

Is a Long-Dismissed Forgery Actually the Oldest Known Biblical Manuscript?

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In 1883, a Jerusalem antiquities dealer named Moses Wilhelm Shapira announced the discovery of a remarkable artifact: 15 manuscript fragments, supposedly discovered in a cave near the Dead Sea. Blackened with a pitchlike substance, their paleo-Hebrew script nearly illegible, they contained what Shapira claimed was the “original” Book of Deuteronomy, perhaps even Moses’ own copy.

The discovery drew newspaper headlines around the world, and Shapira offered the treasure to the British Museum for a million pounds. While the museum’s expert evaluated it, two fragments were put on display, attracting throngs of visitors, including Prime Minister William Gladstone.

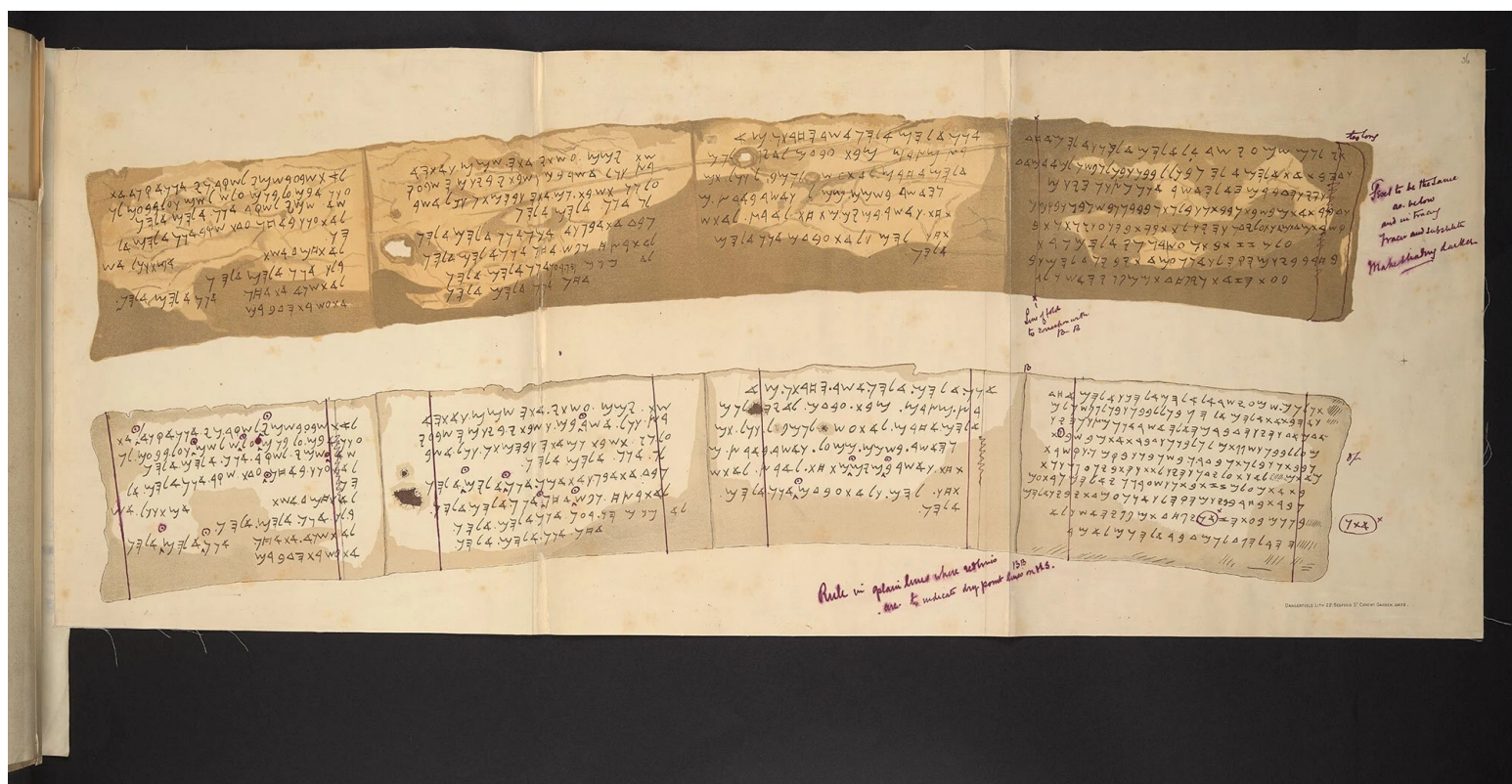
Then disaster struck.

Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau, a swashbuckling French archaeologist and longtime nemesis of Shapira's, had been granted a few minutes with several of the fragments, after promising to hold his judgment until the museum issued its report. But the next morning, he went to the press and denounced them as forgeries.

The museum's expert agreed, and a distraught Shapira fled London. Six months later, he committed suicide in a hotel room in the Netherlands. The manuscript was auctioned for a pittance in 1885, and soon disappeared altogether.

Since then, the Shapira affair has haunted the edges of respectable

biblical scholarship, as a rollicking caper wrapped in a mystery wrapped in a cautionary tale. But now, a young scholar is staking his own credibility by asking, what if this notorious fake was real?



The fragments, seen here in an 1883 drawing prepared in consultation with the British scholar Christian David Ginsberg, were blackened with a pitchlike substance, their paleo-Hebrew script almost illegible. Credit...The British Library

In a [just-published scholarly article](#) and [companion book](#), Idan Dershowitz, a 38-year-old Israeli-American scholar at the University of Potsdam in Germany, marshals a range of archival, linguistic and literary evidence to argue that the manuscript was an authentic ancient artifact.

But Dershowitz makes an even more dramatic claim. The text, which he has reconstructed from 19th-century transcriptions and drawings, is not a reworking of Deuteronomy, he argues, but a precursor to it, dating to the period of the First Temple, before the Babylonian Exile. That would make it the oldest known biblical manuscript by far, and an unprecedented window into

the origins and evolution of the Bible and biblical religion.

Dershowitz's research, closely guarded until now, has yet to get broad scrutiny. Scholars who previewed his findings at a closed-door seminar at Harvard in 2019 are divided, a taste of fierce debates likely to come.

But if Dershowitz is correct, some experts say, it will be the most consequential Bible-related discovery since the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947.

"Qumran was a massive shift," [Na'ama Pat-El](#), an expert in classical Semitic languages at the University of Texas in Austin, said, referring to the area where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. "What Idan is offering is something that's at

least equivalent, if not more. It's pretty incredible if he's right."

For Dershowitz, the dismissal of Shapira's manuscript nearly 140 years ago was not just a mistake, but "a tragedy" — and not just for Shapira.

"It's mind-boggling that for almost the entire existence of the discipline of Bible studies, this text that tells us more than any other manuscript discovered before or since hasn't been part of the conversation," he said.

This is a particularly fraught moment to



Idan Dershowitz, a scholar at the University of Potsdam, first looked at the Shapira text about four years ago. Almost immediately, he said, "I felt like it couldn't be a forgery." Credit...Amani Willett for The New York Times

reconsider a famous fake. Last year, the Museum of the Bible in Washington announced findings that all the Dead Sea Scroll fragments in its collection were modern forgeries. And more than one scholar interviewed about Dershowitz's research mentioned the fiasco of the so-called Gospel of Jesus' Wife, a supposedly ancient papyrus fragment announced with much fanfare in 2012, only to have the case for authenticity crumble to dust.

But proving something is authentic is harder than proving it is fake. And underneath all the big questions raised by Dershowitz's claims, there lies a more basic conundrum: How can you prove a disputed ancient artifact is genuine when it may no longer exist?

‘False From Beginning to End’

When Shapira unveiled his discovery in 1883, modern biblical scholarship was in its first flowering. The so-called documentary hypothesis — the idea that the Pentateuch, or first five books of the Bible, rather than being written by a sole author (Moses, by tradition), were compiled from several texts by various authors — was just being solidified.

And alongside the scholarly ferment, there was a mad scramble to discover artifacts that might vindicate various claims about the Bible. Discoveries also enhanced the prestige of various colonial powers, whose archaeologists engaged in all manner of aggressive,

sometimes ethically questionable angling for the choicest treasures. The first big prize, discovered in 1868, was the so-called [Moabite Stone](#), a three-foot black basalt stele with a 9th-century BCE, 34-line paleo-Hebrew inscription celebrating the Moabite King Mesha's rebellion against the Israelites. It was among the first non-Biblical texts to confirm an event mentioned in the Bible, and became a key to the study of ancient West Semitic languages.

