

**THE ORACLES OF JEREMIAH IN NORTHWEST
SEMITIC RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

The oracles of Jeremiah, who prophesied in the 7th-6th century B.C., offer a great challenge to the translator. The elliptic poetic style of the Biblical poets continues to puzzle scholars who, faced with a limited quantity of classical Hebrew literature, frequently have recourse to the Old Greek or Septuagint translation, made in the 3rd-2nd century B.C. at a time when Hebrew had ceased to be the ordinary language of the chosen people. How well, then, was classical Hebrew poetry understood? Archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, especially those at Ras Shamra-Ugarit, have disclosed a considerable corpus of texts written in languages closely related to ancient Hebrew. This has greatly improved our understanding of Biblical Hebrew grammar and poetic techniques. While current scholarly opinion tends to maintain that the shorter oracles of Jeremiah found in the Septuagint translation more faithfully reflect those of the prophet, careful analysis of the standard Hebrew version of Jeremiah's words in the light of the wider Northwest Semitic literature discloses finely constructed, artistic poetry whose grammatical and stylistic features were frequently missed by the Old Greek translators.

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The oracles of Jeremiah, like those of the other Old Testament prophets, continue to offer a great challenge to the translator. Consider Jer 4:27-28, rendered by the Revised Standard Version, "For thus says the LORD, 'The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented, nor will I turn back.'" The qualification of the punishment in v.27 does not harmonize with the unrelenting tone of v.28. The Jerusalem Bible omits the negative and offers, "The whole land shall be laid waste, I will make an end of it once for all." A similar difficulty arises in 5:10, and 5:18.

It has been customary, when faced with a problem in the Hebrew text, to rely on the ancient translations into other languages or to use later cognate tongues. But the earliest translation is the Old Greek or Septuagint (designated as LXX) made in the 3rd-2nd century B.C. at a time when Hebrew had already ceased to be the ordinary language of the chosen people. Hence it cannot be assumed that the translators appreciated fully the oracles of Jeremiah, who was prophesying in the 7th-6th century. Furthermore, the Hebrew alphabet is based on the Phoenician, which had only consonants, and so the Hebrew text at first had very few vowel indicators. The present fully vocalized text is the work of Jewish scholars - the Masoretes - in the early Middle Ages, and it is on this Masoretic Text (designated as MT), that most modern translations depend.

The consonantal text itself was only fixed about the time of Christ, hence the LXX translators may have worked from a Hebrew text different from our own. In Jer 4:27 (also 5:10 and 5:18) they seem to have had the same Hebrew text before them, for they include the difficult negative. But in other passages the divergences between the LXX and the MT are so great that they probably had a different Hebrew text. For instance, the LXX of Jeremiah lacks some 2 700 words found in the MT. Parts of verses, single verses and large sections are missing.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from about the same time as the LXX, provide some evidence to support the view that the Old Greek translation of Jeremiah was in places based on a different text. Hebrew fragments of the book of Jeremiah have been found at Qumran, some being very similar to the MT; others, however, bearing a marked resemblance to a short form of the text which

otherwise appears only in the LXX version of the book.¹ This raises the question of whether the shorter form of Jeremiah's oracles, preserved in the LXX, may not reflect an earlier stage in their transmission. Not a few scholars maintain that this is indeed the case. J. Gerald Janzen, for example, concludes his comparison of the Hebrew and Greek forms of Jeremiah with the observation that the MT has undergone much secondary expansion and that the shorter form of the LXX is generally superior.² Others, however, believe that the question can only be settled after fuller study of the grammatical and poetical phenomena of the Hebrew text.³

Our knowledge of Hebrew grammar and poetic techniques has benefitted enormously from archaeological discoveries of the 20th century. These have made it possible to move away from heavy reliance on the ancient translations, such as the Greek, Latin and Syriac, and on later cognate languages such as Arabic, which have proved inadequate for solving most textual difficulties. Their failure is not surprising, for, as George Mendenhall points out, "Ideally a solution to a difficulty in the text should be sought in uses and parallels which **antedate** the passage in question."⁴ In other words, we should listen to what the languages and dialects of Israel's neighbours and predecessors have to tell us.

Among these languages, Ugaritic has proved especially helpful. The ancient city of Ugarit was discovered in 1929, when French archaeologists began digging at Ras Shamra on the north Syrian coast. Its language, Ugaritic, was deciphered the following year. Like Hebrew and Phoenician, Ugaritic belongs to the Northwest Semitic group of languages, and a sizeable corpus of texts in Ugaritic has been found. Especially valuable for study of the Old Testament prophetic books have been the mythological texts which illuminate aspects of Hebrew poetic style. Ugaritic is often thought to be quite remote from Hebrew in time and place. But the city of

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1. Most of these fragments are published in Janzen, J G 1973, **Studies in the Text of Jeremiah**. Cambridge, Mass. 174-184.
 2. Cf Janzen, **Studies**, 127, 128.
 3. See M Dahood's review of Janzen (n.1) in **Biblica** 56 (1975) 431.
 4. Consult G Mendenhall's review of Barr, J 1968: **Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament** (London) in **Interpretation** 25 (1971) 362.

