The Language of the Book of Jeremiah

The principal objective of the present study is to situate the language of the book of Jeremiah within the broader history of the Hebrew language. As argued in the introductory chapter, attempts (some recent) to discredit the standard linguistic approach to dating biblical and extra-biblical texts, while no-doubt judged by some as conclusively damning, are here considered unconvincing.\(^1\) It remains a valuable paradigm and, as such, is adopted in the present study with slight modification so that the language of Jeremiah may be correctly located not only within BH, but within ancient Hebrew more generally. For this reason, the criterion of Late Distribution is understood here to include Jeremiah and other likely exilic/transitional material as well as LBH, non-Masoretic, and post-biblical Hebrew, and late Aramaic, rather than just LBH.

Comparison with other texts proceeds from those biblical and extra-biblical sources that can be unequivocally dated—both linguistically and non-linguistically—to the later period through those extra-biblical inscriptions that can be dated—non-linguistically—to the early period to bodies of biblical text dated linguistically to the classical, transitional, and late periods. Since the linguistic approach to dating has been deemed viable both here and elsewhere in recent scholarship, its results regarding the classical dating of large portions of the Hebrew Bible, e.g., the Torah and the Former Prophets, are accepted as reliable. This is not to say that the Hebrew of, say, Genesis–Kings is homogenous, nor that this material is entirely lacking in characteristically late features, but that notwithstanding fluctuations, these texts present a consistently more classical linguistic profile than transitional and LBH sources. Statistically speaking, a given corpus, for instance, P, may betray a typically late tendency in one or even a few categories, e.g., use of אֲנִי rather than אָנֹכִי (see below, § 4.1), which may or may not necessitate a diachronic explanation, but these pale in comparison to the multiple categories of characteristically late elements present in high concentrations in all extant LBH, late non-Masoretic, and post-biblical Hebrew sources. Summary judgments regarding the date of a given composition based on only one or a few features must be avoided in favor of descriptions taking into account accumulations of multiple features.

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\(^1\) Far from being the isolated view of the present author, this opinion seems to hold general sway among Hebrew specialists, as seen in the majority of the relevant articles in such collections as Young 2003a, Hebrew Studies 46 (2005) and 47 (2006), and Miller-Naudé and Zevit 2012, as well as in Joosten 2012a.
While non-diachronic explanations for some of the non-standard linguistic features in Jeremiah—dialect, register, textual corruption, literary device—are considered in the following studies, in line with doubts regarding the certainty of their respective methodologies as outlined in the Introduction these are often judged less convincing than diachronic explanations. The bulk of the non-standard features in Jeremiah are here ascribed to the book’s having been written in a transitional form of BH linking CBH and LBH, approximately reflecting the Hebrew of the 6th century BCE.

2.1 History of Research

While the book of Jeremiah has garnered a great deal of scholarly attention over the years—with research focused on such topics as its theology; the personality of the prophet and the nature of his prophecy; the historical portrait presented by the book; its literary development, editing, and textual transmission (especially in view of the striking differences between the MT and the Greek, on which see below, §9); and its dependence on, use of, or affiliation with other biblical material—its language has been relatively little discussed. This is not to say that scholars have totally ignored linguistic issues in relation to the book. Some who have investigated the aforementioned topics, especially those who have sought to identify the book’s component literary layers and those interested in uncovering connections between the book and other biblical material, like Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, have displayed sensitivity to language. By and large, however, these studies have focused on style (e.g., characteristic vocabulary and phraseology), refraining from a comprehensive examination of the language of the book from the perspective of historical linguistics.

The three most significant studies of the language of Jeremiah are articles by Stipp (1997) and Joosten (2008), both of which deal with linguistic differences between the purported short Hebrew text thought to stand behind the Greek translation and the longer Masoretic edition (see below, §9.2.2), and C. Smith’s (2003) dissertation, which focuses mainly on morphology and highlights what the author considers linguistic features especially characteristic of Jeremiah’s Benjaminitic dialect (see below, §2.3).

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2 Space precludes a detailed bibliographical survey of these topics. Besides the various introductions to biblical literature and the relevant commentaries, the interested reader is encouraged to consult Robinson 1924; Bright 1951; 1966; Holladay 1960; 1975; Hyatt 1961; 1967; Weinfeld 1972; Thiel 1973–1981; Weippert 1973; Perdue 1984; Lundbom 1992; Friedman 1997; Lipiński and Sperling 1997; Parke-Taylor 2000.