



The Shapira Scrolls

The Case for Authenticity

Dead Sea Scroll Similarities

IT IS EASY TO FORGET THE INITIAL SKEPTICISM regarding the antiquity of the collection of ancient manuscripts that we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls. The first texts were discovered accidentally by three Bedouin shepherds in a cave just northwest of the Dead Sea in the winter of 1946–1947. One of the ten clay jars in the cave contained six scrolls, another was filled with soil, and the rest were empty. When first discovered, the scrolls had the appearance of dark oblong lumps wrapped in lengths of linen and coated with a black layer of what seemed to be wax or pitch—“wrapped up like mummies,” as recounted by John Trever, one of the first scholars to examine the scrolls.¹ Muhammad edh-Dhib, the youngest of the three shepherds, initially took three of the bundles and hung them in a bag from a tent pole at their Bedouin camp south of Bethlehem—thinking they might be worth something.

The skepticism was understandable. How could it be possible for such texts, which by all appearances dated back to the first century B.C.E. or earlier, to be so well preserved for more than two millennia? It seemed just too good to be true. However, today, the skeptics have largely vanished, and the Dead Sea Scrolls continue to shape our understanding of Judaism and early Christianity in the Second Temple period.

We are convinced that a similar manuscript discovery, which might be of even greater significance and antiquity than the Qumran scrolls, has been understandably, but mistakenly, dismissed as a 19th-century

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*For this coauthored article, James Tabor wrote the introductory section “Dead Sea Scroll Similarities,” and Idan Dershowitz contributed the section “Genuine Manuscripts.”

THE CASE FOR FORGERY

See the counter-argument on p. 39



DEAD SEA SCROLLS. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the caves near Qumran (see left). Although many were found in fragments, some were well preserved. For example, the Temple Scroll came from Cave 11 as an intact roll. It was later unrolled and revealed to contain a text about a temple and religious rules for a Jewish sect. It dates from the first century B.C.E.–first century C.E. and measures nearly 27 feet in length (a portion of which is shown below), making it the longest of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

worthless, one of them retrieved them and hung them on a pole in his tent—thinking they might bring him good fortune.

There they remained until they came to the attention of a Jerusalem manuscript dealer, Moses W. Shapira, who purchased them from the Bedouin for a few pounds in 1878. Shapira studied them intensely, as can be seen from his recently discovered notes (see p. 52). What the 16 leather strips contained were multiple copies of a strange, short version of the Book of Deuteronomy, written in Paleo-Hebrew (or Old Hebrew) script. Shapira brought them to the attention of scholars in Germany and England in the spring and summer of 1883. Although most were highly skeptical, the strips caused quite a sensation.

Ironically, one of the main sources of that skepticism was the story Shapira related from the Bedouin as to how the strips had been discovered. Many simply could not believe that such ancient manuscripts would have survived after nearly 3,000 years of exposure to the southern Levant's harsh climate. It didn't take long before scholars reached their verdict: The manuscripts were fakes, and Shapira was the obvious suspect. Although many scholars at the time were coy, perhaps fearing a libel suit, the insinuations could hardly have been clearer. A person of European Jewish extraction, like Shapira, had written the text on the bottom margins of Yemenite Torah scrolls, of which, it so happened, Shapira was a main purveyor. Charles Clermont-Ganneau, the famous Orientalist, drove home the point: "Mr. Shapira must be well acquainted with [such scrolls], for he deals in them."³

Shortly after, the British biblical scholar Christian Ginsburg, who had been charged by the British Museum with determining whether the strips were authentic or not, rendered the same verdict—forgery! Shapira wrote Ginsburg a short note stating that he was leaving London for Berlin and was not sure he could "survive this shame," but that he nonetheless remained convinced of their authenticity. This tidbit was passed on to the press, including one newspaper that wrote, "Mr Shapira, innocent soul! Professes

forgery. Like our Dead Sea Scrolls, these manuscripts were seen as too good to be true.

