

Response to Benjamin Suchard, “The ‘Valediction of Moses’ is not a proto-Deuteronomy: evidence from the verbal system” (published on Academia.edu)

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We are very grateful to Benjamin Suchard for his engaging critique of our linguistic profile of the Valediction of Moses (V).¹ In this response we offer a rebuttal of Suchard’s arguments.² This is a brief reply, and we refer the reader to our original piece for the full discussion of the relevant features. Suchard’s discussion largely ignores the analysis in our chapter on the topic and arbitrarily concentrates on a few examples, which he inaccurately depicts as representative. We show below that even by Suchard’s own logic, his conclusions are non sequitur.

In our joint chapter in Dershowitz’s book, we list and analyze numerous linguistic features unique to V and find them to be consistent with Dershowitz’s proposed First Temple date for the book’s composition. Considering the title of Suchard’s article, one might have expected to find several rebuttals of our analyses, or examples of features in V that are incompatible with pre-exilic epigraphic Hebrew. Remarkably, there is not a single such rebuttal or counterexample. In other words, Suchard has found nothing in the language of V that is incompatible with our conclusion. Instead, his critique boils down to a single spurious argument, namely that the distribution of purported linguistic errors in V (only with regard to verbal forms; see below) is suggestive of forgery for a simple reason: they are concentrated in parts of V that have no biblical counterpart. The only logical conclusion, Suchard argues, is that the modern forger of V (likely Shapira, in Suchard’s view)³ used the canonical Bible as a template, since he never made errors when copying from his source text; whenever the forger exercised creativity and composed new material, however, he made linguistic errors due to his poor grasp of the relevant grammar with no biblical text to crib from.⁴

¹ Idan Dershowitz and Na’ama Pat-El, “The Linguistic Profile of V,” in Idan Dershowitz, *The Valediction of Moses: A Proto-Biblical Book* (Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 96–133.

² Benjamin Suchard, “The ‘Valediction of Moses’ is not a proto-Deuteronomy: evidence from the verbal system.” Posted to Academia.edu; accessed on April 15, 2021.

³ Suchard implies that V was written by a “(formerly) observant Jew,” implicating Shapira. We refer the reader to ch. 2 in Dershowitz, *Valediction* (2021), which presents Shapira’s papers and notes on V. As is quite clear from this material, Shapira was unable to understand portions of the text, and his command of biblical Hebrew left something to be desired.

⁴ “That the non-Classical Perfect and Imperfect forms are practically limited to the small minority of phrases not paralleled by MT is then inexplicable. On the other hand, it makes good sense if V’s author accurately copied MT’s Classical forms from Deuteronomy and Numbers, but *often* slipped into non-Classical forms in his own interpolations” (Suchard, “Not a proto-Deuteronomy,” 5; our emphasis).

Suchard explains away the counterexamples he does mention with ad hoc proposals. He suggests, for example, a scribal error—a confusion between *he* and *yod*—where we find the correct ויתרך and he would expect והתרך. But *he* and *yod* look very different in both Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic script, there are no other examples of any such error in V, and it is an altogether unlikely alternation. The only reason to suggest scribal error is that this example would otherwise undermine Suchard’s hypothesis.⁶

Another ad hoc and unfounded dismissal of evidence is the case of וחרה אפו (*we-qatal*) in V’s Pe’or passage, which Suchard argues is actually based on the Shema. Suchard is motivated to make an accommodation in this case, since it would otherwise disprove his theory that V was forged by someone who got his Hebrew right when he had a biblical text to copy from, which a forger plainly would have had here. The Shema—Suchard’s proposed *Vorlage*—has absolutely nothing to do with the passage at hand. By contrast, V’s Pe’or pericope has a very close counterpart in Numbers 25. If V is indeed a forgery, the Pe’or narrative in Numbers would obviously be its source text. But Num 25:3 uses ויחר אף in the *wayyiqtol*, which we don’t find in V: ותצמדו לבעל פער ביום ההוא וחרה אף אלהם עלכם. ויִצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיִּחַר אַף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. This is devastating for Suchard’s hypothesis of the copyist fraudster; V should clearly read ויחר אף here, according to his conjecture, and it does not. In short, it is not the case that when V corresponds to the biblical text, the verbal forms in the parallel passages are identical, whereas when V deviates from MT, its verbal forms are erroneous.

Suchard’s more peripheral arguments are also imprecise. His claim that all the relevant epigraphic evidence would have been known to a forger in the 1870s is incorrect. For example, the negation לא written with no division from the following word was unknown in Hebrew before the discovery of the Uzziah tablet in 1931; the spelling of the 3ms pronoun on masculine plural nouns with only -w, while known from BH, was not recognized as a genuine feature before the discovery of the Lachish ostraca in 1935 and then the Yavneh-yam inscription in 1960. We discuss many more such examples in our chapter.

