 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 3,4 14, סֵפֶר in the meaning of ‘letter’, written on an ostrakon.

4. Cognates

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

AKKADIAN: *sipru* ‘document in Aramaic’; *sepēru* ‘to write alphabetic script’; *sepāru* ‘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* [Š] 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, *ALCBH*, 266). In Akkadian the semantic notion of writing was taken over by *šaṭāru* ‘to write’ and its derivatives, e.g. the nouns *šaṭāru* ‘copy, exemplar, text, inscription, writing’, *šitirtu* ‘inscription, text’, *šitru* ‘text, document, inscription’, cf. *CAD* (Š) 2, 221-41; (Š) 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* (Aḥituv, *EFP*, 435).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: *spr* in many different meanings, e.g. ‘written document, book, letter’, but especially ‘Bible, Scripture’ (Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 3, 576-7).

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

SAMARITAN ARAMAIC: *spr* ‘book, document’ (Tal, *DSA*, 607).

SYRIAC: *sefrā* ‘writing, book, letter, language’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], *CSD*, 387).

MANDAIC: *ʿaspar*, *sipra* ‘book’ (Macuch, *MD*, 29, 329).

OLD ARABIC: Sabaeen *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 *šabara* ‘to measure’ (Lane, *AEL*, 1293, 1495).

MODERN ARABIC: Mehri *ś^ebūr* ‘to measure’, *śēb^er* ‘span of outspread fingers’. Palestinian Arabic *sēfer* ‘book’ is no doubt a loanword (Barthélemy, 344).

ETHIOPIIC: Geez *safara* ‘to measure’, *sefrat* ‘measure’, *masfart* ‘length’ (Leslau, *ESAC*, 488-9). Amharic *säfärä* ‘measure’ (Leslau, *CAmhD*, 60).

5. Ancient Versions

ס and the other versions: The ס 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 סֵפֶר.

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 (Ahituv, *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 (→ סֵפֶר).

9. Conclusion

In distinction to → לִיָּהּ ‘board, tablet’, the biblical word סֵפֶר 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 סֵפֶר might also have been written on clay tablets or even on natural stone.

The semantic sphere of סֵפֶר must have been rather broad, the basic meaning being apparently ‘written text’. In Biblical Hebrew texts possible translations are ‘book’, ‘letter’, ‘record’, ‘document’. סֵפֶר 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, מְגִלַּת-סֵפֶר, or merely → מְגִלָּה).

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.

DCH, vol. 6, 189-193: ‘1. document, record, rarely book* (as literary composition), written text ... 2. letter (Jr 29_{25,29}), specif. in ref. to a written order’ ... 3. literature, in idiom ‘know literature’, i.e. be literate’ – *HAHAT*, 899-900: ‘1. (?) Inschrift ... od. ... Buch ... 2. Brief ... 3. Schriftstück a) Urkunde, Dokument ... Buch, i.S.v. Buchrolle ... 4. Schrift’ – *HALAT*, 723-4: ‘1. Inschrift ... 2. Schriftstück, Brief, Buchrolle ... Schrift’ – *KBL*, 665-66: ‘Inschrift, inscription; Schriftstück, Brief, Buchrolle, written document, letter, scroll; Schrift, Geschriebenes, Schriftart, writing, kind of writing’ – Korpel 1990: M.C.A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (UBL, 8), Münster 1990 – Liedke 1971: G. Liedke, *Gestalt und Bezeichnung alttestamentlicher Rechtssätze: Eine formgeschichtlich-terminologische Studie* (WMANT, 39), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1971 – Muffs 1969: Y. Muffs, *Studies in the Aramaic Legal Papyri from Elephantine*, Leiden 1969, 207 – *NIDOT*, vol. 4, 1291-2 – Parry & Qimron 1999: D.W. Parry & E. Qimron, *The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a)*, Leiden 1999 – Smelik 1990: K.A.D. Smelik, ‘Ostrakon,

schrijftafel of boekrol? Jeremia 36, Jesaja 30:8 en twee ostraca uit Saqqara', *NedThT* 24 (1990), 198- 207 – *THAT*. Bd. 2, 163-173: 'Brief, Buch, Dokument, Urkunde, Schrift, Schriftart' – Tov 2004: E. Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (STDJ, 54), Leiden 2004 – *TWAT*, Bd. 5, 163-73 – Van der Toorn 2007: K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, Cambridge: HUP, 2007,176.

Last update: 25-05-2011

K.A.D. SMELIK

This article should be cited as:

K.A.D. Smelik, 'סֵפֶר – written document, book, letter', PDF downloaded from:

<http://www.otw-site.eu/KLY/kly.php>