The booming market in antiquities also begat a booming market in forgeries — “an intolerable bit of shuffling and roguery in the Jerusalem game of the ‘curios,’” as The New York Times put it in 1874.

Moses Wilhelm Shapira, a Russian-born Jewish convert to Christianity who arrived in Jerusalem as a young man, sold antiquities — both real and fake — from his shop in the Old City. Credit...CPA Media Pte Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo



And Shapira, a Russian-born Jewish convert to Christianity who arrived in Jerusalem in 1855, was a major purveyor of both.

In 1861, he opened a souvenir shop on Christian Street in the Old City, offering palm fronds and kitschy souvenirs to tourists. Soon, he started selling antiquities out of his back room, and cultivating grandiose ambitions. In her 1914 autobiographical novel, "The Little Daughter of Jerusalem," his daughter Maria recalled how Shapira would return from artifact-hunting trips proclaiming himself "King of the Desert."

The showdown with Clermont-Ganneau was not the first time the two men had tangled. In 1873, after Shapira sold a

large collection of newly “discovered” Moabite pottery to the German government, Clermont-Ganneau publicly denounced them — correctly — as “false from beginning to end.”

By 1883, Shapira had re-established himself as a respected dealer of antique Hebrew manuscripts. By the time he announced the Deuteronomy fragments, he had sold some 250 apparently genuine ones to the British Museum. Still, for some, his Jewish origins rendered him suspicious.

After the British Museum issued its damning verdict on the Deuteronomy fragments, the satirical magazine *Punch* ran a cartoon showing the museum’s expert, Christian David Ginsburg, apprehending a stereotypically

hooknosed “Mr. Sharp-Eye-Ra,” with forger’s ink still dripping from his finger. But in a letter to Ginsburg, Shapira professed his innocence, and pointed the finger at his old nemesis.

“I do not think that I will be able to survive this shame,” he wrote.

“Although I am not yet convinced that the M.s. is a forgery unless Monsieur Ganneau did it!”

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a few scholars have tried to reopen the Shapira case, arguing that his Deuteronomy fragments were [another Dead Sea Scroll](#), dating, like those from Qumran, to around the first century B.C.E. But their arguments gained little traction. (It didn’t help that one scholar who took up the cause also

claimed that Christianity's roots were connected with hallucinogenic mushrooms.)

Pentateuchal scholarship, meanwhile, steamed along. Through the 20th century, scholars painstakingly reconstructed four (or, some argue, five) so-called source texts, known by initials like J (for the Jahwist), E (Elohism), D (Deuteronomist) and P (Priestly).

Today, these source texts remain entirely theoretical — not a single scrap of ancient manuscript for any of them has yet been found.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

