

Menahem Mansoor – Disturber of the Scholarly Calm

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*This note was originally posted on my author's blog.

<https://themosesscroll.com/menahem-mansoor-disturbing-the-scholarly-calm/>.



Travel writer, explorer, and journalist John Hillaby broke the news of an exciting story for *The New York Times* readers with an article submitted from London on 12 August 1956. The story was a revival of “the case of a man who committed suicide seventy years ago because of disbelief that he had discovered a Dead Sea Scroll.”

American Revives Biblical Scroll Case

By JOHN HILLABY

Special to The New York Times.

LONDON, Aug. 12—The case of a man who committed suicide seventy years ago because of disbelief that he had discovered a Dead Sea scroll has been reopened at the British Museum by an American scholar.

In *The New York Times* article, published 13 August 1956, Hillaby announced that a mysterious cold case had been “reopened at the British Museum by an American scholar.” The article was titled “American Revives Biblical Scroll Case.”¹

The American scholar was Egyptian-born Menahem Mansoor, the founder of the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at the University of Wisconsin. Hillaby met Mansoor during the British leg of the American scholar’s investigative tour of Jerusalem, Rome, Paris, Brussels, and England to collect “tape-recorded opinions about the significance of all the Dead Sea scrolls.”

Mansoor revealed to Hillaby “that when he first heard by chance that something remarkably like a Dead Sea scroll had been discovered more than seventy years ago and might still be in the vaults of the British Museum, he ‘could not sleep.’” Hillaby then shared the basic details of the “Scroll Mystery” with his readers. The story he told involved the 19th-century cold case of the notorious “Shapira scroll.” Hillaby’s article was the first to mention Shapira in *The New York Times* since the news of his tragic death reached the columns of *The New York Times* in a dispatch from The Hague to the *London Standard* on Sunday, 30 March 1884.²

Hillaby reported that Professor Mansoor was “impressed by the parallels between the Shapira Scroll ... and the recent discovery of Dead Sea scrolls in other caves on the opposite shores of the

¹ Hillaby, John. “American Revives Biblical Scroll Case.” *The New York Times*, 13 August 1956, Vol. CV. No. 35,996 edition, 1, 6. See, <https://nyti.ms/3pNCskA>.

² “Dr. Shapira’s Suicide.” *The New York Times*, 30 March 1884, 4. See, <https://nyti.ms/37etVAW>.

sea by a Bedouin shepherd boy in 1947.” He went on to inform his readers that “the professor spent four weeks in the British Museum studying the Shapira dossier, Number 41294.”³

“I do not claim that Shapira’s Deuteronomy is genuine,” Professor Mansoor added. “I simply believe that, in the light of recent discoveries, the whole question must be carefully examined. My impression is that there is a good chance of this scroll emerging as a genuine one.”

And with these closing words, and a short notice that “Dr. S. Yeivin, a noted archaeologist, and director of the Department of Antiquities in Israel, also believes the case calls for reinvestigation,” the case of Shapira, and a seventy-year-old Scroll Mystery was reopened.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1956.

SCHOLARS DISPUTE SCROLLS' VALIDITY

**Biblical Experts Hear Plea
to Revalue Dead Sea Finds
and an Alleged Forgery**

Four months later, Professor Mansoor and the case of Shapira were back in the printed pages of *The New York Times*.⁴ The article’s subtitle informed readers that “biblical experts hear plea to revalue Dead Sea finds and an alleged forgery.”

The referenced plea was issued at the ninety-second annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis at Union Theological Seminary in New York, 27-28 December 1956.⁵ According to the proceedings of that meeting, papers related to the Old Testament were read on Thursday, 27 December, in the second session. The first on the list was a

paper by Professor Menahem Mansoor titled, “The Case of Shapira’s Dead Sea (Deuteronomy) Scroll of 1883 (illustrated).”⁶ Professor Mansoor’s lecture centered on fourteen bits of internal evidence that he proposed as warranting a further evaluation of the leather fragments. The Society’s president, J. Philip Hyatt, declared that the recent discovery [of the Dead Sea scrolls] might eventually lead to the authenticity of the ‘Shapira Scroll.’ In the presence of his colleagues, Hyatt also advanced a view that the authenticity of the Dead Sea manuscripts was beyond question.

According to the article in *The New York Times*, the “scholarly calm” of the meeting was disturbed when Dr. Solomon Zeitlin entered the meeting at the end of Mansoor’s talk and began to challenge the ideas presented. Despite efforts to bring things to order, the disputation continued into the corridor.

³ “Papers Relative to M.W. Shapira’s Forged MS. of Deuteronomy (A.D. 1883 – 1884).” *Add. MS. 41294* (London: British Library).

⁴ “Scholars Dispute Scroll’s Validity.” *The New York Times*, 28 December 1956, Vol. CVI. No. 36,133 edition, 14. See, <https://nyti.ms/3MyPJHD>.

⁵ Proceedings, December 27-28, 1956, *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1957), 76 (1): i-xxviii - <https://doi.org/10.2307/3262125>.

⁶ Mansoor, Menahem. “The Case of Shapira’s Dead Sea (Deuteronomy) Scroll of 1883.” Edited by Stanley D. Beck. *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* (1958), XLVII (1959): 183-225. Find it online here - <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WT1958>.

According to Hillaby, the controversy notwithstanding, Professor Mansoor maintained his position “that the entire Shapira case should be restudied, but advanced no claim that the scroll was authentic.”

Thanks to Professor Menahem Mansoor, the relative scholarly calm surrounding the Shapira case, which had peacefully existed since 1883, was disturbed once again in 1956. His courage to call for a reassessment of the notorious leather strips, even with opposition, has inspired many subsequent researchers.

On 7 March 2022, while researching Menahem Mansoor, I came across a series of audio programs on “Scrolls from the Dead Sea,” jointly produced by the University of Wisconsin and Madison, Wisconsin radio station WHA. The series is described as presenting “the story of the Dead Sea Scrolls, featuring interviews with thirty leading scholars, scientists, archaeologists, and theologians.” One of the episodes is titled “The Missing Shapira Manuscript.”⁷ In this 30-minute broadcast, written by Menahem Mansoor, the story of the ‘Shapira Scroll’ is told according to what was known at the time, based mainly on material from the British Museum dossier.

The program is professionally produced, complete with voice actors for the various characters in the story. Anyone interested in the Shapira case or the Dead Sea Scrolls will enjoy this show. Listen to “[Scrolls from the Dead Sea: The missing Shapira manuscript](#),” and as you do, think of Menahem Mansoor, the man who first disturbed the scholarly calm. May we continue in his path!

⁷ “Scrolls from the Dead Sea.” See, <https://www.unlockingtheairwaves.org/episode/cpb-aacip-500-222r8k88/>. See also, “Scrolls from the Dead Sea: The missing Shapira manuscript,” 1957-01-01, University of Maryland, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress), Boston, MA and Washington, DC, accessed March 8, 2022, <http://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-500-222r8k88>.