

IDAN DERSHOWITZ

The Valediction of Moses

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament
145*

Mohr Siebeck

Forschungen zum Alten Testament

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145



Idan Dershowitz

The Valediction of Moses

A Proto-Biblical Book

Mohr Siebeck

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This book is dedicated to my parents, with love and gratitude.

Potsdam, Germany, 2020

Idan Dershowitz

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	V
List of Figures and Tables	XI
1. Introduction	1
1.1. History of Discovery and Initial Assessment	2
1.2. Reasons for Forgery Verdict	9
1.2.1. An Unprecedented Discovery	9
1.2.2. Moabite Pottery Scandal	12
1.2.3. Cut-Margin Theory	16
1.2.4. Hebrew “Errors”	18
1.2.5. Paleographic Objections	21
1.3. Summary	33
2. A New Discovery: The Shapira Papers	34
3. Philological Analysis	41
3.1. The Character of V	41
3.2. The Absence of the Deuteronomic Law Code in V	45
3.2.1. The Bifurcated Gerizim and Ebal Pericope	45
3.2.2. The Conquest of Sihon’s Land	48
3.3. The Absence of P in V’s Historical Exposition	53
3.3.1. The Incipit	54
3.3.2. The Injunction against Idols	57
3.3.3. The Stone Tablets and the Wooden Ark	59
3.3.4. The Rebellion at Kadesh Barnea	63
3.4. Summary	70
4. Biblical Intertexts	72
4.1. The Decalogue	72
4.1.1. Jeremiah 7:9	74
4.1.2. Jeremiah 29:23	76

4.1.3. Hosea 4:2	77
4.1.4. Psalm 50	78
4.1.5. Proverbs 6:16–35	80
4.1.6. Leviticus 19	82
4.1.7. Ezekiel 22:6–12	85
4.1.8. Interim Summary	87
4.2. Gerizim and Ebal.	87
4.2.1. The Tribal Lists	87
4.2.2. The Location of Gerizim and Ebal.	91
4.2.3. Summary.	93
5. Conclusion	94
6. Excursus: The Linguistic Profile of V, with Na'ama Pat-El	96
6.1. Orthography	97
6.1.1. Diphthongs	97
6.1.2. Word Division	100
6.1.3. Miscellaneous Orthographic Features.	101
6.2. Verbal Morphosyntax	104
6.2.1. The <i>waqāṭal</i> Construction	104
6.2.2. The (<i>wə-</i>) <i>yiqṭōl</i> Construction	108
6.2.3. לֹלַחַם (D 3:1)	112
6.2.4. Negation of the Jussive	113
6.2.5. Verbal Forms Following עַד “Until”	114
6.2.6. וַנִּכְהָ עַד (D 1:3)	114
6.2.7. לַתָּה מִפֶּת (E 1:6)	115
6.3. Nominal Morphosyntax	115
6.3.1. בְּלֹהֵי טַפְכֶּם (B 1:5)	115
6.3.2. לְמֹאֵד (D 3:2; E 1:2–3)	116
6.3.3. בַּעַת הַזֹּאת (E 1:9)	116
6.3.4. Plural of אָב “Father”	116
6.3.5. Plural of Ethnonyms	117
6.3.6. Disagreement of Suffixed Pronoun with Its Referent	118
6.4. Lexicon.	119
6.4.1. הוּן (E 3:8)	119
6.4.2. יִבְעַל עִם כָּל בַּהֲמוֹה (G 5:12)	119
6.4.3. הַחֲרֹתֶךָ (E 2:1)	121
6.4.4. וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְךָ/לִּי (E 3:3–4, 4:6–7)	122
6.4.5. עֲדַת שִׁקֵּר (E 4:4; H 1:2)	123
6.4.6. חֲנֹהֵן (D 2:7–8)	125
6.4.7. שְׂאֲרֹתֶךָ (G 5:1 [?]; H 1:9)	126
6.4.8. גַּם (E 3:3)	126
6.4.9. מֵעֵלַם (C 1:4, 8; D 1:8)	128

6.5. Summary	129
7. Annotated Critical Edition	131
7.1. Manuscripts	131
7.2. Sources and Method	132
7.3. Text and Notes	134
8. English Translation of V	156
8.1. Introductory Remarks	156
8.2. Translation	156
9. Paleo-Hebrew Reconstruction	167
9.1. Introductory Remarks	167
9.2. Text	167
Bibliography	175
Index of Primary Sources	185
General Index	195
Index of Modern Persons	200

List of Figures and Tables

Fig. 1	Photograph of Moses Wilhelm Shapira	XIV
Fig. 2	Map of Wadi al-Mujib (Arnon)	3
Fig. 3	Two photographs of Fragment E, columns 1–2, and one unknown fragment	4
Fig. 4	Cartoon of Ginsburg apprehending Shapira	8
Fig. 5	Box of linen from Qumran with bituminous substance resulting from leather decay	11
Fig. 6	Folded fragment of 4QOtot (4Q319)	12
Fig. 7	Fragments of 4QSerekh ha-Yahad ^c (4Q259)	13
Fig. 8	1QpHab	14
Fig. 9	4QShirShabb ^f (4Q405)	14
Fig. 10	11QPs ^a (11Q5)	17
Fig. 11	11QTemple ^a (11Q19)	17
Fig. 12	Brinner 11 (Sutro Library)	19
Fig. 13	Ginsburg’s sketch of Fragment E (V ^a)	22
Fig. 14	Drawing of Fragment E (V ^a) prepared by Dangerfield Lithography (London, 1883), in consultation with Ginsburg	23
Fig. 15	Drawing of Fragment E (V ^a) prepared by Dangerfield Lithography (London, 1883), in consultation with Ginsburg	24
Fig. 16	Drawing of Fragment E (V ^a) prepared by Dangerfield Lithography (London, 1883), in consultation with Ginsburg	25
Fig. 17	Table by Guthe of letterforms appearing in Fragments D and E (V ^a)	26
Fig. 18	Drawings of Fragment E (V ^a) from <i>The Graphic</i> (1883)	27
Fig. 19	Drawing of V ^b fragment by William Simpson for <i>The Illustrated London News</i> (1883)	27
Fig. 20	Ginsburg’s drawing of Fragment E that was analyzed by Lemaire	28
Fig. 21	Different version of Ginsburg’s drawing of the same column ...	29
Fig. 22	Examples of <i>vav</i> in Ginsburg’s drawings of Fragment E (V ^a) ...	30
Fig. 23	<i>Vav</i> in Guthe’s table of letterforms in Fragment E (V ^a)	30
Fig. 24	Examples of <i>qoph</i> in Ginsburg’s drawings of Fragment E (V ^a) ..	31
Fig. 25	<i>Qoph</i> in Guthe’s table of letterforms in Fragment E (V ^a)	31
Fig. 26	Examples of <i>he</i> in Ginsburg’s drawings of Fragment E (V ^a)	32
Fig. 27	Illustration of several characters from <i>The Graphic</i> (1883)	32
Fig. 28	Samaria Ostrakon 15	33

Fig. 29	First page of Shapira's draft transcription	35
Fig. 30	Second page of Shapira's draft transcription	36
Fig. 31	Third page of Shapira's draft transcription	37
Table 1	Table of correspondences between Deuteronomy and V	41
Table 2	The Decalogue constellation in V	74



Fig. 1. Photograph of Moses Wilhelm Shapira.

1. Introduction

In 1883, more than half a century before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some intriguing manuscripts came to light that were greeted with considerable public excitement.¹ Written in Paleo-Hebrew script and consisting of a handful of leather fragments, the text presented a short narrative that had much in common with the biblical book of Deuteronomy. The British Museum was on the verge of purchasing the fragments from their purveyor, the antiquities dealer Moses Wilhelm Shapira. (See fig. 1.) The sale was abruptly called off, however, after the manuscripts were declared to be forgeries, with Shapira himself the immediate suspect. Since that time, the manuscripts have fallen out of circulation; it is unknown whether the fragments still exist, or where they might be.

In this introductory chapter, I review the history of the manuscripts and provide a fresh analysis of the reasons they were initially judged forgeries. In light of our current knowledge, none of the original reasons for dismissing the fragments can be considered valid. More recent objections to the authenticity of the manuscripts on paleographic grounds are likewise found to be untenable. In chapter 2, I present overlooked archival material that severely undermines the verdict of Shapira's guilt.

In chapter 3, I show that the literary structure and content of the text itself – which I call the Valediction of Moses, or “V” – constitutes evidence that the manuscript fragments are bona fide ancient documents. Moreover, rather than being a secondary abridgment of Deuteronomy, as has been assumed, V was composed *prior* to the canonical book of Deuteronomy. Indeed, Deuteronomy evolved out of V itself – or out of a very similar text. As such, V offers a priceless key for illuminating the compositional history of this Pentateuchal text.

I explore intertexts between V and various biblical passages in chapter 4. These intertexts suggest that V's traditions were familiar to several biblical authors. Conclusions and future directions are presented in chapter 5. An excursus co-authored with Na'ama Pat-El (chapter 6) examines V's linguistic profile, which we find to be consistent with a First Temple-era text. Chapters 7–9 contain an annotated critical edition of V, an English translation, and a reconstruction of the Paleo-Hebrew text.

¹ A separate discussion of the material covered in this chapter is published in Idan Der-showitz, “The Valediction of Moses: New Evidence on the Shapira Deuteronomy Fragments,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 133, no. 1 (2021).

The Valediction of Moses is an extraordinary textual specimen with far-reaching implications for biblical studies, particularly in its capacity to shed light on the development of the book of Deuteronomy.

1.1. History of Discovery and Initial Assessment

The prominent antiquities and manuscript dealer Moses Wilhelm Shapira (1830–84) was born to a Jewish family in the city of Kamianets-Podilskyi, in present-day Ukraine. He converted to Christianity when he was twenty-five years old and moved to Jerusalem, where he would open a shop on Christian Quarter Street in the Old City that offered miscellaneous souvenirs for sale, as well as valuable manuscripts and other antiquities. Shapira traveled extensively to acquire his wares, many of which he sold to prominent international collectors and institutions.