They came to light 70 years earlier than the Qumran texts, reportedly found by Bedouin on the east side of the Dead Sea, in a cave high in the steep cliffs of Wadi Mujib (the biblical Arnon River). These Bedouin too reportedly discovered what appeared to be lumps of leather with strange writing, wrapped in linen strips, coated with a sticky asphalt-like substance—"wrapped up like mummies," as Hermann Guthe and Eduard Meyer, the two Leipzig scholars who were the first to examine scientifically these leather strips, commented.² Although the Bedouin were said to have thrown the bundles aside as

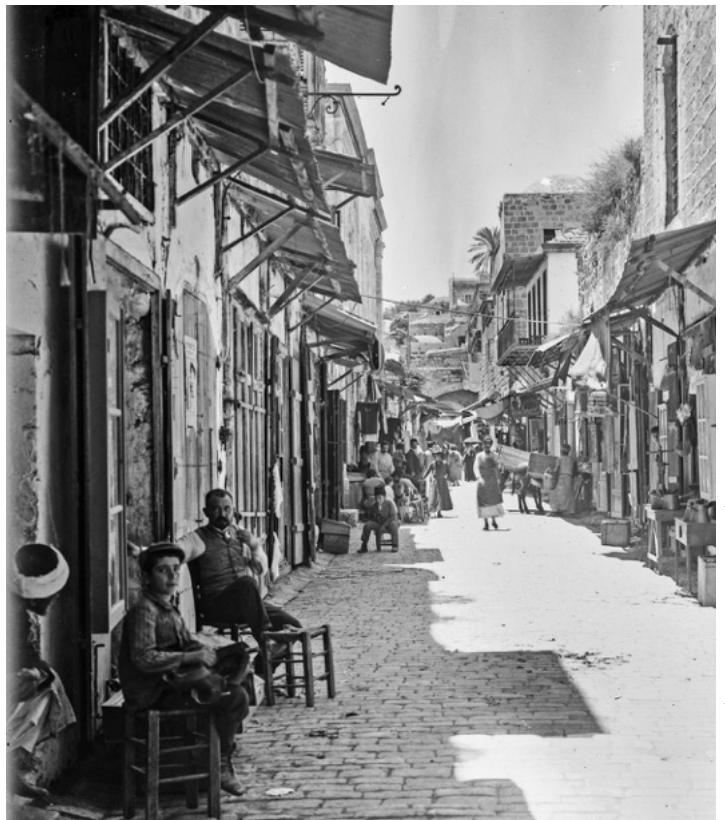
to have been terribly deceived, and even threatens to commit suicide. Perhaps from the point of view of the public, that would be the best thing he could do.”⁴

Shapira traveled in Germany and Holland over the next few months and continued to sell other manuscripts to the British Museum. We have a particularly interesting letter he wrote to the British Museum librarian Edward Bond. He passionately argued for authenticity, refuting Ginsburg’s debunking in detail, point by point. He clearly believed his scrolls were authentic and hoped they would still get further consideration from other scholars, adding, “The sin of believing in a false document is not much greater than disbelieving the truth.” He concluded by saying, “Nevertheless I do not wish to sell it even if the buyer should take the risk

himself (I have such offers) unless to authorities.” The next we hear of Shapira he is dead, having committed suicide in a Rotterdam hotel on March 9, 1884.

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-20th century, however, Shapira’s story suddenly stopped sounding so absurd. In fact, it now seemed uncannily precise—almost prophetic. After all, how could one even imagine that Moses Shapira, in the 1870s, would concoct such a story, precise in these details. This, along with a reexamination of the scroll itself, led some scholars to call for a reassessment of the Shapira manuscripts, while others drew the opposite conclusion: Since the Shapira manuscripts were an obvious hoax, the Dead Sea Scrolls must be a hoax as well! Despite it now being definitively known that the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the 20th century are authentic, the consensus that Shapira forged his Deuteronomy manuscripts never budged. The few people who mounted significant defenses that the case for authenticity be reopened, particularly Menachem Mansoor and Shlomo Guil, have been mostly ignored or derided—despite the fact that all of the 19th-century objections to the authenticity of the Shapira Scrolls have now been shown to be invalid.⁵

ANTIQUE JERUSALEM. Moses Shapira opened an antiquities shop on Christian Street in Jerusalem. Numerous wares passed through his store to museums and collections around the world. This portrait of Shapira dates to c. 1880, around the time that the Deuteronomy manuscript came into his possession. The photograph of Christian Street (see bottom, right) near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre comes from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection and dates to c. 1900–1920.



