The question of whether we can date biblical texts solely on the basis of the linguistic data shall be answered after the next chapter, in which we will examine eight morphological, syntactical, lexical, and phraseological variables in BH. Nevertheless, some of the difficult problems in the present debate may now be tackled with the insights that we have already gleaned from present-day and historical sociolinguistics. This chapter attempts to present a theoretical assessment of these problems before we enter into an empirical analysis of the biblical data in chapter 5. 

The major part of this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section argues that the sociolinguistic conception of linguistic variability problematizes the challengers’ stylistic understanding of EBH and LBH, while at the same time it potentially weakens the traditionalists’ case for linguistic dating. The second section introduces the sociolinguistic distinction between two types of linguistic changes: changes from below and changes from above. It is argued that this distinction enables us to accommodate the two opposing views on EBH and LBH, that is, the traditional chronological model and the challengers’ stylistic model.

1. Variability, EBH and LBH, and Linguistic Dating

1.1. Variability, EBH, and LBH

Most critical for our present discussion is the understanding that a linguistic change occurs only by passing through the state of variation. This implies that during the period of change an individual may or may not adopt the change; in other words, different individuals behave differently with regard to the change. Raumolin-Brunberg writes the following:

It is obvious that when there is a linguistic change in progress, everyone has to make the choice, usually unconscious, between participating in the change or not.

If people do participate, they can adopt the innovation in different ways. There is always someone who is the innovator, the person who is the first
to use the new form, but tracing innovators in historical texts is impossible. Instead, we can access early adopters, people who picked up the new form before most other people. They may have changed their language during their lifetimes or adopted the form during language acquisition. A further division can be made between people who have had variable grammars, that is, those who used both the incoming and old forms, and those who had only one alternative.¹

As there are early adopters, so there are late adopters. In some cases, it is possible that the old form is never given up. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg observe the following:

It is clear that, if a change has reached … [a] completed stage, the new form has triumphed and language has changed. But it is not unusual that the old form lingers on in some linguistic environments, some dialects or a genre or two. For instance, the possessive determiner its has not ousted its postnominal variants of it and thereof from the language, and the third-person singular suffix -TH is found in King James Bible, which is still in use today.²

The existence of early adopters and conservatives in the process of a linguistic change does not mean that the speakers/writers have freedom in producing the linguistic variable. As Raumolin-Brunberg has noted in the first quotation above, the choice is usually “unconscious.”³ Although “speakers may not be sociolinguistic automata,” “neither are they free social agents linguistically,”⁴ because

Apart from their spoken vernaculars acquired in early childhood, people have … verbal repertoires which are constrained by their backgrounds. Access to the various regional, social and professional repertoires can only be ensured by sufficient exposure to them.⁵

Therefore, during the period of variability, although there may be individual speakers/writers who deviate from the general tendency of the period, the average use of language by multiple speakers/writers is predictable or “orderly,”⁶ since the choice that each individual makes is usually unconsciously constrained by the linguistic and social context in which she or he is situated.⁷

² Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg, Historical Sociolinguistics, 56.
⁴ Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg, Historical Sociolinguistics, 20.
⁵ Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg, Historical Sociolinguistics, 20. Emphasis original.
⁷ This is especially true when the change itself is an unconscious one (for the distinction between unconscious and conscious changes, see further below).