Jeremiah Amid Actual and Virtual Editions: Textual Plurality and the Editing of the Book of Jeremiah

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The five hundred-year anniversary of the Complutensian Polyglot is an especially propitious time to explore questions about the ideal form of an edition of books of the Hebrew Bible. In the realm of print editions, a greater variety of forms and types of editions are being pursued than at any time in the history of print editions of the Hebrew-Aramaic text. At the same time, the explosion of possibilities for connecting and manipulating data via computers and the Internet has opened the door to configurations of textual evidence and interpretation inconceivable in print. Finally, the current state of the discussion makes clear that the textual situations of the books of the Bible, and thus the issues in producing editions of them, vary in important ways from book to book. In what follows we will address questions of textual plurality and stability in the book of Jeremiah and their consequences for text critical method and editions. Jeremiah 23 will be used as a sample to illustrate the issues and problems.

As is well known, two different text forms of the book of Jeremiah existed in Antiquity. When compared to the longer text form, the shorter text form is shorter by about one sixth, has the Oracles Against Foreign Nations in a different place as well as in a different order, and displays many qualitative variants for text the two versions have in common. The longer text form survives completely in Hebrew in medieval Masoretic manuscripts, and fragmentarily in the

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2 Naming only the most widely available resources, one might mention (in alphabetical order) Accordance, Bible Works, Gramcord, and Logos. Moreover, increasing numbers of manuscripts are becoming available online in digital form.


remains of three manuscripts from Qumran, the oldest of which has been dated to 225–175 B.C.E. by its editor, Emanuel Tov. It is also attested in the usual array of proto-Masoretic witnesses. The shorter text form survives completely only in Greek. It is attested fragmentarily in Hebrew in the remains of two manuscripts from Qumran, one of which is nearly as old as the earliest Hebrew witness for the long text form. Fragments of manuscripts of both text forms were found in Cave 4 at Qumran, demonstrating that both Hebrew text forms existed side by side in at least one ancient collection.

The question, of course, is how to explain the extant data most economically. The predominant interpretation, in recent times first proposed by Gerald Janzen, is that in Antiquity two actual Hebrew text forms existed side by side in Judaism of the last two centuries before the Common Era. Thus questions of the relations between them, and of the reconstruction of the once actual, but now virtual, Hebrew behind the actual Greek become key foci for the current discussion of the text of Jeremiah.

The most economical explanations of the different locations and arrangements for the Oracles Against Foreign Nations and the different structures for the book that result from them involve intentional activity on the part of an individual. Similarly, the large-scale pluses in chapters 10, 33 and 39 of the MT seem more simply explained as deliberate acts than as copyists’ mechanical errors. Thus, we must take seriously the possibility that at least some of the differences between the two text forms arise from deliberate intervention of a scale and intentionality that elsewhere we call redaction. Indeed, while there is more diversity of opinion here than on the question of two Hebrew text forms, the majority view is that the two text forms result at least in significant part

6 For an overview of all witnesses to the longer and shorter text forms see Weis, “Textual History,” §7.1.1.1–3.
9 In chapter 10, vv. 6–8, 10 (vv. 3–5 + 9 also are differently arranged); in chapter 33, vv. 14–26; in chapter 39, vv. 4–13.