Furthermore, we showed that V includes features whose *antiquity* was not recognized by scholars in the 1870s. For example, the use of בלתי to negate nouns, contrary to the typical usage in MT (as well as Qumranic, Rabbinic, and Modern Hebrew), where it negates infinitives;⁷ the marking of 3ms possessive pronouns on mp nouns as -w, rather than -yw; the use of finite verbs

⁶ Suchard also suggests that perhaps this counterexample shouldn’t count, because the correspondence between V and its biblical counterpart is not entirely exact. This criterion of exactitude is both ill-defined and irrelevant. A biblical passage either served as a model for forgery or it did not; the precise degree to which tangential elements of an ostensibly forged passage differed from their source is of no consequence, provided the relevant verb appears in both, as it does here: ויתרך in V vs. והותירך in Deuteronomy.

⁷ But this is similar to its use in a fifth-century BCE Phoenician inscription, the Tabnit Sarcophagus, which was discovered in 1887, after Shapira’s death.

directly after **וַי**, rather than infinitives, etc. Only in recent years have scholars made a case for the early date of these features.

We should also note that the characterization of the forger as some sort of philological, epigraphic, and/or linguistic genius is a novel development. Prominent Hebrew scholars previously considered the language of V to be replete with errors, and the forger to be someone who could not muster even beginner's Hebrew. Neubauer, for instance, wrote that the text is "an ignorant amalgamation [...] as incorrect as only school-boys can make it," adding that V should be used, at most, "as exercises for beginners in Hebrew, for whom practice in the correction of bad grammar may be desirable."⁸ Likewise, the text of V was assumed to be a mere abridgment of Deuteronomy, not a (pseudo-)proto-biblical precursor replete with countless implicit source-critical insights that wouldn't be proposed by scholars for generations hence. Once Dershowitz showed that V reflects intricate insights into the composition history of Deuteronomy that were made long after Shapira's demise, the consensus forgery theory was in need of an update, and the alleged fraudster assumed his new status as genius mastermind, with "an uncanny literary sense," etc.⁹

On the topic of this new evaluation of the alleged forger, it is worth taking a step back to consider the internal logic of Suchard's proposal. A priori, would we expect *wayyiqtol* to be the feature that our genius forger was unable to comprehend? He invents perfectly conjugated neologisms, such as **וַיְהִי**; cleverly uses the *qal* for **לָחַם** (only later found to be attested in the epigraphic record) instead of the standard *niphal*; repeatedly anticipates 140 years of biblical scholarship, etc. And yet, according to Suchard, the *default* BH verbal form, of all things, is beyond his ken. We find this to be preposterous.

On a more methodological note, Suchard's argument is somewhat analogous to P-hacking.¹⁰ When considering the full dataset (or other individual linguistic features), no pattern consistent with forgery is forthcoming. Features in V, such as the negation of **אֵל**, lexical choices, orthography, etc. all break the pattern developed by Suchard. Suchard cast these aside and opted instead to arbitrarily focus on selected examples of verb tense/aspect. Even so, the ostensibly incriminating pattern in this severely limited dataset is illusory.

In our joint chapter, we discuss more than two dozen linguistic features and many more individual examples. The antiquity of V's language is reflected in every aspect: phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Suchard not only ignores the antiquity of these features in V, but he also disregards the absence of any late signs in the spelling and lexicon. There are no Hellenistic (or later) texts that manage to completely avoid Aramaisms, rabbinic features, or

⁸ Adolf Neubauer, "The Shapira Mss. of Deuteronomy," *The Academy* 590 (August 25, 1883), 130.

⁹ Suchard, "Not a proto-Deuteronomy," 5.

¹⁰ For more on this methodological pitfall, see, e.g., Jelte M. Wicherts et al., "Degrees of Freedom in Planning, Running, Analyzing, and Reporting Psychological Studies: A Checklist to Avoid P-Hacking," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7.1832 (2016): 1–12.

other neologisms. A nineteenth-century forger simply could not have known what we know today about the difference between First Temple and Second Temple Hebrew. Suchard does not disprove a single claim in our chapter and evidently agrees that the verbal morphosyntax upon which he focuses is consistent with First Temple epigraphic Hebrew. And yet he reaches an unequivocal conclusion that stands in sharp contradiction to the paucity and inconclusiveness of his own evidence (and the wealth of evidence to the contrary). His determination of forgery is premised on the fallacious postulation that V contains mistakes specifically in sections with no biblical counterpart, thus implicating a forger with limited Hebrew skills. In sum, Suchard has offered no evidence or sound arguments to counter the conclusions of our linguistic analysis of the Valediction of Moses.