According to Shapira, in 1878 he learned about several leather fragments that Bedouins had reportedly found in a cave on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, near Wadi al-Mujib (Arnon; see fig. 2). On a shelf or a ledge in the cave were several linen-wrapped bundles that contained strips of blackened leather. (See fig. 3.) One of the Bedouins took the strips, allegedly because he thought they might bring good luck. These leather strips had a sticky black substance on the back that looked like bitumen, to which the brittle remains of linen fabric were stuck.² With the assistance of a local sheikh, Shapira managed to procure from a member of the Bedouin Ajayah tribe sixteen leather strips – manuscript fragments of varying length and condition – for a very modest price. Upon further examination, it became clear that the fragments represented three manuscripts of the same text (namely, V): One of the manuscripts was almost complete and a second was somewhat fragmentary. What little remained of the third manuscript was in very poor condition.³

In the summer of 1883, Shapira traveled to Europe and sought to have the manuscripts evaluated by experts who were best equipped to assess their value and authenticity. Shapira succeeded in gaining an audience for his fragments in Berlin, where a number of eminent scholars gathered to analyze them. As reported in *The Times* of London:

The committee met at the house of its convener, Professor Lepsius, on the 10th of July last; and, while Mr. Shapira, of Jerusalem, was waiting in expectant trepidation in an adjoining room, spent exactly one hour and a half in a close and critical investigation into the character of his goat-skin wares. At the end of the sitting they unanimously pronounced the

² British Library Ms. Add. 41294, “Papers relative to M. W. Shapira’s forged MS. of Deuteronomy,” 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 29. I refer to the first of these manuscripts as V^a, and the second as V^b.

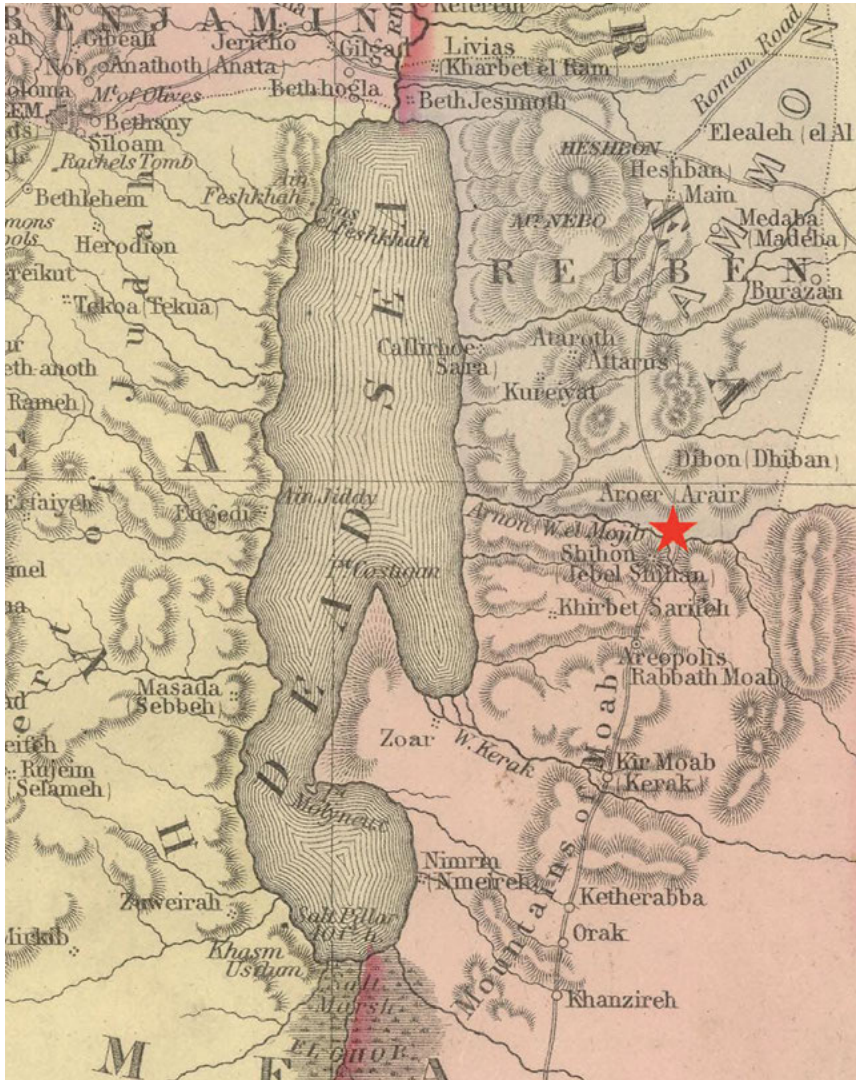


Fig. 2. Map with Wadi al-Mujib (Arnon) marked. From *Mitchell's New General Atlas* (Philadelphia: Mitchell, 1874). Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.



Fig. 3. Two photographs of Fragment E, columns 1–2, and one unknown fragment. In the top image, Fragment E is folded in half, with column 4 (verso) partially visible behind column 1 (recto). The image of the unknown fragment is cropped at the bottom. By permission of the British Library (Ms. Add. 41294).

alleged codex to be a clever and impudent forgery. There was some thought of calling in a chemist... [but they] deemed it unnecessary to call for further proof.⁴

At around the same time that the Berlin committee conducted their brief evaluation, another biblical scholar, Hermann Guthe, worked to decipher the manuscripts in Leipzig with the historian Eduard Meyer. Guthe and Meyer were able to spend several days with the texts in Shapira's hotel room, but even this was not sufficient time to undertake a thorough analysis of the manuscripts. The leather fragments were severely blackened and became blacker by the week. Since most of the text, written in black ink, was illegible against this dark background, and infrared photography was not yet in use, Guthe and Meyer resorted to brushing alcohol on the leather to make the ink shine against the light. Guthe described their method as follows:

We were only able to read small parts without any kind of aid. Usually, we applied some alcohol (spirit) with a small brush to sections of the manuscript and then tried to identify the letters that glistened from the moisture. Unfortunately, this was not always possible, even with help of a magnifying glass. This explains the various large and small gaps that the reader will encounter when reading the text of the leather manuscript.⁵

Due to summer thunderstorms, the light was too poor to allow the scholars to confirm their preliminary transcription of certain columns. Guthe nonetheless published his findings the following month.⁶ Although he initially thought the fragments to be authentic,⁷ Guthe eventually became persuaded that they were forgeries.

Despite the initial unfavorable reception of the manuscripts in Germany, Shapira persisted in his quest. He traveled from Berlin to London, where he reportedly offered to sell his fragments to the British Museum for one million pounds.⁸ Having already acquired many valuable manuscripts from Shapira,⁹ the British Museum seriously considered purchasing these fragments from him as well, pending their authentication by the scholar Christian David Ginsburg. Ginsburg devoted several weeks to studying the manuscripts, regularly publishing updates and translations of the text in *The Athenæum*, a London weekly liter-

⁴ "The Shapira Manuscripts," *The Times* (August 28, 1883), 5. According to the same article, "This committee consisted of Professor Dillmann, of the Hebrew Chair; Professor Sachau, the distinguished Orientalist; Professor Schrader, the celebrated Assyriologist; Professor Ermann, another Hebrew scholar; and Dr. Schneider" (ibid.).

⁵ Hermann Guthe, *Fragmente einer Lederhandschrift enthaltend Mose's letzte Rede an die Kinder Israel* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1883), 21. (My translation.)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Mr. Shapira's Manuscript," *The Times* (August 8, 1883), 11.

⁸ BL Ms. Add. 41294, 24; *The Times* (August 3, 1883), 9.

⁹ George Margoliouth, *Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. 4 (London: The British Museum, 1935), viii–ix.

ary magazine.¹⁰ While awaiting Ginsburg's verdict, the British Museum exhibited two of the fragments, which attracted large crowds. Among the curious onlookers was none other than the prime minister, William Gladstone, who also met with Shapira to learn more about the manuscripts.¹¹

Another noteworthy visitor to the British Museum at this time was the French Orientalist and diplomat Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau, a longtime nemesis of Shapira's.¹² Clermont-Ganneau arrived in London and requested access to the fragments, which he already believed must be forgeries.¹³ Ginsburg permitted him a few minutes with "two or three" fragments,¹⁴ on the condition that Clermont-Ganneau refrain from publishing anything on the matter until Ginsburg published his own report.¹⁵ And yet the very next morning, Clermont-Ganneau declared his opinion to the press that the fragments were forgeries.

Afterward, Clermont-Ganneau was denied further access to the fragments. But this did not prevent him from making further claims regarding Shapira's manuscripts. As Clermont-Ganneau himself noted:

In these circumstances, the object of my mission became extremely difficult to attain, and I almost despaired of it. I did not, however, lose courage. I set to work with the meagre means of information which were at my disposal: – (1) The hasty inspection of two or three pieces which M. Ginsburg had allowed me to handle for a few minutes on my first visit; (2) the examination of two fragments exposed to public view in a glass case in the manuscript department of the British Museum – a case very ill-lighted and difficult of approach, owing to the crowd of the curious pressing round these venerable relics.¹⁶

Based solely on "these meagre means of information," Clermont-Ganneau managed to craft a theory regarding the method by which the forgery was carried out. He argued that the forger had obtained the leather fragments by cutting off the lower margins of Torah scrolls, noting underhandedly that "Mr. Shapira must be well acquainted with [such scrolls], for he deals in them."¹⁷ Soon after Clermont-Ganneau made his declaration, Ginsburg too announced the results of his assess-

¹⁰ Christian David Ginsburg, "The Shapira Ms. of Deuteronomy," *The Athenæum* 2911 (August 11, 1883), 178–79; idem, "The Shapira Ms. of Deuteronomy," *The Athenæum* 2912 (August 18, 1883), 206; idem, "The Shapira Ms. of Deuteronomy," *The Athenæum* 2913 (August 25, 1883), 242–44; idem, "The Shapira Ms. of Deuteronomy," *The Athenæum* 2915 (September 8, 1883), 304–5.