Ugarit was destroyed about 1190 B.C., some thirty years after Pharaoh Mernepta's mention of Israel in an inscription. Although Ugarit was situated in North Syria, inscriptions employing a type of Ugaritic script have been found at Beth Shemesh near Jerusalem, at Mount Tabor and at Tell Taanach (in a late twelfth-century archaeological stratum) in central Palestine. The Ugaritic mythological texts seem to have been composed south of Ugarit, to judge from the references to the Lebanon, the Anti-Lebanon, Apeq, Tyre, Sidon and Semachonities (Northern Galilee).⁵ D.N.Freedmann dates the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) to between 1200 and 1150; the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) to between 1150 and 1100.⁶ While the precise nature of the relationship between Ugaritic and Hebrew is not yet agreed, it seems likely, to judge from the large number of parallel word pairs, that the distinction is at the level of dialect.⁷

Let us now return to Jer 4:27 and its troublesome negative. The Masoretes vocalized the consonants, *lō*, "not", and this understanding of the word is already found in the LXX. The Ugaritic mythological texts, however, suggest something else. A common epithet of Baal is Aliyan, "the Powerful One", "The Victorious One", the root being *l'y*, "to be powerful", "to conquer". This same root appears in Hebrew in the form *l'h*, the stative participle and adjective being *lē*. Hence, MT *lō* in 4:27 can be revocalized *lē*, eliciting the divine title, "The Powerful One, the Omnipotent", and permitting a translation in harmony with the context, "And I the Omnipotent will make a full end".⁸

5:18 is rendered by the Revised Standard Version, "But even in those days, says the LORD, I will not make a full end of you". Commentators usually treat the verse as a prose comment by an exilic editor. Here too, however, the context is one of complete

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5. Cf Dahood, M 1970. *Psalms III 101-150* (AB 17A; Garden City) xxiv; Althann, R 1983. *A Philological Analysis of Jeremiah 4-6 in the Light of Northwest Semitic* (BibOr 38; Rome) 7-8.
 6. Freedman, D N 1977. *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: an Essay on Biblical Poetry*. JBL 96 18.
 7. See Althann, *Jeremiah*, 8-11.
 8. For this divine title, consult Vigano, L 1976. *Nomi e titoli di YHWH alla luce del semitico del Nord-ovest* (BibOr 31; Rome) 80-105. On Jer 4:27, see Althann, *Jeremiah*, 100-103.

destruction with which the negative accords ill. If we vocalize $\bar{l}e'$ for MT $\bar{l}o'$, "not", the following translation emerges, "And also in those days - Word of Yahweh the Omnipotent - I will make an end of you". The verse now appears as a tricolon with an 8:5:8 syllable count. Also to be noted is the division of the prosaic sentence, "And also in those days ...I will make an end of you". Both features suggest poetry, and the sense harmonizes with Jeremiah's oracle in 4:27-28. 9

The context of 5:10 is also one of emphatic destruction, so that the translation of the Revised Standard Version jars, "Go up through her vine-rows and destroy, but make not a full end". The Masoretes vocalize consonantal 'l as a negative particle, 'al, but here too seem to have missed a divine name, El ('ēl), used as superlative, "Go up through her vine-rows and destroy, make a complete end" (literally, "an end of El"). 10. It would appear that in all three passages the consonantal text is sound, but that the later tradition, including the LXX translator(s) and the Masoretes, failed to grasp the full meaning.

Let us now consider two passages where the MT is longer than the corresponding LXX.

Jer 34:7 Lo, the army of the king of Babylon,
 they are fighting against Jerusalem
 and against **both (kōl) of the cities of**
 Judah that remain,
 against Lachish and against Azekah,
 for those remain
 from among the cities of Judah,
 from among the fortified cities.
 (Emphasis indicates omission by the LXX.)

In the first LXX omission, Hebrew $k\bar{o}l$ causes difficulty. Its usual sense, "all", appears inappropriate as the reference is to only two cities. Hence the new English Bible and the Jerusalem Bible omit it with the LXX. Translators usually keep the LXX's second omission, "that remain", but Janzen argues that a scribe sensing the incongruity of $k\bar{o}l$ denoting only two cities inserted the clause. 11

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- 9 See further **Althann, Jeremiah**, 166-167.
 10. Or "Go up against her warriors and destroy ...", cf **Althann, Jeremiah**, 146-149.
 11. **Janzen, Studies**, 66.