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Genuine Manuscripts

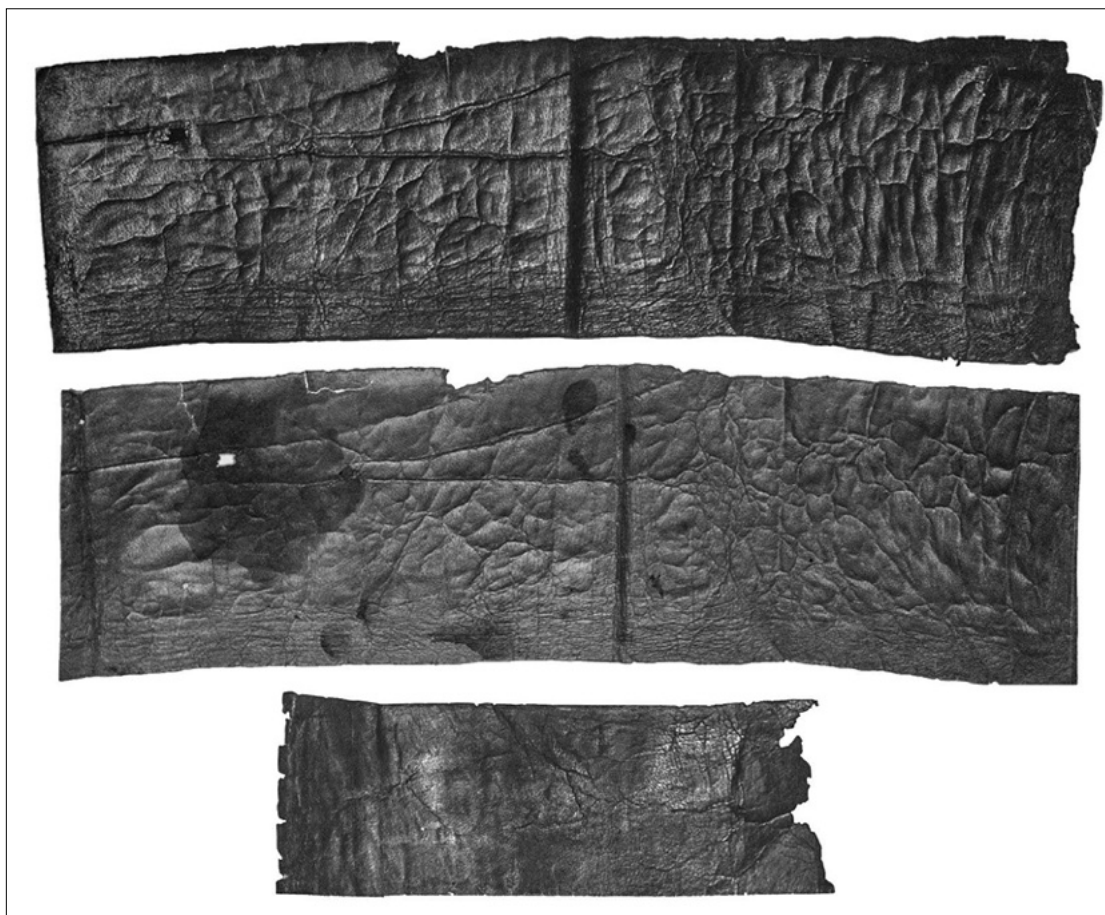
BEFORE TAKING A CLOSER LOOK at the Shapira manuscripts and why we believe they are an authentic, pre-canonical version of Deuteronomy, I (Idan) will first present new evidence that undermines the consensus theory that Shapira forged his Deuteronomy fragments. I will also rebut some recent scholarly claims made against their authenticity.

In the Berlin State Library, there is an unassuming volume titled *Handwritten Inventory of the Hebrew Manuscripts Collected by Shapira*. As the name suggests, it consists primarily of long lists of manuscripts that Shapira had offered for sale at one time or another. Scattered haphazardly among the 600-odd pages are three untitled pages overlooked by scholars, which contain strange Hebrew text in purple ink—amazingly, they preserve Shapira's own preliminary transcription of the Deuteronomy fragments! This document was written slowly and laboriously, with little written between one dip of the pen and the next. Beyond providing another valuable witness to the original documents themselves (which unfortunately disappeared sometime after