¹¹ "The Shapira Manuscript," *The London Evening Standard* (August 14, 1883), 3.

¹² See §1.2.2.

¹³ Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau, "Mr. Shapira's Manuscripts," *The Times* (August 21, 1883), 8: "I will not conceal the fact that I entertained in advance, most serious doubts as to their authenticity, and that I came here in order to settle these doubts. But I thought it my duty to pronounce no opinion until I had seen the originals."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "From our London Correspondent (by Private Wire)," *The Manchester Guardian* (September 6, 1883), 5.

¹⁶ Clermont-Ganneau, "Mr. Shapira's Manuscripts," *The Times* (August 21, 1883), 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

ment,¹⁸ which were much the same. Ginsburg highlighted two primary reasons for his forgery verdict: First, in line with the theory that the manuscripts had been cut from the margins of scrolls,¹⁹ Ginsburg stated that the fragments were a perfect match for Yemenite Torah scrolls. Second, Ginsburg observed that there were various errors in the Hebrew text, several of which he believed could have been made only by someone of European Jewish extraction.²⁰ Although Ginsburg did not explicitly accuse Shapira of forgery, his statement on the matter left little room for doubt: Not only was Shapira of European Jewish extraction, but it was well known that he was also the primary, if not only, dealer of Yemenite Torah scrolls at the time. A cartoon published in the magazine *Punch* on September 8, 1883 depicts Shapira as a stereotypical Jew, with the ink of his devious forgery still dripping from his fingers. The dubious character is held in a firm grip by Ginsburg, who is shown valiantly apprehending Shapira in front of the British Museum.²¹ See fig. 4.

In light of Ginsburg's authoritative ruling, the British Museum declined to buy the fragments, which were apparently abandoned by the devastated Shapira. In a letter to Ginsburg dated August 23, 1883, Shapira expressed his abjection and a sense of betrayal, clinging to his avowed belief that the manuscripts were authentic:

Dear Dr. Ginsburg!

You have made a fool of me by publishing & exhibiting things that you believe to be false. I do not think I will be able to survive this shame. Although I am yet not Convinced that the M.s. is a forgery unless Ganneau did it!

I will leave London in a day or two for Berlin.

Yours truly,

M W Shapira²²

Word of this letter seems to have reached *The Times*, which published the following statement: “[Shapira] is so disappointed with the results of his bargain that he threatens to commit suicide. This, we venture to think, he will not do.”²³ But Shapira never returned to his wife and daughters in Jerusalem. After spending six

¹⁸ Ginsburg's letter to Edward Bond of the British Museum, dated August 22, 1883, was published in *The Times* (August 27, 1883), 6; Ginsburg then published his final installment on the manuscripts in *The Athenæum*: “The Shapira Ms. of Deuteronomy,” *The Athenæum* 2915 (September 8, 1883), 304–5. In both publications, Ginsburg designated the manuscripts forgeries.

¹⁹ It is possible that Ginsburg initiated this theory rather than Clermont-Ganneau. For the controversy regarding which of these scholars first developed the idea that the manuscripts were excised from the margins of eastern Torah scrolls, see “From our London Correspondent (by Private Wire),” *The Manchester Guardian* (September 6, 1883), 5.

²⁰ *The Times* (August 27, 1883), 6.

²¹ *Punch, or the London Charivari* (September 8, 1883), 118.

²² BL Ms. Add. 41294, 16.

²³ *The Times* (August 27, 1883), 7.



Fig. 4. Cartoon of Ginsburg apprehending Shapira.

months wandering through Europe, Shapira committed suicide in a hotel room in Rotterdam, Holland, where his body was found on March 9, 1884.

Shapira's manuscripts eventually made their way from the British Museum to Sotheby's, where they were purchased in July 1885 by the bookseller Bernard Quaritch. (Quaritch's namesake bookshop still exists in London.) Quaritch went on to sell the fragments in 1898 or 1899 to Philip Brookes Mason, a naturalist, doctor, and avid collector.²⁴ Their subsequent fate is unknown.

1.2. Reasons for Forgery Verdict

Beyond the primary reasons given by Ginsburg, which will be discussed at greater length below, why were Shapira's fragments judged forgeries in 1883? It appears that several factors conspired to seal their fate. First, very simply, the Dead Sea Scrolls had not yet been discovered. The manuscripts that Shapira offered to the scholarly world were thus entirely without precedent. Second, Shapira's record was tarnished due to a previous scandal involving suspect artifacts. Third, the discipline of biblical studies was very much in its infancy, and little was known about the composition history of Deuteronomy. Other factors, including rampant anti-Jewish (and anti-Arab; see below) sentiments, surely played a part as well. After all, despite having "fair hair and blue eyes; not the least like the ordinary Polish Jew," Shapira would always remain a Hebrew who "converted to Christianity but not to good works."²⁵

1.2.1. An Unprecedented Discovery

The distinguished philologist Archibald Sayce stated his opinion on Shapira's fragments in August 1883:

It is really demanding too much of Western credulity to ask us to believe that in a damp climate like that of Palestine any sheepskins could have lasted for nearly 3,000 years, either above ground or under ground, even though they may have been abundantly salted with asphalte from the Vale of Siddim itself.²⁶

Another commentary published two years later in the *St. James Gazette* (January 2, 1885) expresses a similar view on Shapira's manuscripts: "Every one remembers the announcement of the original copy of Deuteronomy: how people

²⁴ Charles Francis Thornewill, "Obituary Notice of Philip Brookes Mason," *Journal of Conchology* 11 (1904): 104–5, at 105. See also Patricia Francis, "Philip Brookes Mason (1842–1903): Surgeon, General Practitioner and Naturalist," *Archives of Natural History* 42, no. 1 (2015): 126–39.

²⁵ Walter Besant, *Autobiography of Sir Walter Besant* (London: Hutchinson, 1902), 162.

²⁶ Archibald H. Sayce, "Correspondence: The Shapira Mss. of Deuteronomy," *The Academy* 589 (August 24, 1883), 116–17, at 117.

who knew anything about leather and linen, and damp caves, and Arabs, and Jerusalem curiosity-dealers, laughed at the whole thing.”

In fact, the details of Shapira’s scorned discovery story were so similar to those of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946–47 that some scholars initially concluded the latter were also a hoax. Like Shapira’s manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls were said to have been accidentally discovered by Bedouins in caves around the Dead Sea, and many were also wrapped in linen and covered with a bituminous substance.²⁷

In 1949, Solomon Zeitlin, an expert on the Second Temple period and editor of the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, cited Shapira’s manuscripts as evidence that the Dead Sea Scrolls must likewise be forgeries:

Professor Burrows seems to have forgotten the affair of Shapira, who produced a manuscript of the Book of Deuteronomy, written on parchment in archaic Hebrew script. He stated that he procured it from a Bedouin who told him that he found it in a cave (again a Bedouin and a cave). Scholars and experts of the British Museum were convinced of its authenticity until it was discovered to have been produced by Shapira himself over a period of twenty years. Thus “the Bedouin and the cave” became a myth.²⁸

In retrospect, Zeitlin’s judgment on the matter was incorrect. The Dead Sea Scrolls were soon confirmed to be genuine, and they marked a watershed in the field of biblical studies. Had Shapira’s manuscripts come to light after the verification of the Dead Sea Scrolls, his texts certainly would have been judged differently. Moreover, the details of discovery as reported by Shapira – which are almost identical to the circumstances surrounding the unearthing of the Dead Sea Scrolls – must now be regarded as strong evidence supporting the validity of Shapira’s fragments.²⁹ Indeed, the presence of a bituminous substance on both the Shapira fragments and many Dead Sea Scrolls provides even more support

²⁷ See, e.g., Naama Sukenik, “The Temple Scroll Wrapper from Cave 11. MS 5095/2, MS 5095/4, MS 5095/1,” in *Gleanings from the Caves: Dead Sea Scrolls and Artefacts from the Schøyen Collection*, ed. Torleif Elgvin, Kipp Davis, and Michael Langlois (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 339–50; Roland de Vaux, “Post-Scriptum: La Cachette des Manuscrits Hébreux,” *Revue Biblique* 56, no. 2 (1949): 234–37; Joan E. Taylor, “Buried Manuscripts and Empty Tombs: The Qumran Genizah Theory Revisited,” in *Go Out and Study the Land” (Judges 18:2): Archaeological, Historical, and Textual Studies in Honor of Hanan Eshel*, ed. Aren M. Maeir, Jodi Magness, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 269–315, at 280, 314–15.

²⁸ Solomon Zeitlin, “The Alleged Antiquity of the Scrolls,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 40, no. 1 (1949): 57–78, at 67.

