Why not Jeremiah?

A copy of a letter that Jeremias sent to those who would be led as captives into Babylon by the king of the Babylonians to proclaim to them just as it was commanded to him by God: 1 On account of the sins that you have sinned against God, you will be led into Babylon as captives by Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians. 2 When, therefore, you come into Babylon, you will be there for rather many years, even for a long time, as long as seven generations. But after this, I will bring you from there with peace. 3 Now then, you will see in Babylon silver and gold and wooden gods being carried upon shoulders causing fear to the nations. 4 Beware, therefore, lest you too, having been made like the foreigners, become like them and be afraid of them 5 when you see a crowd before and behind them worshipping them, but say to yourselves, “We must worship you, O Lord.” 6 For my angel is with you, and he is caring for your souls. (Letter of Jeremias superscription + vv. 1–6, translation according to NETS with slight changes).

This is a letter from the prophet Jeremiah, found among the Jeremianic writings. The letter reminds us of other letters written by the prophet Jeremiah and attested in Jer 29. However, this letter usually is deemed to be post-Jeremianic by scholars (and also by me in my commentary in the ATD series) and so, in other words, fictitious. But why? Let us first follow the usual argument of Old

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Testament scholarship as if we were dealing with a text from the biblical book of Jeremiah here.

In its entirety, the letter of Jeremiah is preserved in Greek only as chapter 6 of the apocryphal book of Baruch and also in diverse daughter translations of the Septuagint. Furthermore, the evidence from Qumran, fragment 7Q2, which contains traits of verses 43–44, is in Greek. Yet Semitisms in the text and, in particular, two translation errors lead to the conclusion that the letter was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic:

In v. 30 we read: “And in their houses the priests ‘travel’ or ‘make a journey with a wagon’ (διφρεύουσιν) with their tunic’s torn and their heads and beards shaven, whose heads are uncovered, and they roar and cry before their gods, as a man does at the feast when one is dead.” The verb διφρεύουσιν, “travel with a wagon,” is obviously out of place here. It seems to be the rendering of a form of the root ḫg, which means “to drive, lead, make a journey with a wagon,” but also “to groan, cry” (in Nah 2:8), and this meaning fits the scene.

The second example is v. 71 where we read: “And from the purple and the marble (ἀπὸ τῆς πορφύρας καὶ τῆς μαρμάρου) that rots upon them you will know that they are not gods.” “Marble,” which does not rot, seems to be the rendering of the word ṣš; however the same root means also “byssus, linen,” which, again, fits much better the context.

Thus, the original language of the letter probably was Hebrew or Aramaic, both of which Jeremiah was familiar with according to the book of Jeremiah (taking the Aramaic verse in Jer 10:11 into account). Not only the language, but also the theology of the letter is Jeremianic: the fact that the people must go into Babylonian exile because of their sins is made clear again and again from the beginning to the end of the biblical book of Jeremiah. The formulation of our letter particularly recalls Jer 16:10–12:

And when you announce all these things to that people, and they ask you, “Why has the Lord decreed upon us all this fearful evil? What is the iniquity and what the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?” say to them, “Because your fathers deserted Me—declares the Lord—and followed other gods and served them and worshiped them… And you have acted worse than your fathers.” (Translation according to NJPS)

The prophet Jeremiah is fully aware of the fact that the exiles in Babylon were still in danger of worshipping other gods. Thus, he not only accuses God’s people in his book and impresses the first commandment on them, but he also solemnly cautions them against the gods of the people in the foreign country. This can be found in Jer 16:13: