THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE
AND THE EMERGING CONCEPT OF THE “IDEAL TEXT”
IN LATE SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

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The prologue to the Book of Ben Sira is one of the most important testimonies to the intellectual culture of Judaism in the 2nd century BCE, specifically in its second half. It reflects the concepts that were crucial for that milieu and may therefore serve as a starting point for its reconstruction. The following paper will focus on some of these concepts, especially regarding the pre-eminence of the Hebrew language as well as the “ideal text.”

1. THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

From the perspective of the Masoretic text, Hebrew is of course the language in which the sacred scriptures of Israel were composed, apart from only a few passages which are written in Aramaic. We may expect, therefore, that the Hebrew language has been an important marker of Jewish identity throughout the late second temple period, at least in Palestinian Jewry. Unfortunately, explicit and unambiguous statements regarding the Hebrew language coming from that very time are rare and seem not to cover the whole period.

One of the most important testimonies is preserved in the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira, line 6, containing one of the earliest testimonies of the language name “Hebrew.” Before we consider it, however, the question may

1 It has been suggested by Veltri that the prologue dates to the 1st century CE and not, as the dates given by the text itself seem to indicate, to the 2nd century BCE, see G. Veltri, Eine Tora für den König Talmi: Untersuchungen zum Übersetzungsvorverständnis in der jüdisch-hellenistischen Literatur (TSAJ 41, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1994) 139. However, the basis for Veltri’s suggestion seems narrow, being formed only by a small number of lexical parallels between the prologue and Greek texts from the 1st century CE, as the writings of Josephus and the New Testament. Moreover, as will be demonstrated below, the concepts of language (especially with regard to the Hebrew language) and translation one encounters in the prologue fit a 2nd century BCE context but much less the 1st century CE. Therefore, the date provided by the prologue itself still seems the most probable and should be followed unless evidence comes to light which proves the contrary.
be asked, whether the passage “things originally said in Hebrew” (αὐτὰ ἐν ἑωρίσι Ἑβραΐστι λεγόμενα) does indeed refer to the Hebrew language as apart from the Aramaic. In many similar cases it is not easy to know whether a given ancient Jewish source refers to the Hebrew or rather to the Aramaic language, and often there seems to have been made no clear-cut difference in the designation of the two.

This situation is especially problematic with regard to sources composed in Hebrew or Aramaic: So far, the oldest known testimony which is written in Hebrew and attests the designation יִבְּרֶה (“Hebrew”) comes from the Babylonian Talmud and thus dates only to the period of the 3rd-5th centuries CE. Even in Talmudic times, however, the name יִבְּרֶה does not specifically refer to the Hebrew language in the modern linguistic sense, but may be applied to the Aramaic language as well, at least to the Aramaic dialect used by Jews.2

If we look at the Greek sources from the first century CE, the situation is essentially the same: Both the New Testament writings and Josephus apply the adverb Ἑβραϊστι and the adjective Ἑβραῖς to the Hebrew as well as to the Aramaic language (e.g. John 5:2; Acts 21:40).3 Philo, on the other hand, seems to mix up the two as well, when he applies the word χαλδαίος not a few times to designate the Hebrew tongue, as has been shown by Wong.4

It may be surprising, therefore, that the situation is different if we look into sources from the 2nd century BCE, since they are obviously based on a clear distinction of Aramaic and Hebrew. Most prominently, this distinction appears in the Letter of Aristeas, composed probably in the second half of the 2nd century BCE.5

LetAris 11:4-6: ἐρμηνεύεται χαρακτήρι γὰρ ἱδίως κατὰ τὴν ἱεράδαιαν χρώσινα….καὶ φωνὴν ἱδίων ἱεροῖς. ὑπολαμάζονται Ἰουσαπὴ χρῆσιν τὸ δ’ αὐτὸ ἐτέλεσ άλλ’ ἔνες τρόπος (“Translation is needed. They use letters characteristic of the language of the Jews […] They are supposed to use Aramaic [Syriaic] language, but this is not so, for it is another language.”)

LetAris 30:1-3: τῷ νόμῳ τῶν ἱεράδαιων βιβλία σίεν ἱερώς ἱεροῖς τοῖς ἀπολείπει τριγυρῶν γὰρ Ἐβραῖοις γράψαι καὶ φωνὴν λεγόμενα (“Books of the law of the Jews, together with few others, are missing [from the library], for these works are written in Hebrew characters and language.”)