²⁹ Several scholars have made a case for the authenticity of Shapira’s manuscripts (as post-biblical Hellenistic documents) in light of their affinity to the Dead Sea Scrolls, but these arguments have not been widely accepted. See, e.g., Jacob L. Teicher, “The Genuineness of the Shapira Manuscripts,” *The Times Literary Supplement* (London) (March 22, 1957), 184; Menaheem Mansoor, “The Case of Shapira’s Dead Sea (Deuteronomy) Scrolls of 1883,” *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 47 (1958): 183–225; John Marco Allegro, *The Shapira Affair* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); Helen G. Jefferson, “The Shapira Manuscript and the Qumran Scrolls,” *Revue de Qumrân* 6, no. 3 (1968): 391–99; Shlomo Guil, “The Shapira Scroll Was an Authentic Dead Sea Scroll,” *PEQ* 149, no. 1 (2017): 6–27; Yoram Sabo, *The Scroll Merchant: In Search of Moses Wilhelm Shapira’s Lost Jewish Treasure* (Hebrew) (Bnei Brak: Hakib-

Index of Primary Sources

Hebrew Bible

Genesis

1 58, 58n55, 79n13

1:14 115

1:26 58

2:2–3 105n45

2:6 107

4:12 113n82

6:4 128n155

7:11 116

7:14 58

7:23 122

13:7 117n109

13:16 108

15:6 105n47

15:18 116

15:20 117n109, 118n110

20:3 83

20:7 122

21:25 105n47

24:8 113

27:29 102, 138n64

28:16 79

29:31 121n123

31:7 105n47

31:21 122

33:7 127–28

34:2 120

34:30 117n109

35:2 123

38:5 105n47

39:7 81, 120, 153n213

40:15 118

43:3 124n138

43:15 91n25

43:28 102, 138n64

46:1 122

48:3–6 90

Exodus

2:6 145n122

3:8 117n109

3:17 117n109

5:8 118, 139n75

5:11 75

7:3 115n97, 141n91

7:9 115n98, 141n91

8:28 116

12:31 127

12:31–32 127

12:38 127

12:51 116

13:9 141n91

13:16 141n91

16:7 69n82

16:10 69n82

17:7 79

17:31–32 127n152

19:1 116

19:4 64

19:17 115

19:23 124, 124n138

20 54n37, 75

20:2 39n4, 78

20:3 74

20:4 57–58, 59n58, 83,

143n107

20:5 72n1, 74, 145n121

20:7 72, 75, 77

20:8 83

20:11 104n42

20:12 80, 83, 85, 143n114

20:13 75, 83

20:13–15 77

20:14 75, 80

20:15 75, 80, 83

20:16 123, 145n124

20:17 81, 122

20:19–20 145n128

21:29 127

22:15 120

23:6–8 124n136

23:18 125, 138n61

23:23	117n109	10:25	105n47
23:28	147n136	13–14	63–64
24:16	69n82	13:1–15	63, 88
25:10	60	13:2	63, 67, 89
25:15	118n114, 139n75	13:8	89
26:7	54	13:17–18	67
26:8	54	13:30	64
31:17	104n42, 105n45	14	68
32:19	59	14:3	135n32
32:25–29	62	14:8–9	64n72
33:2	117n109	14:10	69n82
34	60, 60n65	14:21	68–69
34:11	117n109	14:21–22	69
34:25	126, 138n61	14:21–25	66
39:3	105n47	14:22	68
40:15	115	14:22–23	69
		14:23	69
<i>Leviticus</i>		14:24–25	69
5:24	75	14:25	69
6:7–8	118n114, 139n75	14:31	135n32
9:6	69n82	14:33–34	67n78
9:23	69n82	14:45	102n35
15:18	120	16:19	69n82
16:21	99	17:3–5	141n91
19	54n37, 82–85, 87	17:7	69n82
19:1–4	82	18:20	62
19:3	83	18:28	118, 118n114, 139n75
19:4	83–84	20:1	64n75
19:11	83–84	20:1–13	64, 64n75
19:11–18	82	20:6	69n82
19:12	75, 84	20:13	135n36
19:14	87	24:22	115n96
19:16	84	25:2	137n60
19:17	84	27:14	64n75
19:18	83–84	31:9	117
19:33	84	32:10–12	135n28
20:18	111n72	32:11–12	115
25:32–33	118	32:13	67n78
		33:30–34	62
<i>Numbers</i>		<i>Deuteronomy</i>	
1:4–15	89	1:28b–33	64
5:19	120	1–3	51
7:5	115n96	1–4	53
7:72	54	1	67–68
8:1	115	1:1	54–55
9:2	110	1:1–2	54
10:17	105	1:1–3	56
10:17–18	105n47	1:1–4	56
10:21–22	105n47		

1:1-5	54-56	2:31	48, 51
1:1-6	54	2:32-34	49
1:3	54	2:32-36	51
1:3-4	56	2:33	114
1:4	54	2:34	49, 52
1:5	54, 56	2:34-35	48
1:6	55	2:35	51
1:6-4:40	47	2:36	49
1:19	64, 67	2:37	48, 50-51
1:19-21	65	3:3	114n89
1:19-39	63	3:4	20
1:19-46	52, 64n74	3:5	118
1:21	68, 134n25	3:11	42n2
1:22	67	3:13	137n57
1:22-23	63	3:14	137n53
1:22-25	65-68	4:2	118
1:26-27	64n74, 65, 68	4:10-14	58
1:27	64, 134n26	4:15-16	58
1:28	64, 67	4:15-18	58
1:28-33	64, 64n74, 65-66	4:16	57-59, 59n58
1:29-33	64	4:16-18	57-58, 59n59
1:34	134n28	4:18	58
1:34-35	64n74	4:23	57n50
1:34-36	64	4:25	57n50
1:34-40	66	4:34	115n97, 141n91
1:35	64n74	4:41	91n25
1:36-39	64n74	4:44-28:68	47
1:37	64	4:45	125n142, 155n234
1:39	64n74, 135n32	4:47	91n25
1:41-46	70n84	5-11	47, 53
1:46	135n33	5-28	47
2	51	5:5	116
2:1-4	135n34	5:6	39n4, 78
2:5	113	5:7	74, 83
2:9	113	5:8	57, 59n58, 83
2:12	42n2, 128	5:9	72n1, 74, 145n121
2:16-17	51	5:11	72, 75, 77
2:17	52	5:12	83
2:19	113	5:16	80, 83, 85, 143n114
2:20-21	38	5:17	75, 83
2:24	48-49, 51	5:17-19	77
2:24-31	49	5:18	75, 80
2:24-37	48, 50, 50n25, 51	5:19	75, 80, 83
2:26	51	5:20	123
2:26-29	51	5:21	81, 122
2:26-30	52	5:22	142n101, 145n126
2:26-37	51	5:23-29	146n128
2:30	51	6:5	140n86
2:30-31	51	6:7	125n142

6:8	115, 141n91	20	51–52, 70
6:20	125	20:3	154n232
6:22	115, 115n97, 141n91	20:10	51
7:1	117n109	20:10–14	50, 50n25, 52
7:1–2	52	20:10–18	51–52
7:8	121n126, 143n104	20:14	51
7:16	113, 113n82	20:15–18	50
7:19	115n97, 141n91	20:16–18	52
7:20	147n136	20:17	117n109
9	59, 63n69	21:10–14	120
9:8	134n28	21:15	121n123
9:17	59	22:22	120
9:19	116	22:22–24	120
9:23	66–68	22:24	120n122
9:23–25	62–63	22:29	120n122
9:26–29	63n69	23:1	52n31
10	60n65, 63	26:5	91n25
10:1	59–61	26:8	115n97, 141n91
10:1–2	59–60	26:16–27:26	47
10:1–5	60–62	27–28	45, 47, 52n31, 87
10:3	60–61	27	53
10:3–5	59	27:12–13	45, 47, 88
10:5	61–62	27:12–14	46
10:6–7	62, 62n68	27:14	109
10:6–9	60, 62	27:18	87
10:8–9	60, 62, 62n68	27:20	52n31, 120
10:10	62–63, 63n69, 116	28–30	53
10:10–11	63n69	28	47
10:17–18	124n136	28:5	126
11	45, 87	28:11	109
11:18	141n91	28:17	126
11:26	45, 48	28:46	115n97–98, 141n91
11:26–30	46	29–30	47
11:26–32	47	29:3	115n97, 141n91
11:29–30	45, 47	30:9	109
11:30	91, 91n24	31:6–21	155n233
11:31–27:11	46	32	41
12–26	41, 45, 47, 53	32:22	110n66
12	47	32:46	102n35, 124
13:1	113n82, 115n98, 118, 141n91	32:51	64n75
13:1–2	115n97, 141n91	33	41
13:6	121n126, 143n104	34	41
13:9	113n82	34:11	115n97, 141n91
16:17–20	124n136		
18:16	113n82	<i>Joshua</i>	
18:16–17	146n128	1:4	91n25, 118
19:3	115n96	1:5	150n178
19:13	98	1:7	118n114, 139n75
		1:15	91n25

2:16	114	19:19	127
2:22	114	21:20	102n35
3:10	117n109		
4:6–7	141n91	<i>1 Samuel</i>	
4:19	91n24, 92	1:3	124n136
5:1	92	1:12	105n47
5:2	92	1:28	102, 138n64
5:10	91n24	6:18	117n109
6:26	111n72	7:9	114
7:9	110	8:9	124n138
8	90, 92	13:18	91n25
8:15	91n25	14:36	113n82
8:33	90	17:38	105n47
8:34	73n2	27:8	128n155
9:1	117n109	28:19	110
9:7	52n30		
9:9–10	52n30	<i>2 Samuel</i>	
9:24	52n30	1:4	127
10:24	106	11:17	113n80
10:25	154n232	12:31	105n47
11:3	117n109	13:18	105n47
12:1	91n25	19:16	91n24
12:2	48		
12:8	117n109	<i>1 Kings</i>	
15:7	91n24	2:6	113n82
17:15	117, 117n109, 118	9:9	102, 138n64
21:41	118	9:20	117n109
23:14	118n114	10:29	118
24:2	128n155	13:3	115n98, 141n91
24:11	117n109	13:5	115n98, 141n91
45:11	122	14:15	135n31
		18:23	110
<i>Judges</i>		18:43	91n25
1:4–5	117n109	21:8	121, 143n104
1:26	118	21:11	121, 143n104
3:4	115n96		
3:5	117n109	<i>2 Kings</i>	
3:19	91n24	7:6	118
5:7	117n109	7:8	114
6:13	79	17:15	124
7:13	105	17:18	134n28
11:13	48	18:36	105
11:22	48	22	48
12:4	113n80	23:3	125
16:18	105n47	23:25	140n86
17:7	89		
18:2	10n27	<i>Isaiah</i>	
18:30	90n22	3:8	98n8
19:8	105n47	8:18	115nn97–98, 141n91
		14:9	103n41