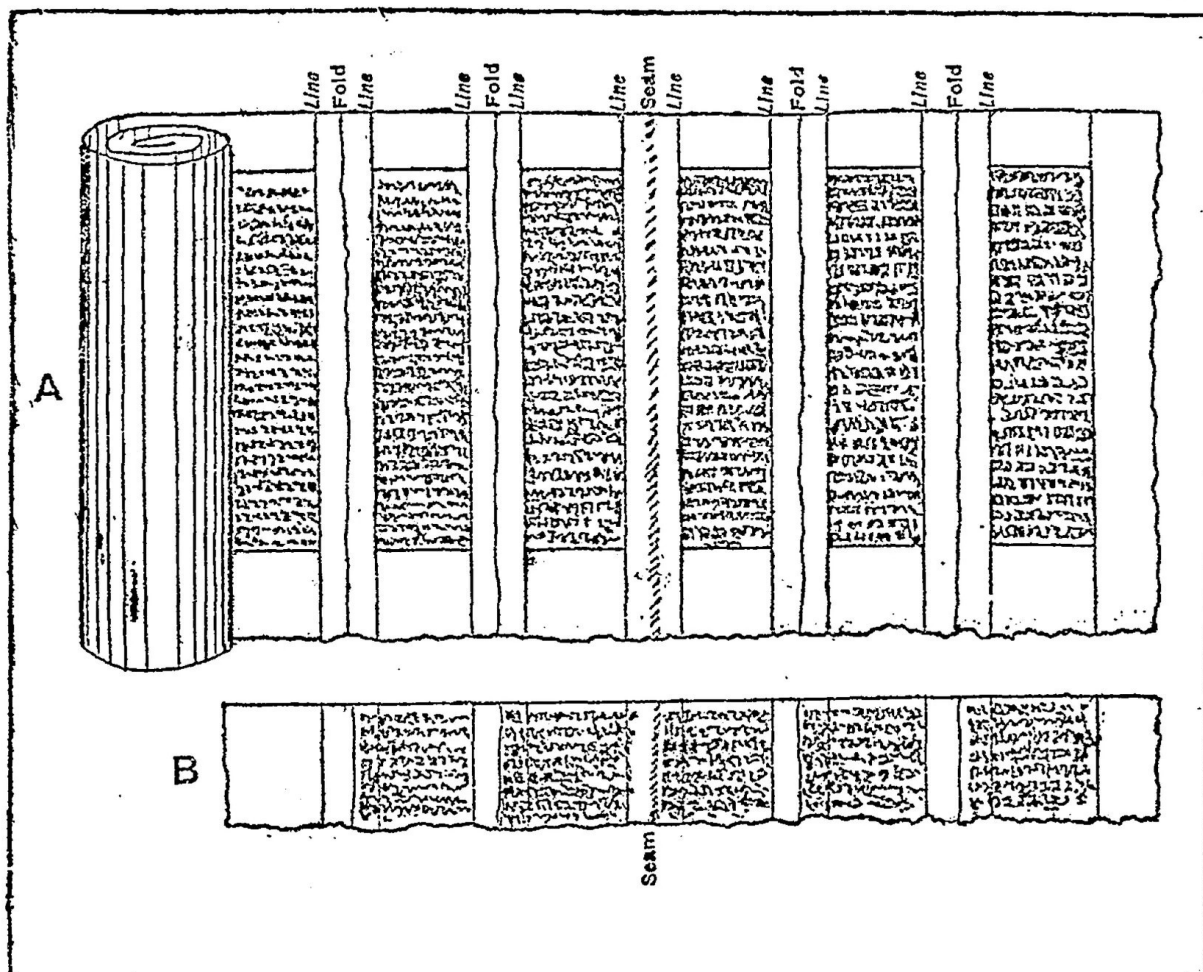
Sir,—In order to enable your readers to judge at a *coup d'œil* the technical explanations which I have presented on the manner in which the Moabite manuscript of Mr. Shapira has been fabricated, I give below a little diagram showing (A) the modern roll of the Pentateuch which has been used by the forger, and (B) one of the Moabite slips. In A are marked the general disposition of the square Hebrew text in parallel columns; the sewing which joins two pieces of the skin; the marginal vertical lines limiting the width of the columns and extending on to the superior and inferior margins, the inferior margin being broader than the superior; the folds in the leather between

each column; the lower edge of the roll, irregular and jagged.

In B are marked the columns in Moabite characters. The exact coincidence between A and B may be observed in respect of the seam, the folds, and the vertical lines. It is to be noticed also that the upper edge of the slip is smoothly cut, the work of the forger, and the lower edge is jagged, as on the roll. Lastly may be perceived the disposition of the Moabite characters, passing beyond the primitive marginal lines, which escaped the attention of the forger.

By a clerical error in my former letter the breadth of the rolls was given as 16 centimètres. It should have been 60 centimètres. With respect to their length, I may say that No. 1,460 in the British Museum measures 120 feet.

CLERMONT-GANNEAU.



Soon after they went on view in London, Shapira's fragments were declared a forgery by Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau, a French archaeologist, who took to the pages of *The Times of London* to explain his case. Credit...*The Times of London*.

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest known substantial Bible manuscripts in Hebrew dated from around the 10th century C.E. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from about the second century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., moved that time horizon back a millennium.

But for most scholars, discovering an actual biblical source text, dating from before the creation of the Hebrew Bible we know, seemed extremely unlikely.

“As someone who spends all day reconstructing source texts, I’ve often daydreamed about actually finding one,” Dershowitz said. “But I didn’t think about it as something that could actually come true.”