The Northwest Semitic dialects, however, attest a distributive sense for **kōl**, "each" or "every". Compare in Ugaritic 2 Aqht VI:36, **mt kl amt**, "The death of every man will I die", and in Phoenician the Kilamuwa Inscription, line 6, **wkl šlh yd**, "And every man stretched forth his hand". This distributive sense of **kōl** is applied specifically to two in Is 31:3, "and he who aids will slip and he who is aided will fall and together both of them (**kullām**) will perish". See too Prov 22:2. 12 We may therefore render Jer 34:7 "against both of the cities of Judah that remain", noting that the last two words are fully appropriate to their context.

The two concluding cola of the verse also deserve attention. The LXX runs, "for these were left among the cities of Judah, the fortified cities", witnessing to the same Hebrew as the MT. Translators, nevertheless, generally paraphrase the text. So the Revised Standard Version renders, "for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained". This fails to reproduce two elements of style. First, the omission of one occurrence of "cities" removes the repetition, a not uncommon feature of Northwest Semitic poetry. See, for instance, in Ugaritic UT 128:IV:17-18, **lh.trh ts'rb 'lh.tš'rb zbyh**, "Into his presence his bulls she introduced, into his presence she introduced his gazelles", and Jer 5:15, **gōy 'etān hū' gōy mē 'ōlām hū'gōy lō' tēda' lēsonō**, "A people enduring it is, a people from old it is, a people whose tongue you do not know". Secondly, the paraphrase avoids the poetic practice of allowing one preposition to govern words in more than one clause, and therefore serving a "double-duty" function. For this technique in Ugaritic, see 'nt:II:25-27, **ymlu.lbh. bšmpt.kbd. 'nt tšyt**, "Her heart is filled with joy, the liver of Anath with triumph", where **b**, "with", is expressed only the first time. 13 In Jer 34:7, we should therefore translate, "for these were left from among the cities of Judah, from among the fortified cities".¹⁴

Another oracle where the shorter form of the LXX is often preferred to the MT is Jer 5:19:

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12. See Irwin, W H 1977. *Isaiah 28-33. Translations with Philological Notes* (BibOr 30; Rome) 112.
 13. Cf Dahood, M 1965. *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology. Marginal Notes on Recent Publications* (BibOr 17; Rome; photomechanical reproduction 1976) 41.
 14. On this verse, see further Althann, Jeremiah, 42-43.

- 1 And it will happen that if they say (**tō' mērû**)
 2 "Why has he done
 3 Yahweh our God
 4 to us all these things?"
 5 then you shall say to them,
 6 "Because you have **forsaken him ('ôti**
 7 **and served** foreign gods,
 8 away from your land shall you serve the honest ones/
 9 strangers in a land not your own".
 such beings
- (Emphasis indicates omission by the LXX.)

In the first colon, **tō'mērû**, according to normal Hebrew grammar, would signify, "you say", and this is the version of the LXX which therefore witnesses to the same Hebrew text. But the sense is awkward, for we expect a third person. The Revised Standard Version favours an emendation, rendering freely, "And when your people say". The New English Bible keeps the second person, but alters the text at the verb's next occurrence. And yet no change is necessary if we recognise that in Hebrew, as in Ugaritic, the verbal preformative **t** can denote third person masculine plural as well as second person.¹⁵ Compare in Ugaritic, **UT 137:29, tšū ilm**, "the gods lift", and **Is 16:7, tehû 'ak-nēkâ'im**, "They moan, utterly stricken". Hence **tō'mērû** in **Jer 5:15** can mean "they say".

Another question arises in connection with **'ôti** in colon 6. This pronoun refers to God, and according to normal Hebrew grammar is first person. But in fact it is the prophet who is to speak these words, so that one would rather expect a third person pronoun referring to the Lord. The LXX lacks the pronoun as well as the preceding verb, which circumvents the difficulty. The Syriac translation, on the other hand, inserts a phrase to show that God himself is speaking, "Thus says Yahweh", and this is followed by some commentators. Janzen believes the LXX has the original text.¹⁶ There is, nevertheless, strong evidence from several Canaanite dialects for the existence of a third person singular suffix in **-i**. It is well attested in Phoenician, but not a few Biblical examples have

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15. Cf Blommerde, A C M 1969. **Northwest Semitic Grammar and Job** (BibOr 22; Rome) 15 and V.6 with bibliography.
16. Janzen, **Studies** 36.
17. See, for instance, Boadt, L 1975. A Re-Examination of the Third-Yodh Suffix in Job, **Ugarit-Forschungen** 7 59-72.

been put forward.¹⁷ If we apply a third person interpretation to 'ôtî the awkwardness disappears. It seems likely that the LXX translator failed to understand this usage.