20:3	115n97, 141n91	22:12	85–86
27:6	111n72	23:43	102n31
34:2	111	26:20	128n155
34:12	121, 143n104	27:12	119
36:21	105	38:11	117n109
42:14	128n155	39:4	58
44:17	126n148	39:17	58
45:11	102n35	40:20	91n25
46:9	128n155	40:24	91n25
51:8	145n119	40:44	91n25
57:11	128n155	41:12	91n25
63:16	128n155	47:19	64n75
		48:14	113, 113n82
		48:28	64n75
<i>Jeremiah</i>		<i>Hosea</i>	
2:20	128n155	4	75
5:2	75	4:2	75, 77–78
5:15	128n155	4:15	91n24
6:10	124n138	9:15	91n24, 113n82
7:7	128n155	10:12	114
7:9	74–77	12:12	91n24
11:17	124n138	13:15	98n9
19:4	135n31	<i>Joel</i>	
25:5	128n155	2:2	113n82
27:20	121, 143n104	2:30	115n98, 141n91
29:23	76, 81	<i>Amos</i>	
31:22	58	4:4	91n24
32:10	124n138	5:5	91n24
32:20–21	115n97, 141n91	<i>Micah</i>	
32:23	155n235	6:4	121n126, 143n104
39:6	121, 143n104	<i>Zechariah</i>	
46:18	68	2:8	117n109
48:8	110	3:6–7	124n138
<i>Ezekiel</i>		5:4	75
5:11	113n82	8:7	91n25
5:14	110	<i>Malachi</i>	
8:3	57n53, 58	2:3	126, 138n61
8:5	57n53, 58	2:14	124
12:6	115n98, 141n91	3:5	75
17:23	58	<i>Psalms</i>	
18:12	81, 153n213	25:6	128n155
21:2	91n25	25:10	125
22:6–12	84–87	35:1	112, 138n68
22:7	85		
22:7–8	85		
22:8	85		
22:8–9	86		
22:9	85–86		
22:9–11	85		

50	78–80	<i>Esther</i>	
50:7	78	4:14	116n104
50:7–20	78–79	9:19	117n109
50:16–21	78		
50:18	78	<i>Ezra</i>	
50:19–20	78	9:1	117n109
56:2	112		
56:2–3	138n68	<i>Nehemiah</i>	
72:5	145n119	2:16	121, 143n104
74:6	102n31	4:14	121, 143n104
78:43	115n97, 141n91	4:19	121, 143n104
82:1	124n140	5:7	121, 143n104
90:2	128n155	6:17	121, 143n104
93:2	128n155	7:5	121, 143n104
95:8–11	67n78	8:6	102, 138n64
99:7	125n142	9:8	117n109
102:24	145n119	9:10	115nn97–98, 141n91
103:17	128n155	9:14	102
105:27	115n97, 141n91	13:17	121, 143n104
118:27	126, 138n61		
119:2	125, 125n143	<i>1 Chronicles</i>	
119:22	125n143	2:1	101, 151n187
119:52	128n155	12:39	126n148
119:146	125n143	29:10	128n155
119:167	125n143		
119:168	125n143	<i>2 Chronicles</i>	
132:2	125n143	1:17	118
135:9	115n97, 141n91	8:7	117n109
148:10	58	16:14	116, 139n70, 140n86
		19:5–7	124n136
<i>Proverbs</i>		32:24	115n98, 141n91
1:13	119	33:7	57n53, 58
6:16–35	80–82	33:15	57n53, 58
6:20	80	34	48
6:25	81	34:14	48n24
6:30–31	80		
6:31	81	<i>Sirach</i>	
6:32	76n7, 80–81	36:15	123
6:35	81		
8:23	128n155	<i>Valediction of Moses</i>	
30:21–23	121n123	A–D	132n13
30:23	121n123	A–E	133n20
		A 1:1–2	55
<i>Job</i>		A 1:2–4	55
16:21	98n9	A 1:4	98
		A 1:5–10	68
<i>Ecclesiastes</i>		A 1:5–9	65
10:17	121, 143n104	A 1:9–B 1:1	65

B 1:1	34n2, 69, 138n63	E 1:1-4	133n13
B 1:1-8	66	E 1:2-3	116, 139n70
B 1:2	68, 115, 141n91	E 1:3	101
B 1:2-5	69	E 1:6	20n52, 98, 115
B 1:5	115	E 1:8	98, 116
B 1:5-6	69	E 1:9	116
B 1:7	69, 114n88	E 2:1	121
B 1:8-9	64n75	E 2:2	151n191
B 1:9	114	E 2:5	98n7
C 1:2	113	E 2:5-7	72n1
C 1:4	128	E 3:2	104
C 1:4-5	42n2, 136n50	E 3:3	126
C 1:6-7	113	E 3:3-4	122
C 1:8	128, 135n37	E 3:6	73
C 1:8-9	42n2	E 3:7	76
C 1:10-D 1:2	49	E 3:8	81, 119
D 1	11n30	E 4:1	72, 76, 84, 124n137
D 1:2	103	E 4:1-3	76
D 1:2-3	49	E 4:2	116
D 1:3	114	E 4:4	123-24, 124nn135,137
D 1:3-5	49	E 4:4-5	77
D 1:6-7	113	E 4:6	73
D 1:8	128, 135n37	E 4:6-7	81, 122
D 1:8-9	38, 42n2	E 4:8	72, 84, 124n135
D 2:1	103	E 1:1-4:2	133n13
D 2:1-2	114	E 2:8-3:4	86, 126
D 2:2	20	F-H	133n20
D 2:3	117	F	132n11
D 2:3-5	117	F 1:4	152n201
D 2:6	102, 116	G 1	132n11
D 2:6-3:3	104	G 1:6	114
D 2:7	103, 118n112	G 1:9-10	145n122
D 2:7-8	125	G 1:11	145n126
D 2:8	20, 102, 125	G 2:2	116
D 2:9	117	G 2:3	116
D 2:10	116, 137n59	G 2:3-4	61
D 3	153n208	G 2:4	61
D 3:1	112, 137n59	G 2:4-6	61
D 3:1-2	137n59	G 2:6	61
D 3:2	116, 140n86	G 2:6-9	62
D 3:3	116	G 3	150
D 3:5	118	G 3-H 1	72
D 3:5-6	58	G 3:5-9	46
D 3:5-7	58	G 3:8	142n100
D 3:6-7	58	G 3:8-9	91
D 3:7	98n7	G 3:9-11	88
D 3:9-10	144n114	G 3:9-12	46
D 2:5-3:3	70n84	G 3:11	101
D 2:6-3:3	104	G 4:1	108

- G 4:1–2 86, 111n72, 143n110
 G 4:2 151n194
 G 4:3 73, 84
 G 4:3–4 83
 G 4:5 84, 86
 G 4:5–7 124n135
 G 4:6–7 77, 84
 G 4:7–8 73, 81
 G 4:8–9 84, 124n135
 G 4:10–11 108
 G 5 132n9, 147
 G 5:1 126
 G 5:6–7 108
 G 5:7–8 109
 G 5:11 73
 G 5:12 119–20
 G 5:12–13 70n86
 H 132n11
 H 1:1–2 124n137
 H 1:2 123
 H 1:2–3 82, 86, 124
 H 1:3–4 73, 81, 111n72
 H 1:7 103, 109
 H 1:9 126
 H 2:2 111n72
- ### Dead Sea Scrolls
- 1Q4 (1Q Deuteronomy^a)
 151n183
 1Q5 (1Q Deuteronomy^b)
 151n183
 1Q22 (1Q Words of Moses; Divre Moshe)
 42n5
 1QH^a (1Q Hodayot^a)
 126n148
 1QIsa^a (1Q Isaiah^a)
 106, 126n148
 1QpHab (1Q Peshet to Habakkuk)
 14fig., 132n8
 1QS (1Q Rule of the Community;
 Manual of Discipline)
 126n148, 132n8
 4Q33 (4Q Deuteronomy^f)
 135n37
 4Q41 (4Q Deuteronomy^a)
 142n97, 143n107
 4Q47 (4Q Joshua^a)
 92, 92n28
 4Q51 (4Q Samuel^a)
 102n33, 138n64
 4Q129 (4Q Phylactery B)
 142n97
 4Q134 (4Q Phylactery G)
 142n97, 143nn107,114
 4Q137 (4Q Phylactery J)
 143n107
 4Q158 (4Q Reworked Pentateuch^a)
 126n148
 4Q161 (4Q Isaiah Peshet^a)
 112n78
 4Q259 (4Q Rule of the Community^e)
 13fig.
 4Q280 (4Q Curses)
 126n148
 4Q319 (4Q Otot)
 12fig.
 4Q374 (4Q Discourse on the Exodus;
 Conquest Tradition)
 126n148
 4Q381 (Q Non-Canonical Psalms B)
 126n148
 4Q405 (4Q Songs of the Sabbath
 Sacrifice^f) 14fig., 132n8
 4Q427 (4Q Hodayot^a)
 126n148
 4Q431 (4Q Hodayot^c)
 126n148
 4Q468g (4Q Eschatological Work A?)
 112n78
 4Q496 (4Q War Scroll^f)
 126n148
 4Q522 (4Q Prophecy of Joshua)
 101, 151n187
 4Q540 (4Q Apocryphon of Levi^a?)
 20, 138n63
 5/6Hev papHebrew Legal Papyrus [P.
 Yadin 44] 100n22
 5/6Hev papHebrew Legal Papyrus [P.
 Yadin 46] 100n22
 11Q1 (11Q Leviticus^a)
 43n10, 132n8
 11Q5 (11Q Psalms^a)
 17fig.
 11Q19 (11Q Temple^a)
 17fig., 132n8
 Mur22 (Mur papDeed of Sale of Land)
 100n22