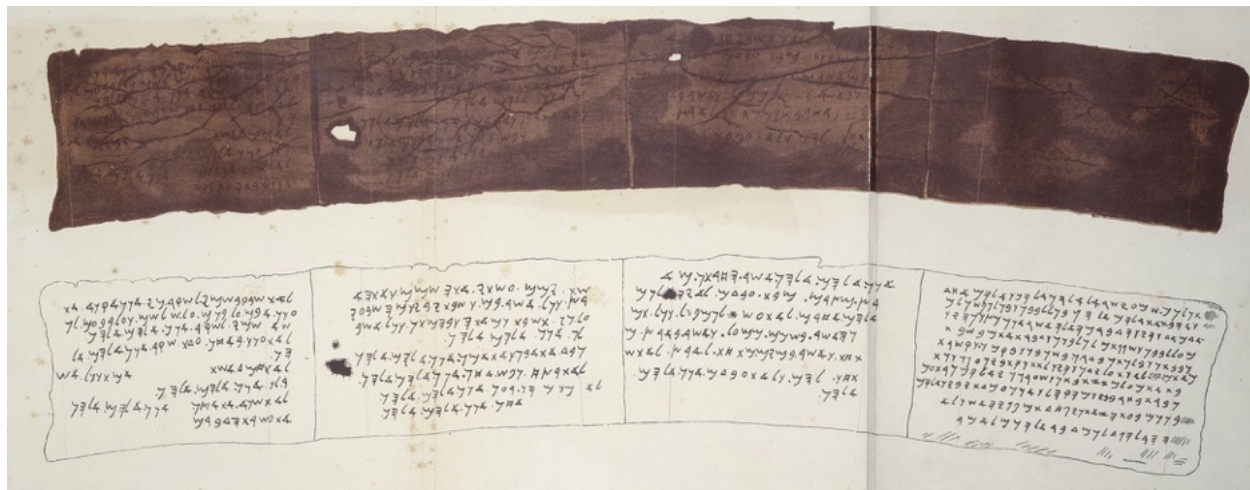
1889), what makes these pages so important is their ability to shine a light on Shapira's own thinking about his infamous manuscripts.

The transcription is full of question marks, marginal reflections, and corrections. What we see is that Shapira was doing his best to interpret the text of the manuscripts. From his barely legible notes, we learn that Shapira first thought the fragments should be arranged in one order, and then he realized that that was wrong. At one point, he reconstructed וימאר (a misspelling of ויאמר "he said"), which he crossed out and corrected to וינאף "he committed adultery" (a misspelling of ויאנף "he raged"). But this, too, was incorrect, as Shapira himself would later realize. In fact, the text read ויחר אף "he became angry." Elsewhere, Shapira made another error: There

SHAPIRA SCROLLS. Only three illegible photographs exist of the Shapira Scrolls. They illustrate two fragments. The top and middle strips are two different photos of Fragment E, and the bottom strip shows an unidentified fragment, which has been cropped. Although we don't know who took these photographs, they ended up in the collection of the British Museum.



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was a tiny illegible spot where, instead of the single letter *mem* (מ), Shapira mistakenly reconstructed two different characters.

While Shapira's errors and corrections are perfectly understandable in view of his efforts to understand and work through the text, none of this comports with Shapira's complicity in the manuscripts' forgery. If Shapira were unfamiliar with the text in the manuscripts, as his previously unknown notes now indicate, he surely wasn't behind their fabrication.

The other elements of the forgery hypothesis are similarly misguided, and I offer here several observations to refute two specific and more recent claims that the manuscripts were forged. The first is the supposed paleographic evidence for forgery, the first iteration of which was published in *BAR* by André Lemaire.* In that piece, Lemaire argued that the script of the Shapira manuscripts contains unusual features that can only be explained as the errors of a modern forger. But Lemaire was not looking at the script of the actual manuscripts, since they were long lost by then. He didn't even have legible photographs with which to work. So Lemaire, like other paleographers who have followed him, conducted his paleographic analysis upon patently inaccurate 19th-century drawings.

The second is the idea that the Shapira manuscripts are based on the Siloam Tunnel Inscription; this claim seeks to highlight and explain various shared features between the scripts of the two texts, as argued in recent months by Ronald Hendel and Christopher Rollston.⁶ The problem with this idea is that the Shapira fragments were already extant in 1878, as indicated by a dated letter to Shapira found in the Israel

INFAMOUS INSCRIPTION. This facsimile and drawing from 1883 shows Fragment E of the Shapira Scrolls. It was prepared by Dangerfield Lithography, in consultation with biblical scholar Christian Ginsburg.