Too Good to Be True?

Dershowitz's own obsession with the Shapira manuscript began as something of a lark. Nearly four years ago, while finishing his dissertation at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he stumbled on an article online about it. He found himself curious about something most articles on the topic barely discussed: its contents.

Deuteronomy, as it appears in the Bible, contains Moses' farewell sermon to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land. In his address, Moses recalls their history, and emphasizes the importance of following the laws, including the Ten Commandments (first revealed in Exodus), which he then restates.

Ironically, Deuteronomy itself has been described as a “pious forgery,” as scholars call works created to justify a particular belief or practice. The Hebrew Bible states that during the reign of Josiah, around 622 B.C.E., priests discovered an ancient [“Book of the Law”](#) in the Temple in Jerusalem. Since the 19th century, scholars have held that Deuteronomy (or its nucleus of laws) was that book, which in fact had been composed shortly beforehand to justify the centralization of worship at the Temple and other priestly reforms.

The Shapira text — which Dershowitz calls the Valediction of Moses, or V — differs from canonical Deuteronomy in a number of striking ways. Most

important, it includes the historical narrative but none of the laws beyond the Ten Commandments, which appear in somewhat different form.

Those basics had been known since Shapira's time, when newspapers published translations of his manuscript. But to reconstruct the full paleo-Hebrew text, Dershowitz first had to track down scattered transcriptions and a handful of drawings of one fragment. And once he pieced it together and began reading, he had an odd feeling.

"I felt like it couldn't be a forgery," he said. "It's hard to put my finger on it. It just didn't match with something I thought could be possible" for the 19th century.

For starters, there were too many features that eerily lined up with discoveries and hypotheses about the Bible's evolution that scholars would only arrive at decades later, after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

“My wife was traveling for work, and I just spent a few days and nights not really sleeping, going through the whole text until I felt like I had figured it out,” Dershowitz said. “I had convinced myself it was not only an ancient document, but actually the ancestor of the Book of Deuteronomy.”



Today, the contents of Shapira's fragments are known only from transcriptions and a handful of drawings. There is a single existing photograph of one fragment, but it is illegible. Credit...The British Library

Asked about Dershowitz's scholarship, colleagues cite his uncommonly creative, interdisciplinary approach. In graduate school, he collaborated with his father, a computer scientist, on [a software program that teased out different writerly voices in the Bible.](#) His dissertation, published last month as "The Dismembered Bible," outlined a new theory of how the Bible was redacted [through literal cutting and pasting](#), drawing on scribal errors as important clues to how the process worked.

And in a 2018 scholarly article, he used similar approach to advance [a startling claim](#): that an earlier version of Leviticus, rather than forbidding sex

between men, had actually permitted it.

Still, claiming that a notorious forgery was the only known surviving source text for the Bible is not the kind of thing a young (and, at the time, untenured) scholar stakes his career on. When Dershowitz outlined his theory to Noah Feldman, a professor at Harvard Law School and chairman of Harvard's Society of Fellows, where he was about to begin a fellowship, the older scholar warned him off.

"I said, 'You're crazy, I don't want to hear it, you're going to destroy your career, go away,'" Feldman recalled. "He would keep emailing me details, and I would reply TGTBT — too good to be true." (Feldman was eventually

persuaded enough to help fund Dershowitz's research, through the law school's Julis-Rabinowitz Program on Jewish and Israeli Law.)

As it happens, Dershowitz wasn't the only one taking a fresh look at Shapira. In "The Lost Book of Moses," a 2016 book about the Shapira affair, the journalist Chanan Tigay claimed to have found "the smoking gun": a medieval Yemenite Torah scroll once owned by Shapira.

There was a strip sliced from the bottom — proof, Tigay argued, that Shapira had created his fake using parchment from an old Torah scroll, just as Clermont-Ganneau had speculated. But Dershowitz noted that one 19th-century observer who handled the

fragments had described them as thicker than a Torah scroll. And when he traveled to the Sutro Library in San Francisco to see the scroll, he also noticed something else: It had clearly suffered serious water damage. To him, this suggested that the bottom had more likely been cut off to prevent further rot, and not to provide material for a forgery.

