

Response to Ronald Hendel, “Notes on the Orthography of the Shapira Manuscripts: The Forger’s Marks”

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I am very grateful to Ronald Hendel for taking the time to review my recent article and book on the Valediction of Moses (V).¹ My response will be brief.²

First, I was surprised to see that Hendel does not address, even in passing, my core argument for V’s authenticity and antiquity, namely my philological analysis, which shows that V preserves numerous pre-canonical recensions of Deuteronomic passages – and indeed of Deuteronomy itself.

Second, and more crucially, Hendel’s review seems to be an extended rejoinder to a position that I myself have never advanced. Hendel sets up his critique as follows: “The ‘very ancient’ age claimed for the Shapira manuscripts refers roughly to the ninth century BCE.”³ But this is simply incorrect and in no way reflects either my own argument or that of Na’ama Pat-El in our joint linguistic excursus.⁴

A clear distinction must be drawn between the Valediction of Moses as a text and the Shapira fragments as objects. My argument is that the *text* is pre-Deuteronomic and thus pre-exilic, and as I write in my book, it clearly underwent some updating after its composition.⁵ When the *manuscripts* were inscribed is a much more difficult question to answer in the absence of the artifacts themselves, although my inclination is that they too are pre-exilic. But this detail is of no consequence to my thesis, which is simply that the now-lost manuscripts preserved a fundamentally proto-biblical book. To reiterate, the Shapira fragments and the Valediction of Moses are neither synonymous nor coterminous. In any event, “pre-exilic” is hardly equivalent to “ninth century BCE.” Hendel’s contention that certain orthographic features in V are attested

¹ Ronald Hendel, “Notes on the Orthography of the Shapira Manuscripts: The Forger’s Marks,” *ZAW* 133.2 (2021): 225–230. Hendel is responding to Idan Dershowitz, “The Valediction of Moses: New Evidence on the Shapira Deuteronomy Fragments,” *ZAW* 133.1 (2021): 1–22; idem, *The Valediction of Moses: A Proto-Biblical Book*. FAT 145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

² I thank Yonatan Miller for his very helpful comments.

³ Hendel, “Notes,” 225.

⁴ Hendel opts for a supposed ninth century BCE date on the basis of the manuscripts’ paleographic features. The manuscripts are lost, however, and no legible photographs are extant. Hendel has therefore conducted his analysis upon a series of unreliable drawings from the nineteenth century CE. For more on this methodological pitfall, see Dershowitz, “Valediction,” 11–16 and *Valediction*, 21–33.

⁵ Dershowitz, *Valediction*, 70, n. 86.

only later in the pre-exilic period is fully consonant with my own proposal and therefore entirely moot.⁶

Hendel's examples of ostensibly anachronistic post-ninth century forms in V have no bearing on the possibility that V is a pre-exilic text, or even that the Shapira manuscripts are (post-ninth century) First Temple-era artifacts. I will therefore point out only that Hendel's suggestion that רעו in the Siloam Tunnel Inscription may have served as inspiration for the forger of V suffers from its own chronological troubles.⁷ Barring time travel, it is difficult to see how an inscription discovered in 1880 could have inspired the (putative) forgery of a text that was circulating already in 1878.⁸ On this point, it is also perplexing that Hendel suggests that the Siloam inscription's form רעו likely evolved out of רעהו (*ihū* > *ew*) – precisely the spelling found in V – and yet he argues that the appearance of this pre-Siloam form in V is evidence for the inauthenticity and *lateness* of the latter. To clarify, according to Hendel's own understanding, Siloam's רעו evolved out of a more primitive and less anomalous form, which *also* had a 3ms -w suffix, and in the case of this specific word, V presents the earlier form than that of Siloam – an unquestionably pre-exilic inscription.

Lastly, in his conclusion, Hendel approvingly cites an alleged confession by Salim, an associate of Shapira's, to Abraham Shalom Yahuda.⁹ A few remarks are in order. Yahuda's account was published a full sixty-six years after the supposed forgery in an article whose premise is the plainly spurious notion that the Mesha Stele is *also* a forgery. Indeed, Yahuda preposterously implicates Salim in the Mesha Stele's fabrication! Even more problematically, Yahuda's testimony is riddled with inconsistencies, as noted by William F. Albright and Michael Press in their discussions of Yahuda's account.¹⁰ Press himself is of the firm belief that the Shapira manuscripts are forgeries, and yet he concludes: "It is remarkable that Yahuda's eccentric article was ever published by *Jewish Quarterly Review*. It is even more remarkable that a scholarly review would cite it as [a] counterpoint to Shapira's claim."

⁶ Na'ama Pat-El and I address ארעו – the one form cited by Hendel as unattested in First Temple period inscriptions – in *Valediction*, 102–103.

⁷ Hendel, "Notes," 229: "I infer that it is an unintended trace of the forger's art. The forger adopted the biblical writing convention for final *ō*, perhaps misdirected by the Siloam inscription, unaware that this usage is a late innovation."

⁸ See Hermann Guthe, *Fragmente einer Lederhandschrift enthaltend Mose's letzte Rede an die Kinder Israel, mitgeteilt und geprüft* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1883), 6.

⁹ Abraham Shalom Yahuda, "The Story of a Forgery and the Mēša Inscription," *JQR* 35.2 (1944): 139–164.

¹⁰ William Foxwell Albright, "Is the Mesha Inscription a Forgery?" *JQR* 35.3 (1945): 247–250; Michael Press, "First Century Mark and Nineteenth Century Moses" (<http://textualcultures.blogspot.com/2018/06/first-century-mark-and-nineteenth.html>; retrieved May 30, 2021).