State Archives that discusses the texts in detail, whereas the Siloam inscription was discovered in 1880. Barring time travel, no forger could have made use of the Siloam inscription. The similarities are due, rather, to both being authentic artifacts from the First Temple period.

We turn now to the manuscripts themselves and what they have to say. Indeed, the strongest evidence for the manuscripts' authenticity comes from the text they contain. In my recent book and other publications, I title this text "The Valediction of Moses"—or "V" for short.⁷ I will briefly outline here a few of the literary examples discussed in my book, which establish that the Book of Deuteronomy as we know it today is an updated version of the Valediction of Moses.

There is something very strange about the structure of the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 11:26 begins, "Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse" (author's translation). This continues for several verses, stipulating that the blessing and curse are to occur on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. But then the narrative breaks off abruptly. What about the blessing and curse? We don't find out and instead encounter chapter after chapter of laws. These laws run from chapter 12 all the way through to chapter 26, and make up the legal code that gives Deuteronomy (meaning "second law") its name. Then, all of a sudden in chapter 27, toward the end of the book, we're back at Gerizim and Ebal, and we finally hear the rest of the narrative from chapter 11. This is an odd literary structure, to put it mildly, and it suggests that the laws were

* André Lemaire, "Paleography's Verdict: They're Fakes!" *BAR*, May/June 1997.

inserted secondarily into the Gerizim and Ebal passage.⁸ Amazingly, V's version of the episode is uninterrupted, and the entire Deuteronomic law code is nowhere to be found.

A similarly disjointed structure is found in Deuteronomy 2, where we find the story of Israel's conquest of King Sihon's Transjordanian territory. In recent years, biblical scholars have realized that the canonical version contains various edits whose purpose was to bring the story in line with the law of warfare in Deuteronomy 20.⁹ That law stipulates, "When you approach a town to battle it, you must (first) offer it peace." The law also states that Israel may go to war if—and only if—their entreaty is refused, and that they may then take spoils. Recent scholars have theorized that a later editor added a passage to the original Sihon story about Moses sending messengers with "words of

peace" (Deuteronomy 2:26), bringing the narrative in line with the law. The canonical text has Sihon make the first move, so the war is justified, and Israel proceeds to take spoils.

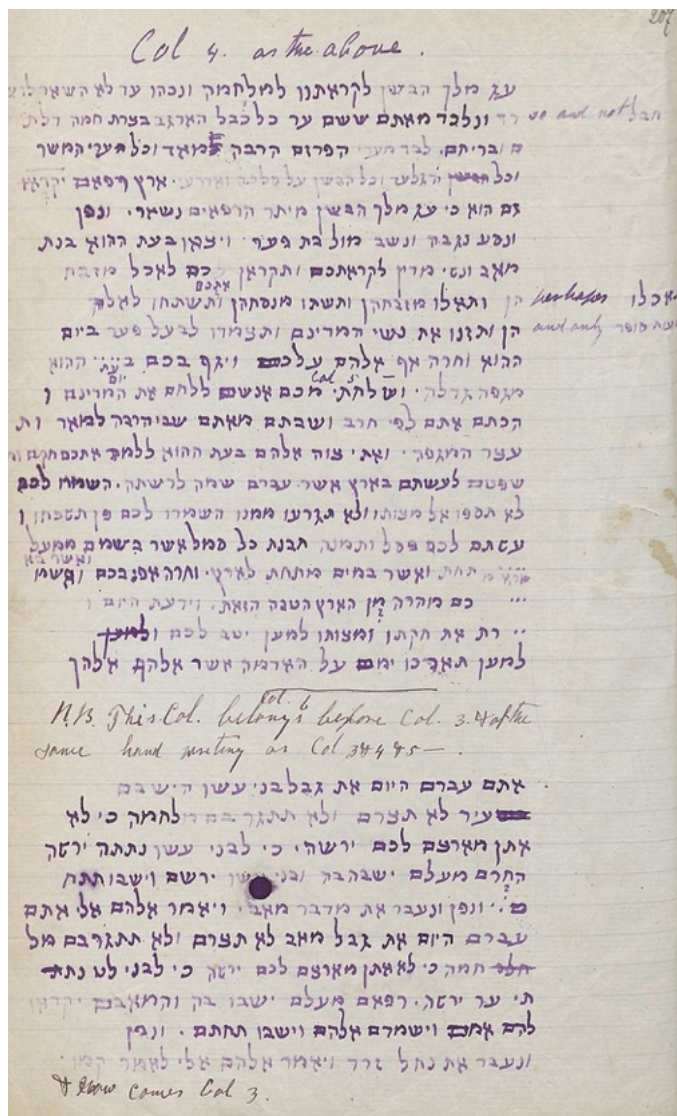
Incredibly, the version preserved in V is one protracted transgression of the law: Moses offers no peace, and Israel—not Sihon—is the aggressor. Furthermore, V lacks any mention of spoils. It is not as though the version in the Shapira manuscripts is an abridgment of Deuteronomy. Rather, it tells a different story.