Dershowitz also traveled to the Berlin State Library to look at Shapira's papers. There, scattered in a bound volume of jumbled invoices and notes, he found something he said no one had ever noted: three handwritten sheets that appeared to show Shapira trying to decipher the fragments, with many question marks, marginal musings,

crossed-out readings and transcription errors.

“It’s amazing because it gives you a window into Shapira’s mind,” Dershowitz said. “If he forged them, or was part of a conspiracy, it makes no sense that he’d be sitting there trying to guess what the text is, and making mistakes while he did it.”

A Scholarly Grilling

As he built his case, Dershowitz consulted with a tiny circle of confidants, including [Shimon Gesundheit](#), his dissertation adviser at Hebrew University. “I was worried that anyone who heard about it without having the whole picture would think I was a crackpot,” he said.

Then, in June 2019, came a trial by fire, when nearly a dozen leading scholars from around the world were invited to Harvard Law School to hear him present his research at a confidential seminar organized by Feldman.

It was more collegial than Clermont-Ganneau's ambush at the British Museum. But it was still a tough crowd. "There was a lot of pushback, rejection, counterarguments and even mockery," Pat-El, the University of Texas linguist, said.

Dershowitz recalled being barraged by critique after critique. But by the end of the day, a divide had opened.

"Among Bible scholars, who study the evolution of the text, the emergent position was, 'These can't be

forgeries,” he said. “But the epigraphers all said, ‘This can’t be real.’” Epigraphers are experts in inscriptions, with a focus on letter forms and other material aspects of an artifact. They are usually the ones called in to authenticate — or more often, debunk — artifacts, usually with the help of carbon-dating and infrared imaging. In an interview, [Christopher Rollston](#), a leading epigrapher at George Washington University who is writing a book about biblical forgeries, was blunt. The Shapira strips, he said, “have all the hallmarks of a modern forgery,” he said. And the lack of the original fragments, he said, is an “absolute deal breaker.”



THE SHAPIRA MANUSCRIPT OF DEUTERONOMY

Shapira's discovery was covered extensively in magazines like The Graphic, which ran these drawings showing details of the manuscript, other examples of ancient Hebrew script and the area near the Dead Sea where the fragments were found. Credit... Illustrated by London News Group/ The British Library Board

"For many of us, hard evidence reigns supreme," he added. "Speculations never reign supreme."

At the same time, he argued, the evidence that does survive is clear. The drawings and script charts made by Ginsburg and other scholars who examined the original fragments, Rollston said, show “clear anomalies” in the way the Hebrew letters are formed, compared with authentic script from the period, including that on the Moabite Stone.

As for Dershowitz’s argument that the text anticipated too many subsequent discoveries to be a 19th-century forgery, Rollston called it “a pile of hypotheticals.”

“Forgers are pretty clever with regard to content,” he said. “And they’ve been very clever for 2,500 years.”

[Sidnie White Crawford](#), an epigrapher and Dead Sea Scrolls expert at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was similarly clear. Without the original fragments, she said, Dershowitz's arguments can't be proved or disproved, so they "must remain a footnote in the scholarly discussion of the origins of Deuteronomy."

But what you see also depends on the lens through which you view the evidence. Pat-El, [the University of Texas linguist](#), said she went into the seminar "pretty neutral" on the question of authenticity, but left thinking the case for forgery was "weak." Since then, she has collaborated with Dershowitz on an analysis of the lexicon and syntax, included in his book.

The language, she said, is “standard biblical Hebrew, similar to 7th-6th century B.C.E. texts.” There are few of the anomalous features that are common in the Dead Sea Scrolls and other texts from later in antiquity, to say nothing of the howlers in many modern forgeries.

“I’ve never seen a later text that managed to fake good biblical Hebrew,” she said.

When it comes to possible forgeries, several scholars said, skepticism may be the prudent position. But it also carries its own intellectual risks.

[Michael Langlois](#), an epigrapher at the University of Strasbourg who attended the seminar, credited Dershowitz with making the best case yet, even if it

remained, in his view, dependent on many hypotheticals. But he noted that when the first Dead Sea Scrolls surfaced in 1947, some leading scholars, mindful of the Shapira fiasco, initially dismissed them as fakes.

