

Savior's special seven-sealed scroll^{1,2}

In the Bible book of *Revelation* (chapters 5 through 8), we see an unusual scroll (or “book”) written on both sides³ and with seven seals⁴. Since nobody in all creation or even in Heaven was worthy to open it⁵, John, the narrator and author of the book of *Revelation*, wept greatly⁶ (more on this, below). This raises a lot of questions.

What kinds of scrolls are there?

While they can be made of different kinds of materials, the primary distinction of scrolls are whether they roll horizontally or vertically.

- A horizontally-rolled so-called *volumen* (Lat., from which we get our English word *volume*) has writing down columns, each of which is successively unrolled from one spool to the other as the document is read.
- A vertically-rolled scroll called a *rotulus* (Lat.) has its writing down the roll and can be read continuously as the scroll is unrolled. This is what most of us we imagine when think of a medieval town crier or an emissary reading a royal decree.

¹ An excerpt from *A Revelation of Love: A study of the Bible book of Revelation* by Karl Schank, Copyright © Karl Schank, 2024. See also kspubs.com.

² All Scripture quotations are from the *Berean Standard Bible*, public domain (see <https://berean.bible/licensing.htm>)

³ **Rare double-sided scroll: Revelation 5:1a** -- Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the One seated on the throne. It had writing on both sides ...

[Ezekiel 2:9-10](#) -- Then I looked and saw a hand reaching out to me, and in it was a scroll, which He unrolled before me. And written on the front and back of it were words of lamentation, mourning, and woe.

⁴ **Seven seals: Revelation 5:1b** -- ... and [it] was sealed with seven seals.

⁵ **Nobody worthy to open it: Revelation 5:2-3** -- And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look inside it

[Isaiah 29:11](#) -- And the entire vision will be to you like the words sealed in a scroll. If it is handed to someone to read, he will say, “I cannot, because it is sealed.”

[Daniel 12:4a](#) -- But you, Daniel, shut up these words and seal the book until the time of the end. ...

⁶ **John wept: Revelation 5:4** -- And I began to weep bitterly, because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or look inside it

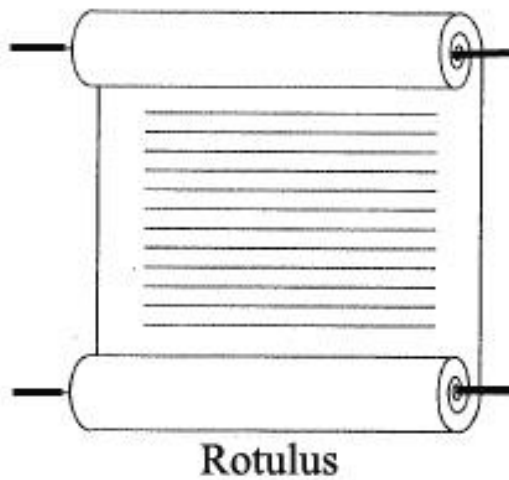
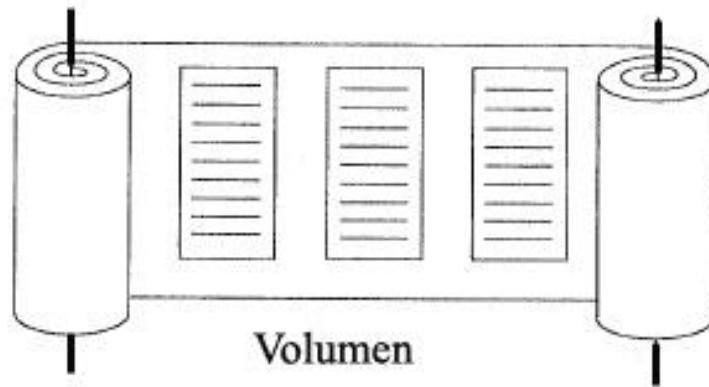


Figure 1 – Types of Scrolls

(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ad/Volumn_y_Rotulus.jpg CC BY-SA 4.0 by Audih)

However, the scrolls used for ancient biblical writings were horizontally-rolled *volumens* with writing in columns.