We see that the version of the Sihon story found in the Shapira manuscripts matches modern Bible scholars' reconstructions of the original proto-Deuteronomic text. These scholars didn't know the text of the Shapira manuscripts, and no one in Shapira's day had imagined anything even remotely similar. How could Shapira or any other 19th-century forger have based his or her forgery on research that wouldn't be published for another century, which would only become sensible after major advances in the field of biblical studies? The answer clearly is: They couldn't. V matches scholars' recovered proto-Deuteronomic Sihon story because it is the proto-Deuteronomic Sihon story.

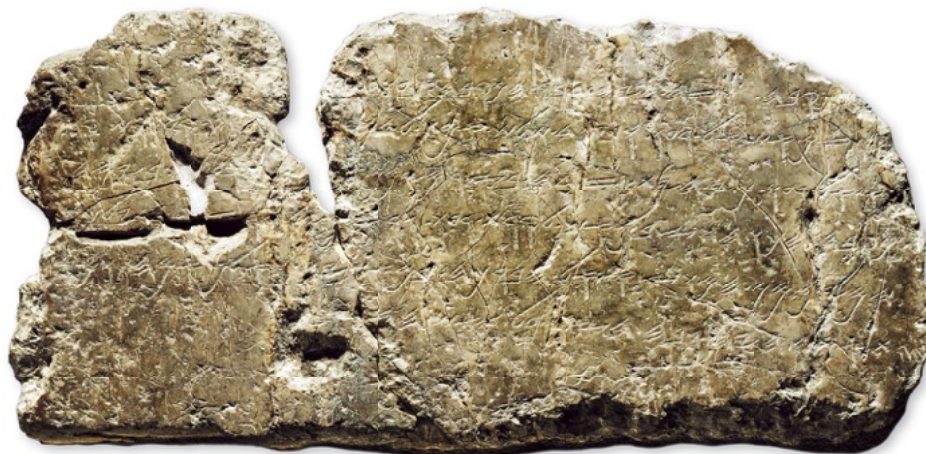
My final example is the famous spies story, which is found in the first chapter of Deuteronomy. This passage tells the story of 12 men—one from each tribe of Israel—who were sent into the land of Israel on a reconnaissance mission. In 2002, Bible scholar David Frankel drew attention to many previously overlooked problems in this Deuteronomic narrative.¹⁰ Frankel realized that an earlier version of the text told a dramatically different story—one that featured no spies at all. Instead, the early text described a commandment for the nation (not spies) to conquer (not explore) Canaan. The people refused, God became angry, and he killed off the sinners in the desert.

Deuteronomy 9:23 alludes to this early story, but not to the familiar spies narrative. That verse reads, "And when YHWH sent you on from Kadesh-barnea, saying, 'Go up and take possession of the land that I am giving you,'

SHAPIRA'S NOTES. Three pages of Shapira's preliminary transcription of the Valediction of Moses have surfaced, the second of which is shown here. Idan Dershowitz found them in the volume *Handwritten Inventory of the Hebrew Manuscripts Collected by Shapira in the Berlin State Library*. These pages even contain Shapira's handwritten notes, corrections, and reflections, revealing his struggles to find the correct interpretation of the text.



SILOAM INSCRIPTION. The Siloam Tunnel Inscription is a beautiful example of Old Hebrew script. Dated to c. 700 B.C.E., it recounts the creation of a tunnel to connect the Gihon Spring with the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 20:20). Digging through bedrock, two teams began on opposite ends and met in the middle. Found in 1880 near one end of the tunnel, this inscription shares some similarities with the writing of the Shapira Scrolls.