“Can you imagine what would have happened if no one had had the guts to consider them authentic?” Langlois said. “We would not even have the Dead Sea Scrolls today.”

‘I Would Like Him to Be Right’

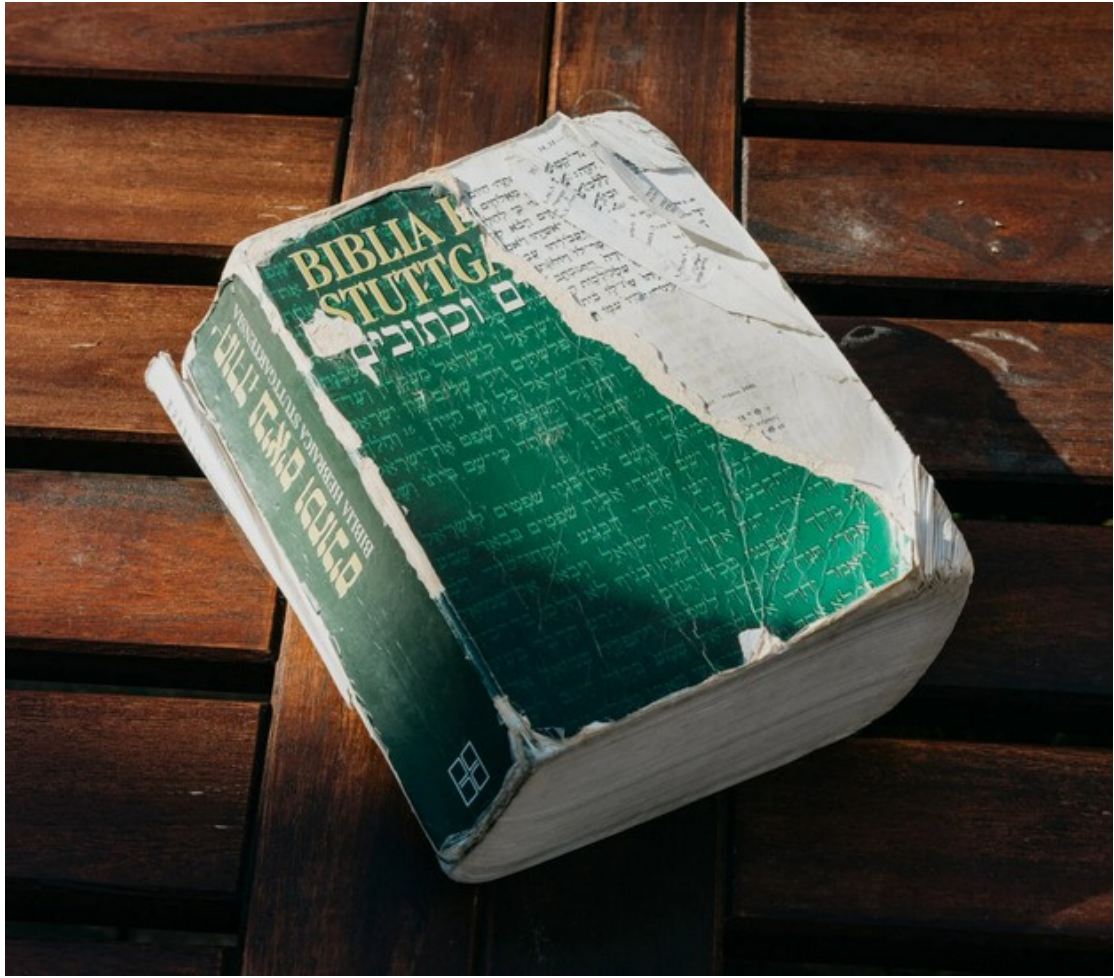
In his paper, published in the journal *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (The Journal for Old Testament Research), Dershowitz responds to some of the epigraphers’ objections. He offers microscopic analysis of various letter forms: Are

they leaning left? Or right? But he also asks another question: Why do we assume that the 19th-century drawings — which, as he notes, sometimes contradict each other — are reliable visual representations of the letter forms to begin with?

In his book, Dershowitz provides additional evidence, including literary analysis of the text itself. And he explores a number of subtle “intertexts” — echoes of passages in other books of the Hebrew Bible that to him suggest that those authors had knowledge of V, or some other text derived from it.