XQ3 (XQ Phylactery 3)
143n107, 145n124

Masoretic and Samaritan Manuscripts

British Library Or. 5557A.74
138n61

Cambridge T-S AS 110.121
126n145, 138n61

Kennicott 1 (Oxford Bodleian Ms. Digby
Or. 32) 98n9

Kennicott 4 (Oxford Bodleian Ms. Hunt.
11) 102n32, 138n64

Kennicott 69 (Oxford Corpus Christi
College Ms. 5) 141n94, 151n184

Kennicott 75 (Oxford Jesus College Ms.
95) 154n220

Kennicott 81 (Oxford Merton College
[?]) 139n71

Kennicott 95 (Cambridge St. John's
College Ms. A 1)
102n32, 138n64

Kennicott 96 (Cambridge St. John's
College Ms. A 2)
134n28

Kennicott 129 (BL Arundel Or. 2)
139n71

Kennicott 131 (Lambeth Ms. 435)
126n145, 138n61

Kennicott 133 (Westminster Ca Ms. 2)
126n145, 138n61

Kennicott 147 (Cf. Cod. Parm. 2292)
98n9

Kennicott 173 (Denmark Ms. Hebr. 1)
102n32, 138n64

Kennicott 221 (BNF Ms. Sam. 3)
134n28

Kennicott 232 (Vatican Ms. ebr. 20)
137n55

Kennicott 681 (Oxford Corpus Christi
College Ms. 133)
126n145, 138n61

Sutro Brinner 11 18, 19*fig.*

General Index

- Abravanel, Isaac, 63
adultery, 20n50, 70n86, 74–76, 76n7,
78–81, 85, 120–21
Akkadian, 99, 108n58, 117, 121n124, 123,
124n136
Aleppo Codex, 98n9
Altes Museum (Royal Museum), 12
Amarna letters, 102, 108n58
antisemitism, 8*fig.*, 6–9
Arabic, 79n13, 99, 121, 123
Arad ostraca, 97, 100, 100n23, 106, 108,
130
Aramaic, 39n8, 99n14, 100, 103, 103n36,
112, 112n77, 114n91, 117, 119, 121,
123, 126n146, 128, 128n156, 129,
129n160, 143n104
archaic features, 20, 102n31, 110–12, 128
ark of the covenant, 59–63, 90
Arnon. *See* Wadi al-Mujib
Athenæum, The, 5, 7n18, 22*fig.*, 133,
142n102, 144n116, 147, 147n136,
148nn138–39, 142, 146–47, 150,
149nn153–54, 152n201
- Bar Kokhba, 130
Bedouins, 2, 10, 15n40, 39
Bekor Shor, 64n75
Ben Sira. *See* Sirach
bitumen-like substance on manuscripts,
2, 10, 11, 11*fig.*, 39, 131
blackening of leather, 2, 4*fig.*, 5, 133
bribery, 15, 81–82, 85–86, 124, 124n136
British Library, 2n2, 4*fig.*, 22–25*figs.*,
131n5, 133n16
British Museum, 1, 5, 5n9, 6–7, 7n18,
8*fig.*, 9–10, 15, 15n38, 18, 40, 134n28,
137n53
- Chronicles, book of, 116n101
Classical Biblical Hebrew (CBH), 96,
98n9, 100, 104, 107, 111, 113–14, 116,
118–19, 122, 126n146, 130. *See also*
pre-exilic epigraphic Hebrew
Clermont-Ganneau, Charles Simon, 6–7,
15, 15n35
cut-margin theory, 6–7, 7n19, 12, 14*fig.*,
17*fig.*, 16–18, 19*fig.*, 39
- Dangerfield Lithography, 23–25*figs.*
Dead Sea, 2, 3*fig.*, 10–11, 15n40, 39
Dead Sea Scrolls, 1, 9–10, 10nn27–28,
10n29, 11, 11*fig.*, 11n30, 12, 12–14*figs.*,
16, 17*fig.*, 20, 28, 42, 42n5, 43, 43n10,
92–94, 104n43, 112nn77–78, 117, 119,
119n117, 130, 132n8, 143nn107, 114,
145n124. *See also* Qumran
Decalogue, 39n4, 41, 41n1, 42–43, 48n23,
53n31, 54n37, 57, 57n51, 59, 59n58,
72–87, 93–94, 100, 104n42, 122–23,
124n135, 131–32, 132n9, 142, 142n102,
143n114, 144n116, 152n201, 155n234
deception, 77–78, 82, 84
defective spelling (*haser*), 98n9, 97–100,
102–3, 113n84, 114n88, 125n143,
130–31, 141n92, 142n104
Deir 'Alla inscription, 108n58
Deuteronomic law code, 41, 47n17,
45–53, 64, 70, 120n122
Deuteronomic warfare legislation, 50–52
Deuteronomy Rabbah, 50n25
diphthongs. *See* monophthongization
divine names in V
– Elohim, 42, 44, 79, 79n13, 80
– YHWH (Tetragrammaton), 42, 44, 79,
142n97
drawings of Shapira fragments, 16n42, 21,
21n53, 22–25*figs.*, 27*fig.*, 28, 28n59,
29–32, 32*fig.*, 33, 39n4, 131–33, 140,
140nn87–88, 140nn89–90, 141n91,
141nn92–93, 142n100,
142nn98–99, 102, 143nn105–6, 109,
143nn112–13, 144n115, 144n116,
145nn120–21, 145n125

- dry-point lines, 12, 14*fig.*, 131–32, 132n8
- Eblaite, 99
- Ecclesiasticus. *See* Sirach
- edges of manuscripts, 12, 14*fig.*, 16, 16n42, 17*fig.*, 18, 19*fig.*
- Elephantine papyri, 103, 103n36
- Elohistic Psalter, 79, 79nn12–13
- epigraphic corpus, 32–33, 95–102, 102n31, 103, 106, 108, 111, 111n72, 112, 129–30
- Ethiopic, 121
- European pronunciation of Hebrew, 7, 18–20, 39, 137n53
- Eusebius of Caesarea, 92
- First Temple (pre-exilic) period, 1, 28, 70, 94–95, 97, 99–100, 103, 111, 114, 130. *See also* pre-exilic epigraphic Hebrew
- folds in manuscripts, 4*fig.*, 11, 12*fig.*, 12n31, 13*fig.*, 131–32
- Fortschreibungen*, 52, 60–62, 62n68, 63
- Fragment A, 21, 27*fig.*, 32, 32*fig.*. *See also* under *Valediction of Moses* in Index of Primary Sources
- Fragment D, 20, 26*fig.*, 153n208. *See also* under *Valediction of Moses* in Index of Primary Sources
- Fragment E, 4*fig.*, 21, 22–25*figs.*, 26–27*figs.*, 28, 28–29*figs.*, 30, 30–32*figs.*, 131, 133. *See also* under *Valediction of Moses* in Index of Primary Sources
- Ge'ez, 99
- Gerizim-Ebal pericope, 45–48, 70, 72, 87–93
- German Oriental Society (DMG), 12
- Gersonides, 64n75
- Gezer calendar, 99n14
- Gladstone, William, 6
- graphic confusion, 20, 136n45, 138n63, 141n91, 142n100, 148n147, 152nn201,203. *See also* transcriptions of V, errors
- Graphic, The*, 21, 27*fig.*, 32, 32*fig.*, 131
- Harry, Myriam (Shapira's daughter), 15n40
- Hellenistic period, 10n29, 42, 56, 66, 94, 97, 104, 129–30
- hiphil* (C-stem), 113n83, 114n89, 121, 124
- Hobbes, Thomas, 47n17
- Humboldt University (University of Berlin), 34
- Ibn Ezra, 147n136
- idols, 15n40, 57–59, 81, 83
- Illustrated London News, The*, 21, 27*fig.*, 131, 132n6
- incipit, 54–57
- ink, 5, 7, 8*fig.*, 133
- Jerusalem, 2, 7, 10, 15n40, 43
- Joshua, book of, 93n29
- jussive, 113
- Kadesh Barnea, 63–69, 135n33
- Kara, Joseph, 89n22
- ketiv*, 99, 102, 102nn31,35, 103, 103nn37–38, 114, 135n37, 138n64
- killing, 48, 74, 77, 83
- Kimhi, David, 78
- KLMW (Kilamuwa) inscription, 112, 112n75, 112n78, 138n68
- Kuntillet 'Ajrud, 98, 111
- Lachish ostraca, 97–98, 101n27
- Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), 58, 97, 102, 104, 111–14, 116n104, 119, 119n118, 126nn146,148, 129, 129n160, 130. *See also* Second Temple (post-exilic) period
- lectio difficilior*, 90n22, 125, 138n61
- lectio facilior*, 138n62
- Levites, 60, 62, 87–93, 109n62. *See also* tribes of Israel
- linen, 2, 10, 11*fig.*, 39, 43, 131
- Louvre, 15
- lust, 81, 153n213
- LXX. *See* Septuagint
- Mason, Philip Brookes, 9, 9n24
- Masoretic Text (MT), 38, 46, 49–50, 55, 58, 61–62, 65–66, 69, 77, 88, 91–92, 92n28, 97–98, 98nn9–10, 99–102, 102n31, 102n35, 103, 103n41, 105, 108–11, 112n78, 113, 113n80, 114n89, 115, 116nn101,104, 117–21, 123–25, 121n126, 125n143, 126, 126nn145,148, 128–30, 135nn36–37,