When they contained Bible books and other important writings, scrolls were wound on two wooden spools on which to roll the scroll. Such wooden spools would prevent sealing the scroll on its open edge, as there would be no open edge. Without spools (the norm), scrolls could be wound up entirely to one side, leaving an open edge which could be sealed (see below).



Figure 2 – Biblical-style "volumen" scroll
(Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA)



Figure 3 – Scroll of the Bible book of Esther
(Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scroll#/media/File:Scroll.jpg> Public Domain)

Why was the scroll written on both sides?

Scrolls were rarely written on both sides.

Depending on what material scrolls were made of, ink tended to bleed through to the back, making two-sided scrolls difficult to read. Additionally, it could be cumbersome at best to read the other side of a scroll – especially one with wooden spindles or a horizontally-rolled *volumen* – as that would require reading the entire scroll, reversing it, and rewinding it the other way.

Some commentators say that a two-sided scroll could mean it would be a somewhat “cheaper” (though still quite expensive) scroll for private use (the equivalent of a modern “book club edition” or a mass-market paperback book). High quality, important scrolls and scrolls for heavy public use (what we’d call a library edition) would be single-sided, which, by far, was the norm. But as this one is God’s own scroll in Heaven, cost certainly wasn’t a problem! It’s double-sidedness must be for some other reason.

Other commentators note that double-sidedness was normal for a scroll for private use, such as a Roman last will and testament (which, as a legal document, was also sealed).

Regardless of its purpose, which may remain a mystery, this double-sided nature was most unusual.

How was this scroll sealed?

Another special thing about the scroll in *Revelation* is that it had seven seals. This would normally be done only for things like documents of state, contracts, and legal papers when security and authentication were critical. Each party to a contract or document would use its own seal and impression. For a contract between two parties, for instance, there would be two seals.



Figure 4 - Scroll with seven seals

(photo by author; Better photos of scrolls with seven seals are at <https://randolphrichards.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/seven-seals.jpg> and <https://randolphrichards.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/seven-seals.jpg>)

This document in *Revelation* had seven seals. The seals would have been made of hard-drying sealing wax melted and “glued” to both the open edge of scroll material (if no wooden spindles

were used) or sealed to leather ties or laces around the rolled-up scroll, or both (as in the photo above). If no spindles were used (the norm), each seal was usually applied to both the open edge and to the tie. The seals could not be broken open without detection and damage to the scroll. Normally, only the one who impressed the seal or his intended recipient was authorized to open it.

As noted, such seals could have been applied by seven different signatories to a treaty, contract, or covenant, embossing each with his own seal or signet ring. However, in this case, the seals are all God's.

Multiple seals could also have been applied to super-lock a scroll, sort of like using seven padlocks on a treasure chest instead of just one. That seems to fit this special scroll also.

The seals would have been applied across the edge or opening (as in the diagram) so that *all* the seals had to be broken open before *anything* could be read.

Revelation reads as though when each one was opened, something else happened that *seem* to come out from the scroll itself. However, the text of [Revelation 6:1-8](#) does not actually say the source from which these riders and events "came out". It could equally well have been from the seals or from Heaven itself.

After a seal's events, the next seal was opened and something else happened, and so forth. Only then at the end could the contents – God's decrees of what would happen – be revealed. The *seven* disasters and plagues brought on by the *seven* seals is the necessary and sufficient number to complete God's purpose for the scroll and seals.

While the events happened sequentially, contrary to popular belief the seals could not have been applied to the inside of the scroll. It could not be that a single outside seal was broken and the scroll was unrolled, then another inner seal was broken and unrolled, and so forth seven times in sequence. The sealing wax itself would have damaged the scroll and when opened, would have torn the scroll and made portions of it unreadable. It would also preclude using the leather ties to hold the scroll closed.

What was the scroll about, what was written in it?

When unrolled, this special scroll will tell what God planned for the future⁷. John wept when it seemed that it could not be opened because he had been promised in [Revelation 1:1](#) that this would be revealed to him, but now it appeared that it would not. However, John actually isn't going to be told what will happen, but is going to be *shown* the future: When the scroll is opened, things happen. He *sees* it, he *experiences* it; he doesn't read it.

What exactly this entails is the subject of our study of the book of *Revelation*.

⁷ **The scroll tells what is to come:** [Revelation 1:1](#) -- This is the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him **to show His servants what must soon come to pass**. He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John,