

Scrolls that the experts rejected

by ANNE TAYLOR

Fourteen Dead Sea Scrolls lent by Jordan will be on display at the British Museum until January 29. The exhibition will then go to Manchester, Edinburgh and Cardiff. Their arrival recalls an earlier exhibition of Hebrew scrolls which led to a fascinating controversy.

IT IS, of course, a coincidence that of all the rooms in the British Museum, it is the Long Library which today houses 14 Dead Sea Scrolls lent by Jordan.

It was to this library that the public flocked in the summer of 1883 to gaze at a nine days' wonder: fragments from the Schapira scrolls, leather strips covered with ancient Hebrew writing, and found, it was claimed (as some of the Jordan scrolls were found), by Arabs in a hot, dry cave not far from the Dead Sea.

These have been lost for many years. Most scholars would like to know where they are, if only for their private peace of mind. Some, in particular Professor Mansoor, of the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at the University of Wisconsin, believe that Schapira's scrolls were genuine. If so, they would be worth a fortune.

Told by Bedouin

But it was decided by the British Museum at the time that the Schapira scrolls were forged. This decision came to be questioned only when the circumstances of the finding of the first Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 recalled the story told in 1883.

Its author was M. W. Schapira, a converted Jew, dealer in antiques whose shop in Jerusalem proclaimed him an agent of the British Museum.

In a letter in the British Museum's file (written from Jerusalem on May 9, 1883, to Professor Herman Strack, a famous German Hebrew scholar) Schapira describes how the scrolls came into his hands.

In July, 1878, some Bedouin told him how, some years previously, Arabs fleeing from their enemies hid in caves high up in a rock, east of the Dead Sea. They discovered there several bundles of old rags. Thinking they might contain gold, they peeled away a good deal of old cot-

ton or linen, but found only some "black charms," which they kept.

Schapira describes how he visited the caves himself; it was an old burial ground, and "we marvelled at the dryness of the place." Before his only go-between died, Schapira acquired fragments which appeared to him to belong to three different documents, "one nearly complete, one a very little wanting, of one I have only a very little piece and much decayed."

He waited until 1883 before disclosing this, he said, because he received a stern rebuff from the first expert he consulted, Professor Schottmann of Halle. Not only did the professor rebuke Schapira for supposing the fragments genuine, but he wrote to the German Consul at Jerusalem asking him to prevent Schapira from publishing his find. (Something of Schottmann's motive for this will appear later.)

Pottery affair

In July, 1883, however, Schapira turned up in London and offered the documents to the British Museum. They caused a sensation, not least because it was said he wanted £1 million for them. (The British Museum later denied this.)

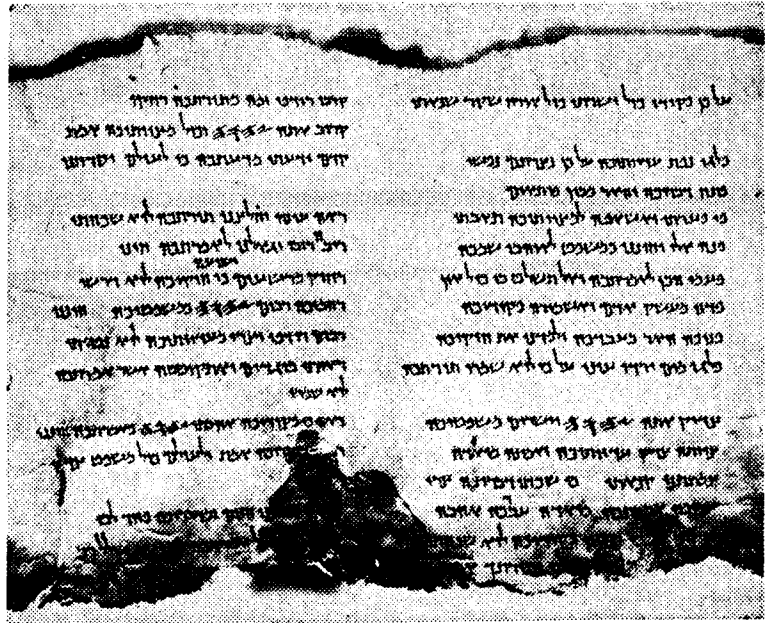
The newspapers were full of the possibility that the scrolls were the oldest known Hebrew manuscripts in existence. The country's leading expert, Dr Christian Ginsburg, began the long task of deciphering the fragments at the Museum; *The Times* printed each translation as it appeared. The fragments proved to be from Deuteronomy, containing several variations from the known version, particularly in the passage about the Commandments.

The climate was against Schapira; learned journals had still not recovered from their surprise that some people had actually believed the recent story of the discovery of the

timbers of Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat. No one believed that it was possible for ancient documents to survive for so long in any country outside Egypt. But if they were forgeries, they had been done by an extremely talented person.

In one article *The Times* remarked: "He has produced two identical texts written in different hands, both preserving unimpaired the archaic character of the letters. This implies either the employment of two scribes or else an almost incredible skill in the single scribe employed."

What told most against Schapira,



Part of the Elizabeth Hay Bechtel psalms scroll in the new exhibition at the British Museum. Named after the American who gave the money to buy it, the scroll contains 38 psalms from the Psalter, seven apocryphal ones and a statement in prose that David composed 4,050 psalms and songs.

however, was that he had been the central figure in the Moabite pottery affair, which made German experts, and Professor Schottmann of Halle in particular, look extremely foolish.

In 1868 a M. Clermont-Ganneau, Orientalist and explorer, sometime French Consul at Jerusalem, was concerned in the discovery of the Moabite Stone. It bore an inscription, the oldest known piece of Hebrew lapidary writing. In 1872 Schapira acquired some Moabite pottery with traces of similar writing. Clermont-Ganneau exposed these pieces as forgeries (there was talk of persons burying pottery only to dig it up later in the presence of Europeans) but not before German authorities, on advice from Professor Schottmann, had bought them. They eventually came to rest at the Foreign Office at Berlin, because the Municipal Museum would not accept them. Schapira always insisted he was the dupe, not the forger in the affair.

'Forgeries'

In August, 1883, Clermont-Ganneau got the French Minister of Public Instruction to send him to London to see the scrolls. He was briefly received by Dr Ginsburg on August 15, and a date was fixed for a longer visit. He inspected the fragments on view in the King's Library. The next day Clermont-Ganneau announced that the scrolls were forgeries, not even clever ones, and that they had been written on the blank bottom half of old synagogue rolls.

Ginsburg did not produce his similar conclusion until August 22.

He accused Clermont-Ganneau of stealing his remarks made at their short interview. Not to be outdone, Clermont-Ganneau accused Ginsburg of lifting his conclusions from his (Clermont-Ganneau's) letter to *The Times*.

On August 28 it was reported that Schapira had first offered the scrolls to the Royal Library in Berlin. A committee which examined them on July 10 took only an hour and a half to decide they were forged.

Schapira, lost in the academic furore, comes sharply back to mind in a scrawled, splashed letter to Ginsburg, dated August 23. "You have made a fool of me. I do not think that I will be able to survive this shame. Although I am yet not convinced that the manuscript is a forgery unless M. [Clermont-Ganneau] did it."

He did not survive. He committed suicide.

For a long time it was thought that the scrolls were still somewhere in the British Museum, although the Museum insisted they had returned them to their owner. Recently a catalogue was found which showed that the scrolls were sold at Sotheby's in 1885. The Deuteronomy strips went to Quaritsch, the rare-book dealer, for just over £10. In 1887 they were sold again; to whom is not recorded.

Let Schapira have the last word. At some undefined time he wrote notes, for and against the authenticity of the documents. Point 10, against, was: "It is too good to be true." Point 10, for, was: "So it is and maked [sic] me also irresolute very often."

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