- 136nn39,41,45–46, 137nn55,60,
138nn61,64, 139nn70–71, 140nn86,90,
141nn91–92, 142nn95–96,104, 142n97,
143nn104,106, 143nn107,114,
145nn121,124, 147n136, 148nn141,150,
150nn174,178, 151nn183,185,187,
154nn217–218,220, 155n234
- matres lectionis*, 97–100
- Mesha Stele (Moabite Stone), 15, 28, 30,
33, 33n67, 44, 98n11, 100, 100n19,
100n24, 102, 112, 112n76, 128
- metathesis, 34n2, 134n28
- midrash, 50n25, 54n37, 82
- Mishnaic Hebrew, 111, 111nn70–71,
120n121, 121–23, 126n148, 130,
143n104
- Moabite pottery scandal, 9, 12–16, 39
- Moabite Stone. *See* Mesha Stele
- monophthongization, 97–98, 98nn10–11,
98nn7,9, 99, 112n75, 131
- morphosyntax
– nominal, 97, 115–19
– verbal, 97, 103–15
- MT. *See* Masoretic Text
- murder. *See* killing
- Nachmanides, 64n75
- narrator, 42
- Nash Papyrus, 142n104, 144n114,
155n234
- negation, 97, 100, 100nn21,23, 112–13,
115, 115n100
- niphal* (N-stem), 75, 112, 112n78,
112–13n80, 138n68
- nomistic edits, 45, 70, 94
- northern Hebrew, 99
- nota accusativi*, 76n7, 100, 100nn22–23,
112n80, 120n120, 151n191
- Numbers Rabbah, 50n25
- object marker. *See nota accusativi*
- orthography, 20, 21n52, 42, 96–103,
112n78, 113n80, 114nn88–89, 126n148,
129, 131, 137n58, 138nn63–64, 141n92,
142n98, 143n104, 151nn187–88
- Osorkon Bust (Elibaʿl Inscription), 15
- Paleo-Hebrew script, 1, 20, 20n50, 21,
22–27figs., 28, 28–30figs., 31, 31–33figs.,
38, 44, 131, 134, 136nn45,48, 138n63,
141n91, 142n100, 145n119, 148n147,
152nn201,203, 167–74
- paleography, 1, 21–33, 44, 94, 132
- paragraph breaks (*petuhot*), 100, 131
- Peshitta, 75, 102, 135n36, 138n64. *See also* Syriac
- Phoenician inscriptions, 57n53, 58, 98,
101, 112, 112nn75,78, 115, 116n103,
138n68
- photographs of Shapira fragments, 4fig.,
16n42, 21, 31, 131, 137n53, 143n105
- plene spelling (*malé*), 98n9, 97–100,
102–3, 103n39, 113n84, 125n143, 129,
137n58, 142nn96,104
- Poenulus, 101n28
- poetry, biblical, 41, 70, 110, 110n66, 112,
119n117
- possessive suffix, 98, 98n11, 99, 99n16,
100
- pre-exilic epigraphic Hebrew, 1, 95–96,
103, 114, 119, 129–30. *See also* Classical
Biblical Hebrew (CBH)
- prefix, 100, 100n21, 126, 126n146, 130
- prefix conjugation, 108n61, 108–11
- Priestly corpus (P), 44, 53, 53n34, 54,
54n37, 55–58, 58n55, 59, 59nn58–59,
60–64, 64n75, 65–68, 68n79, 69–70,
70n84, 83n18, 89, 135n32
- pronominal suffix, 122, 145n122
- Pseudo-Rashi, 48n24
- Punic, 100n22, 101n29
- qal* (G-stem), 112, 112–13n80, 113n83,
121, 138n68, 143n104
- qere*, 99, 102, 102nn31,35, 103nn37–38,
114, 135n37, 138n64
- qere perpetuum*, 101, 151n187
- Quaritch, Bernard, 9
- Qumran, 10, 10n27, 11fig., 11n30, 12,
12–14figs., 17fig., 20, 42, 42n5, 43,
43n10, 92–94, 104n43, 112,
112nn77–78, 117, 119, 119n117. *See also* Dead Sea Scrolls
- Rabbinic Hebrew. *See* Mishnaic Hebrew
- Rashi, 89n22
- Sabaic, 117
- Sabbath, 54n37, 83, 85–86, 104, 105n45,
107, 126, 128

- sacrifice, 20, 74, 125–26, 126n145, 138n61
- Samaria ostraca, 32, 32n65, 33, 33fig., 33n66, 98, 111n72
- Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), 98n10, 103, 134n28, 135n36, 136nn39,41,44–45, 150nn174,178, 151nn183–85, 154nn217–18
- Sayings of Moses (Dires de Moïse)*, 42–43
- scriptio continua*, 38, 100, 131
- Second Temple (post-exilic) period, 10, 58, 60, 97, 114, 119, 119n118, 129. *See also* Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH)
- Septuagint (LXX), 58, 92, 92n28, 101–2, 114n89, 135n32, 136nn41,45–46, 137n60, 138n64, 141n94, 142n104, 143n114, 145n124, 148n141, 150n174, 151nn185,187, 154n217
- Shapira Manuscripts
- condition of, 2, 4fig., 12, 16, 16n42, 131–32, 133n19, 143nn105–6, 150n182
 - dimensions of, 16n41, 18, 132
 - discovery of, 2, 3fig., 9–11, 39, 39n8, 94
 - initial evaluation of, 2–7, 39n8, 44n13
 - margins of, 12, 132, 151n186, 153n205, 154n231
 - present location of, 1, 9, 131
 - purchase of, 2, 10, 39, 39n8
- Shapira, Anna Magdalena Rosette, 34
- Shapira, Moses Wilhelm
- conversion to Christianity, 2, 9
 - letters by, 7, 20, 34n2, 39nn4,8, 43–44, 117n108, 133, 134–35n28, 137n53, 145n119
 - photograph of, xrvfig.
 - shop in Jerusalem, 2, 15n40
 - suicide of, 7, 9, 34, 94
- Shema, 80, 155n234
- Sihon narrative, 48–52, 70
- Siloam tomb inscription, 97
- Siloam tunnel inscription, 44, 103
- Simpson, William, 21, 27fig., 132n6
- single-stroke *yods*, 32, 33fig.
- Sirach (Ecclesiasticus/Ben Sira), 123
- Sotheby's, 9
- southern (Judahite) Hebrew, 99
- SP. *See* Samaritan Pentateuch
- spies (scouts) motif, 52, 63–69, 70n84, 89
- Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Königliche Bibliothek), 34, 34n1
- stance, of letterforms, 30n61, 31, 31n63, 32, 32fig.
- stealing, 74, 77–78, 80, 83
- stone tablets, 59–63
- suffix conjugation, 104–8, 110, 114n88
- swearing falsely, 72, 75–76, 84
- Syriac, 99, 117. *See also* Peshitta
- Targum Neofiti, 136n46
- Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Yerushalmi), 136n46
- Tel Dan inscription, 112, 112n77
- Tel Rehov inscription, 33n66
- Ten Commandments. *See* Decalogue
- terminal letterforms, 18, 38, 136n48, 151n184
- Times, The* (of London), 2, 5nn4,7–8, 6nn13,16, 7, 7nn18,20,23, 12n32, 16nn41,43, 18n44, 20n48, 131n4, 132n10
- transcriptions of V. *See also* notes in critical edition
- by Ginsburg, 5, 20, 96n4, 115n95, 117n105, 125, 132–33, 133nn14,18
 - by Guthe (with Meyer), 5, 20, 20n52, 39n4, 115n95, 117n108, 125, 132, 132nn8,11, 133, 133nn18–19
 - by Shapira, 20, 34–37, 35–37figs., 38–40, 94, 115n95, 117n108, 125, 132, 132n13, 133, 133n18
 - errors, 20, 34–39, 39n4, 117n108, 133, 135n33, 136nn38,45,48, 138nn62–63, 141n91, 142nn100–1, 144n116, 146n129, 147, 148n147, 149n155, 150nn169,180, 152nn201,203, 153nn207–8, 154n228
- Transjordan, 42n2, 43, 91nn25–26
- tribes of Israel, 45, 87–91, 93. *See also* Levites
- Ugaritic, 20, 98n7, 100, 117n106, 138n63
- V as abridgment of Deuteronomy, 1, 42–43, 52, 94
- V as proto-Deuteronomiac text, 1, 40, 42–44, 52, 54–57, 59, 63, 70, 70n86, 94, 97, 129
- Vulgate, 102, 138n64, 141n94

Wadi al-Mujib (Arnon), 2, 3*fig.*

water damage, 18, 19*fig.*

word-separating dots, 100, 100n23,
112n75, 131, 142, 143n113, 144n115,
145n120, 147n137, 154n227, 167

Yavne-Yam (Mesad Hashavyahu)

ostracon, 98, 106, 106n51, 114, 114n94

Yemenite Torah scrolls, 6–7, 7n19, 16,
16n41, 18, 19*fig.*, 34, 39

Index of Modern Persons

- Achenbach, Reinhard, 59–60, 60n61, 62, 69n81
- Ahituv, Shmuel, 101, 101n27, 107, 114n94
- Albright, William Foxwell, 99n14
- Allegro, John Marco, 10n29, 43
- Allen, Leslie C., 74n3
- Andersen, Francis I., 75, 77
- Artus, Olivier, 69n81
- Azar, Moshe, 111n71
- Bacon, Benjamin W., 56
- Barr, James, 97, 98n9
- Bauer, Hans, 98
- Baumgartner, Walter, 119
- Begg, Christopher T., 53n33
- Ben Sasson-Gordis, Avishay, vi
- Ben-Shahar, Rina, 100n22
- Berlin, Adele, 67n78, 79
- Bertholet, Alfred, 56, 62n67
- Besant, Walter, 9n25
- Bevilacqua, Alexander, v
- Bhattacharyya, Tania, 96n1
- Bjørn, Øyvind, 112n79
- Brett, Mark, vi
- Brettler, Marc Zvi, 50n26, 51, 67n78, 79
- Brockelmann, Carl, 121n127
- Bélis, Mireille, 11*fig.*, 11n30
- Caballero, Jay, 120n122
- Clermont-Ganneau, Charles Simon, 6, 7n19, 15, 15n39, 16, 18
- Cohen, Maimon, 102n31
- Cohen, Shaye, v
- Collins, Terence, 112n75
- Cook, Stanley A., 142n104
- Cooke, George A., 57n53
- Crawford, Sidnie White, v
- Cross, Frank Moore, Jr., 32n65, 88n21, 98–99, 107n54
- Dascalu, Raphael, vi
- Dershowitz, Idan, 1n1, 18n47, 21n57, 30n60, 33n67, 96n2, 115, 129
- Dershowitz, Nachum, vi, 77n8, 92n27
- Dillmann, August, 5n4, 43n11, 56, 58n55
- Dobbs-Allsopp, F. W., 107
- Driver, Samuel R., 56, 60n65, 105n46, 108
- Dussaud, René, 15n37
- Eichler, Raanan, vi, 59n60
- Fassberg, Steven E., 96n1, 103, 103n38, 113n85
- Feldman, Ariel, 42n5
- Feldman, Noah, v–vi, 118n114
- Figeac, Petra, 34n1
- Finkel, Irving, vi
- Finkelstein, Israel, vi, 91n24
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A., 114n91, 128n156
- Francis, Patricia, 9n24
- Frankel, David, 67–68, 68n79
- Freedman, David Noel, 75, 77, 98–99
- Fürtig, Nicolé, 34n1
- Gal, Sophia, 34n1
- Garr, Randall W., 99, 99n16
- Gertz, Jan, vi
- Gesenius, Wilhelm, 113nn82–83, 85, 123n129
- Gesundheit, Shimon, v–vi, 50n25, 52n29
- Gevirtz, Stanley, 118n113
- Gilbert, Walter, v
- Ginsburg, Christian David, 5–7, 7n18–19, 8, 8*fig.*, 9–16, 16n41, 17–20, 20nn50,52, 21, 21nn52–53,57, 22–25*figs.*, 28, 28n59, 29–33, 42, 79n13, 96n4, 115n95, 117n105, 125, 132–33, 133n18, 134n28, 135nn29,32–33, 136nn47–49,51, 137nn53–54,57–58, 138nn61–63,65–66,