Cola 6-7 in the MT exhibit a rather common poetic figure, the ballast variant. If a major word in the first colon is not paralleled in the second, then one or more words in the second colon tend to be longer than their counterparts in the first colon. In this way the length of the second colon is increased to suit the poet's wishes. Colon 7 lacks an equivalent to "because", and so *watta 'abēdû*, "you have served", with five syllables, is the ballast variant of *azabtem*, "you have forsaken" with only three syllables. After the same fashion, *'ēlōhē nēkār*, "foreign gods", with five syllables balances *'ôtî*, "him", with two syllables. It can be seen that if with the LXX we omit "you have forsaken him", then this literary device disappears.

Another poetic technique in the verse is the division of a composite phrase. "Yahweh our God" separates two parts of a prosaic sentence, "Why has he done ... to us all these things?"

If we are looking at poetry, then a fresh consideration of the last two cola is desirable. Translators invariably take "land" (colon 8) with the previous clause which, however, becomes overlong. Placing "land" in colon 8 elicits an instance of repeated identical words as well as opposite parallelism in the prepositions which precede them, "away from your land ... in a land". This entails attributing different nuances to the same preposition, *b*, a practice also attested in Ugaritic, see Aqht II:39-40, *mk b šb' ymm tb' b bth ktrt*, "Look, on the seventh day there departed from his house the Kusharatu". There is an example in Amos 6:12 involving the same preposition, "Can horses run upon a rocky cliff (*basseld*), or can one plough without oxen (*babbēqārîm*)?"¹⁸

The word *kēn* in colon 8 is usually rendered, "thus", but the parallelism rather suggests a balance with *zārîm*, "strangers". Two possibilities can be envisaged. The lexicon of F. Zorell notes a

18. Cf Dahood, M 1981. Can One Plow without Oxen? (Amos 6:12) A Study of *ba-* and *'al'*, *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H Gordon*, eds G Rendsburg et al. (New York) 13-23.

number of passages where *kēn* functions as a quasi-pronoun, "such" 19, hence, "away from your land shall you serve such beings/strangers in a land not your own". The figure of chiasmus or inverted parallelism (A:B:B:A) now becomes apparent: land:such beings:strangers:land. It has also been observed, however, that in Mesopotamia a god Kettu was worshipped, derived from the Akkadian *kēnu*, "durable, true, loyal", and that Hebrew *kēn*, parsed as the stative participle of *kwn*, "stand firm", may in similar manner designate Yahweh, "The Reliable One".²⁰ The title may also appear in Ugaritic proper names, for instance *lkn*, "O Honest One", and at Ebla in TM 75.G.336, rev. III 10 is found the proper name *lú ki-ni-lum* for which "the man of Il is honest" has been proposed.²¹ Therefore we could render our cola, "away from your land shall you serve the honest ones, strangers in a land not your own". Note the irony in the use of *kēn* to designate the false gods, see Jer 5:2, *lākēn laššeqer yiššābē 'û*, "O True One, by the Lie they swear". These two possible interpretations of *kēn* are not mutually exclusive. Both senses were probably in the mind of the prophet. Also to be noticed is irony in the use of "strangers", which can refer not only to gods, but also to the foreign political masters that the exiles will have to obey. ²² The figure of the ballast variant now becomes visible in colon 9, which lacks an equivalent to "you shall serve", with the result that *zārīm*, "strangers", with two syllables balances *kēn* which has only one, and "in a land not your own" forms the counterpart of "away from your land". ²³

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19. Zorell, F 1984. *Lexicon Hebraicum Veteris Testamenti* (Rome) 362a.
20. See Viganò, Nomi, 173-180.
21. Proposal of M Dahood, see Althann, *Jeremiah*, 121. For Ebla, a third millennium B.C. city in North Syria whose language was apparently Old Canaanite, see Pettinato, G 1981. *The Archives of Ebla. An Empire Inscribed in Clay* (New York) with an Afterword by Mitchell Dawood. For a brief orientation, see Craigie, P C 1983. *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids) 93-98; Althann, R 1981. *The Impact of Ebla on Biblical Studies, Religion in Southern Africa* 2 39-47.
22. Consult Holladay, W L 1966. *Jeremiah and Moses: Further Observations, JBL* 85 19.
23. See further Althann, *Jeremiah*, 166-170.

From this brief comparison of the MT and the LXX versions of some words of Jeremiah we may conclude that the Greek translator(s) had an unsteady purchase on certain grammatical and lexical phenomena of the Hebrew text as well as showing a lack of appreciation for its poetic features. Our analysis of a few oracles of Jeremiah made according to the canons of Northwest Semitic grammar, poetry and prosody, suggests that the MT may be superior to the shorter LXX.