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you flouted the command of YHWH your God; you did not put your trust in him and did not obey him.” As Frankel writes, “It is striking that [this verse] makes no mention whatsoever of the sending of the scouts.” Instead, God commands the entire nation to conquer the land of Israel—which is quite different from commanding 12 men to gather intelligence, as told in the canonical story.

Here’s where things get really interesting: V’s version of this episode is almost precisely Frankel’s reconstructed story! Unlike the canonical versions, here the spies are nowhere to be found, and the story progresses straight from a commandment to conquer the land of Canaan, to the people’s refusal, to God’s punishment.

How can we explain this incredible coincidence? Surely no forger in the 1800s could have based his text on source-critical insights first suggested in 2002. We can also rule out the idea that V is an abridgment of Deuteronomy, since it isn’t a paraphrase but an altogether different story—no recap of the spies story would neglect to mention the main characters. Like the Sihon narrative, the story in V matches what recent scholars have reconstructed as the original version of the Deuteronomic text.

The text of the Valediction of Moses made little sense to its 19th-century readers, since it didn’t align with existing scholarly or theological views of Deuteronomy. Incredibly, however, the text *does* match up, time and again, with 21st-century scholarly theories about Deuteronomy’s history and composition. Naturally, V does not match every theory proposed since 1878, nor could it. Were any ancient version to materialize, it would prove some hypotheses right and

others wrong; V is thus exactly what an archaic text should look like.

It goes without saying that forgeries look increasingly fake with each passing decade. V, on the other hand, seemed like an obvious forgery to almost all scholars in the 1800s for reasons we now know to be spurious, whereas today it matches all sorts of ideas first proposed by contemporary scholars—ideas that would have sounded crazy to a 19th-century scholar. The explanation is simple: Far from being modern forgeries, the Shapira manuscripts are extremely ancient artifacts, and the text they preserve, the Valediction of Moses, is a proto-biblical book. 

¹ John C. Trever, *The Untold Story of Qumran* (Westwood, New Jersey: Revell, 1965), p. 25. For more on the skeptical reception of the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Edmund Wilson, “The Scrolls from the Dead Sea,” *New Yorker* (May 14, 1955).

² Hermann Guthe, *Fragmente einer Lederhandschrift enthaltend Mose’s letzte Rede an die Kinder Israel, mitgetheilt und geprüft* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtzel, 1883), p. 9.

³ Charles Clermont-Ganneau, letter printed in *The London Sunday Times*, August 21, 1883.

⁴ *The Literary World*, August 31, 1883.

⁵ Menahem Mansoor, “The Case of Shapira’s Dead Sea (Deuteronomy) Scrolls of 1883,” *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 47 (1958); Shlomo Guil, “The Shapira Scroll Was an Authentic Dead Sea Scroll,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 149.1 (2017), pp. 6–27.

⁶ See Christopher Rollston, “Déjà Vu All Over Again: The Antiquities Market, the Shapira Strips, Menahem Mansoor, and Idan Dershowitz,” *Rollston Epigraphy* (blog: www.rollstonepigraphy.com) and both scholars’ comments there; Ronald Hendel, “Notes on the Orthography of the Shapira Manuscripts: The Forger’s Marks,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 133.2 (2021), p. 229.

⁷ See Idan Dershowitz, *The Valediction of Moses: A Proto-Biblical Book*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021); Idan Dershowitz, “The Valediction of Moses: New Evidence on the Shapira Deuteronomy Fragments,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 133.1 (2021), pp. 1–22. For an updated account of the Shapira story, see also Ross K. Nichols, *The Moses Scroll* (St. Francisville, LA: Horeb Press, 2021).

⁸ For more on this topic, see Jon D. Levenson, “Who Inserted the Book of the Torah?” *Harvard Theological Review* 68.3–4 (1975), pp. 203–233.

⁹ See, e.g., Shimon Gesundheit, “Midrash-Exegesis in the Service of Literary Criticism,” in Christoph Berner and Harald Samuel, eds., *The Reception of Biblical War Legislation in Narrative Contexts* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 73–86.

¹⁰ David Frankel, *The Murmuring Stories of the Priestly School: A Retrieval of Ancient Sacerdotal Lore*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 145–148.



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