- 139nn69,73–74,76,78,80–82,
140nn84,87–90, 141nn91–93,
142nn98–100,102,
143nn105–6,109,112–13,
144nn115–17, 145nn120–21,125,
147nn134–37,
148nn138–40,142–43,146–50,
149nn152–54,158–63,165,
150nn166–67,171–73,175–76,178–80,
151nn183–84,188–92,194,
152nn195–96,198–201,203,
153nn204,206–10,213,
154nn214,216,219,222–29,232
- Goldstein, Rebecca, vi
Goren-Arzon, Sivan, v
Gould, Jonathan, vi
Graf, Karl Heinrich, 53n34
Green, Henry, 103n38
Greengus, Samuel, 124n136
Guil, Shlomo, 10n29, 43n10
Guthe, Hermann, 5–32, 16n42, 21n54,
31n63, 39n4, 44n13, 125, 131–55
- Halevy, Schulamith Chava, vi
Halpern, Baruch, 47n17
Hansel, Dorothee, v
Harman, Mishy, vi
Harris, Jay, v
Harvey, Paul B., Jr., 47n17
Hasselbach, Rebecca, 99n17
Heide, Martin, 123
Hendel, Ronald S., 129
Herzog, Erga, vi
Hoftijzer, Jacob, 57n53
Holden, Kevin, v
Holladay, William L., 75
Hornkohl, Aaron, 129n161
Huehnergard, John, 107n57
Hurvitz, Avi, 119n118, 126n146, 129n160
Hyatt, J. Philip, 47
- Isaksson, Bo, 110n65
Ishida, Tomoo, 118n111
- Jackson, Bernard S., 120n122
Jefferson, Helen G., 10n29, 43
Jeon, Jaeyoung, 68n79
Joffe, Laura, 79n12
Jongeling, Karel, 57n53
- Joosten, Jan, v, 96n1, 104, 104n45, 109,
113, 113nn81,85,87, 118n112, 119n115,
129
Joüon, Paul, 114n90
- Kaicker, Abhishek, v
Kaplan, Abram, v
Katz, Kelly, v
Kaufman, Ivan Tracy, 32
Keil, Carl F., 57n54
Kenyon, Frederic, 41n1
Khan, Geoffrey, 96n1, 102n34
Kline, Moshe, 83
Knapp, Dietrich, 57, 57n53
Knohl, Israel, vi
Knowles, Marika, v
Koehler, Ludwig, 119
Krahmalkov, Charles R., 100n22, 101n29
Kratz, Reinhard, vi, 54–55
Kuenen, Abraham, 56, 63n70
- L'Hour, Jean, 47
Landis Gogel, Sandra, 111n72
Langlois, Michael, v, 31n63
Leander, Pontus, 98
Lee, Robert, v
Lemaire, André, 28, 28fig., 29, 103, 128
Leuchter, Mark, 88n21
Levenson, Jon D., vi, 47n22
Levine, Baruch A., 63n71
Levinson, Bernard M., 62n68
Lewinsohn, Jed, v
Lundbom, Jack R., 74n3
Lupsasca, Alexandru, v
- Machinist, Peter, vi, 112n73
Maier, Christl, 80n14
Mansoor, Menahem, 10n29, 18n45,
20n51, 43, 123n131, 137n53
Margoliouth, George, 5n9, 15n38
Marti, Karl, 56
Martilla, Marko, 78
Mayer, Esias E., 82n16
Mayes, Andrew D. H., 47
Mays, James Luther, 77n8
Mazar, Amihai, 33n66
Mendel-Geberovich, Anat, 106n49
Menon, Tara, v
Metzler, Maria, vi, 96n1
Meyer, Eduard, 131–55

- Mor, Uri, 111n69
 Moran, William L., 108n58
 Morgenstern, Julian, 82n16
 Morsel-Eisenberg, Tamara, v, 56n40, 96n1
 Mowinckel, Sigmund, 82n16
 Müller, Johannes, vi
 Muraoka, Takamitsu, 114n90

 Naveh, Joseph, 107
 Nelson, Eric, v–vi
 Nelson, Richard D., 50n26, 62
 Neubauer, Adolf, 96–97, 96nn3–4, 104–5n45, 108, 119n115, 122–23, 121n125, 126–27, 127n151, 128n154
 Noonan, Benjamin J., 119n116
 Notarius, Tania, 110, 110nn65–66, 110n67
 Noth, Martin, 44, 88n21
 Novak, Ana, v

 O'Connor, Michael Patrick, 47n22, 112n74, 113n85, 127n153
 Oettli, Samuel, 57, 61
 Otto, Eckart, 52n29, 54n36, 57n53, 60, 64, 64n76, 69n81

 Pat-El, Na'ama, v, 1, 101n28, 107n57, 114n92, 95–130, 115n100, 123n130
 Peckham, Brian, 47n22
 Perlitt, Lothar, 55n39, 64
 Plenderleith, Harold J., 11n30
 Plöger, Josef G., 70n84
 Polak, Frank H., 129n160
 Porzig, Peter, 60, 62n68
 Praver, Ronit, vi
 Puukko, Antti F., 56

 Qimron, Elisha, 111n69, 125n143, 126n147

 Rabe, Norbert, 69n83
 Rabin, Chaim, 121n127
 Rabinowicz, Oskar K., 96n4, 104n45, 121n125, 123n131
 Rad, Gerhard von, 63n69
 Rainey, Anson F., 102n30, 107, 107n56
 Rand, Michael C., 116n102
 Raymond, Eric D., 112n78
 Reiner, Fred, 41n1

 Reinhartz, Adele, vi
 Reisner, George Andrew, 33, 33fig.
 Rofé, Alexander, v
 Rollston, Christopher, v, 31n63
 Rubinstein, Arie, 105n46
 Rütterswörden, Udo, 55n39

 Sáenz-Badillos, Angel, 97n5, 102n31
 Sabo, Yoram, 10n29
 Sass, Benjamin, vi, 15n37, 33n66
 Sayce, Archibald H., 9
 Schmid, Konrad, vi
 Schmitt, Hans-Christoph, 69n81
 Schmitt, Rüdiger, 51
 Schorch, Stefan, 92
 Schultz, Friedrich W., 57n54
 Schwartz, Baruch, 79n10, 83–84
 Segal, Michael, v
 Segal, Moses H., 111n70
 Shapira, Moses Wilhelm, 1–40, 43, 44n13, 53, 56, 61–62, 69–70, 94, 100, 117n108, 131–45
 Shitrit, Talya, 129n160
 Shulman, Ahouva, 113n82
 Siegismund, Kasper, 104n43
 Sirat, Colette, 11n29, 12n31
 Smith, Mark, vi
 Soggin, J. Alberto, 89n22
 Sommer, Benjamin, vi
 Spellberg, Matthew, v
 Spies-Gans, Paris, 96n1
 Spivey-Faulkner, S. Margaret, v
 Stackert, Jeffrey, v
 Stade, Bernhard, 105, 105n46
 Staerk, Willy, 44, 53, 58
 Staps, Camil, 112n80
 Steinschneider, Moritz, 34, 43n11
 Stern, David, v–vi
 Steuernagel, Carl, 44, 53, 56, 58, 58n55
 Strack, Hermann, 34, 39n4, 43, 44n12, 145n119
 Sukenik, Eleazar L., 100n20
 Sukenik, Naama, 10n27

 Talshir, David, 125n141
 Taylor, Joan E., 10n27
 Teeter, Andrew, v–vi
 Teicher, Jacob L., 10n29, 42, 43n11
 Thornevill, Charles Francis, 9n24

- Tigay, Chanan, 18, 18n47
Tigay, Jeffrey H., 121, 121n124
Tigchelaar, Eibert, vi, 42n5
Tobolowsky, Andrew, 88n21
Tov, Emanuel, 92n28
Treiger, Alexander, 123n130
Tropper, Josef, 101n28
Tsujita, Kyoji, 114n93
Tzoref, Shani, v–vi, 96n1
- Ulrich, Eugene, 92n28
- Valeton, Josua J. P., 56
Vanderhooft, David, v
Vater, Johann Severin, 53
Vaux, Roland de, 10n27, 131n4
Veijola, Timo, 51, 55n39
VerSteeg, Russ, 124n136
Vorpahl, Daniel, v
- Waltke, Bruce K., 112n74, 113n85,
127n153
Weigel, Moira, v
Weinfeld, Moshe, 47, 54, 57, 60n64,
63n70, 67, 79n10
Weiss, Meir, 77n8
Weiss, Raphael, 100n21
Wellhausen, Julius, 53, 53n34
Wells, Bruce, 121n123
Westbrook, Raymond, 124n136
Westermann, Claus, 69
Wette, Wilhelm M. L. de, 46, 47n17, 48, 53
Williams, Ronald J., 114n90
Wilson-Wright, Aren M., 99, 101n28,
117n107, 120n120
Wolff, Hans Walter, 77n8
- Zahn, Molly, v
Zakovitch, Yair, vi
Zeitlin, Solomon, 10, 130
Zevit, Ziony, 79n13