As evidence, it may not be as “hard” as analysis of parchment, stone and letter

forms. But to some scholars, it's tantalizing.



The Hebrew Bible that Dershowitz used while doing his research, which compares the biblical book of Deuteronomy to the alternate version in Shapira's fragments. "There are just mind-blowing things in this text," he said. Credit... Amani Willett for The New York Times

[Jeffrey Stackert](#), a professor at the University of Chicago who has just completed a book on Deuteronomy, said he was “cautious” in his assessment, but found Dershowitz’s evidence “suggestive.” “I would like him to be right,” he said.

And if he is, Stackert said, V would serve as powerful evidence for what scholars have long hypothesized: that the traditions and stories preserved in the Hebrew Bible “are only a fraction of those that existed.”

Over the years, some who have tried to reopen the Shapira case have speculated that the manuscript might be a “rewritten Bible” of the sort found among the Dead Sea Scrolls — texts that revised the canonical books of the

Bible, to clarify certain points or appeal to new readers.

But Gesundheit, of Hebrew University, said the absence of the laws suggests that V is older than Deuteronomy. In antiquity, he said, people who copied biblical texts might add or compile different versions. But they did not delete, he said.

“For them, the text was holy,” he said.

“It’s hard to believe somebody would delete those divine laws.” Moreover, he said, V’s version is “smoother and looks more original” than canonical Deuteronomy, where the laws “interrupt the narrative flow between the beginning and the end of the book.”

And the implications of the absence of the laws, Gesundheit said, are enormous. “These laws are really important for the history of Judaism, for Christianity, for the tradition,” he said. “We have whole libraries of interpretations of the laws, but suddenly we see that there could have been a version which only speaks of beliefs and stories and theology, without the laws.”

As for the Ten Commandments — or “proclamations,” as Dershowitz translates it — they take a form that is quite different from the familiar text, Dershowitz said. They are all rendered in the first-person, from the standpoint of the deity — for example, “I made the heavens and the earth....” (In the

canonical version, they are in the third person.)

And the presentation, in sharp contrast to biblical tradition, implies that there were no other divine laws communicated by Moses.

The text of V, Dershowitz said, has hundreds of features that will keep scholars busy for a long time, on matters relating to biblical geography, the naming of the deity, the development of the Israelite tribal scheme, and on and on.

“There are just mind-blowing things in this text,” he said.

Justice for Shapira?

Knowledge of the past, especially the ancient past, always rests on

fragments, shaped powerfully by contingency. We are dependent not just on what happened to survive, but on who finds those traces, and when, and what happens next.

The Shapira story is trailed by a tantalizing swirl of what-ifs. What if someone with a less checkered reputation had found the fragments? What if Shapira hadn't committed suicide? What if they hadn't been lost — or had first surfaced 80 years later, after the Dead Sea Scrolls, when scholars might have viewed them differently?

And of course, what if they really were forgeries?

16
London 23 Aug 1863
Dear Dr Ginsberg!
You have made a
fool of me by publishing
& exhibiting them, that
you believe them to be
false. I do not think
that I will be able to
survive this shame. Altho
I am yet not convinced
that the MS is a forgery
unless M Ganneau did it.
I will leave London
in a day or two, for Berlin
Yours truly
M W Shapira

ms 320 may be 623 or like
3120 1878

After being denounced as a forger, Shapira wrote to Ginsburg, protesting his innocence: "I do not think that I will be able to survive this shame," he wrote. Six months later, he committed suicide. Credit...The British

Dershowitz's claims will surely be hotly contested. But whatever the ultimate scholarly verdict, he will surely fare better than Shapira himself, whose end he calls "terribly poignant."

"In his daughter's book, you see how excited he was about the potential of the discovery, that it would change everything, that he would return victorious to Jerusalem," he said. "But it all came crashing down."

Dershowitz said it is entirely possible that some of the fragments survived, and may resurface again. (And of course, it's also possible that a clever 21st-century forger will now try to recreate them.) But in the meantime, he confessed to another daydream.

In Jerusalem, near the Hebrew University campus on Mt. Scopus, there's a thoroughfare named for Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau.

"My dream," Dershowitz said, "is that one day it will be named Wilhelm Moses Shapira Street."

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