

THE STATUS AND FUNCTIONS OF JEWISH SCRIBES IN THE SECOND-TEMPLE PERIOD¹

Christine Schams

The thesis conducts a historical investigation into the status and functions of Jewish scribes during the Second-Temple period. The author employs a new approach for the selection and interpretation of the problematic evidence.

Chapter One provides an overview of the various strands of previous scholarship on scribes and its major shortcomings. In general terms, the latter are identified as a lack of distinction between evidence from different periods, the creation of an artificial category of *Schriftgelehrter*/Torah scholar, and a strong bias towards only one of the major sources. The imposition of an artificial category on the ancient sources has led to a conflation of evidence for scribes, sages, rabbis, sophists, and other teachers and experts in the scriptures. The tendency to accept only one major source as historically reliable results at least partly from several apparent contradictions between sources with regard to the functions and status of scribes. On account of differences in the portrayal of scribes in the New Testament, Josephus' writings, and rabbinic literature and their functions in non-Jewish contemporary society, many scholars have tended to accept only one major source as historically reliable while others are neglected or ignored. The contradictions are rarely explained and, in most cases, not even mentioned.

It is evident that the selection of relevant evidence for the study of scribes constitutes one of the main sources of disagreement. Therefore, a new 'exclusive' approach has been adopted in this investigation to assess the evidence. The

¹C. Schams, *The Status and Functions of Jewish Scribes in the Second-Temple Period* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1996); supervisor: Professor M.D. Goodman.

approach is 'exclusive' in the sense that it takes only those pieces of evidence into account which provide explicit proof that individuals or groups referred to were scribes. Scribes are identified as such on the grounds of either a title commonly designating a professional scribe (γραμματεύς, λιβλάριος) or a function exclusively requiring professional writing expertise. In addition, an increased emphasis is placed on the evaluation of the information provided by individual sources and their respective value for writing social, political, economic and religious history. The author also considers it to be of extreme importance that *all* the extant relevant evidence be explained. Individual pieces of evidence or sources cannot be ignored simply because they do not fit a certain theory of the role of scribes.

Chapter Two contains a discussion of the corpus of material which has been selected by employing the 'exclusive' approach. The individual sources are presented in a roughly chronological order and are considered as evidence for the period in which they originated. All Jewish sources from the Second Temple period or soon after which refer to scribes are discussed. This includes the post-exilic biblical books Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, several *bullae*, the Greek translations of the biblical books, the Testament of Levi, papyri including those from Zenon's, Babatha's, and Salome Komaise's archives, 1 Enoch and the Book of Giants, Ben Sira, Esdras a and b, 1 and 2 Maccabees, the Psalms Scroll from Qumran, Philo's and Josephus' books, the Synoptics and 1 Corinthians, 4 Ezra, the Mishna, Tosefta, the Targumim and inscriptions. It is observed that a large variety of functions and roles, and differences in status are associated with scribes in these sources. In addition, the possibly significant lack of references to scribes in some of the sources where one would expect them is also discussed. It is concluded that with regard to the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo's works, and Josephus' books on his contemporaneous history, the complete or partial silence concerning Jewish scribes is probably significant and must be accounted for in any theory about their role in society.

It is evident that the information provided by the ancient sources about scribes is in no way sufficient to allow us

to derive a comprehensive and coherent picture of their status and functions in Jewish society during the Second-Temple period. In order to gain a more complete picture, a large amount of information derived from the general political, social, religious, linguistic, cultural, and economic history of the area has been considered in Chapter Three. Individual factors which were operating during that period and which may have affected the status and functions of scribes and may explain parts of the evidence are isolated and discussed. Some of these factors are well-documented in the ancient sources, others can only be assumed on account of modern parallels or logical deductions. To name but a few of the over thirty factors discussed: the possible influence of Christian interests through their selective role in the transmission of writings on the general picture of scribes which emerges from the ancient sources; the probable influence of the cultural background and personal biases of authors on their portrayal of scribes; the literary genres of sources in which scribes are mentioned; the multilingual situation of Palestine; the influence of the Persian, Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Roman administrations; the destruction of the Temple, the general devastation, and the relocation of people after the two wars against Rome; the change of attitude towards secular and sacred written documents; changes in levels of literacy; the general diversity of Judaism in Palestine and its geographical spread in the ancient world. The majority of factors which have been isolated have so far not been considered in association with the study of scribes.

Chapter Four presents three models which provide complex plausible descriptions of the status and functions of scribes during the Second-Temple period. Each of these models employs a combination of factors described in Chapter Three and accounts for all the extant evidence and the significant lack thereof in some sources as discussed in Chapter Two. The three models provide different perspectives on the evidence and fill in the gaps in our knowledge about the functions and status of Jewish scribes in ancient society, allowing for geographical differences and for changes to take place. The models work with relative chronologies, describing the status and functions

of scribes in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman periods. Despite the fact that there is a substantial overlap between the three models, each offers a unique multifaceted description of the status and functions of scribes during the Second-Temple period.

Model one emphasizes the variety of roles and functions associated with scribes in ancient Near Eastern tradition and the confusion about titles and functions caused by the multilingual situation in Palestine and geographical differences between Jewish communities in the Mediterranean. Model two also takes these factors into account and attributes much importance to the effects of the specialization of scribes. To the author, this seems to be the most plausible explanation for the evidence and lack thereof in some sources. Model three proposes the emergence of a movement or group designated as scribes during the Maccabean revolt which continued to exist and develop until the first century. Although this model is very similar to the most commonly accepted view, model three attempts to provide an explanation of why this movement would have been designated in the first place and how it may have developed throughout the Second-Temple period to become the movement or group of scribes which is known from the first century sources.

It is not claimed that the three models in this thesis are exhaustive, but they avoid the oversimplification of the evidence and the description of the status and functions of the scribes which until now has generally characterized studies on scribes.