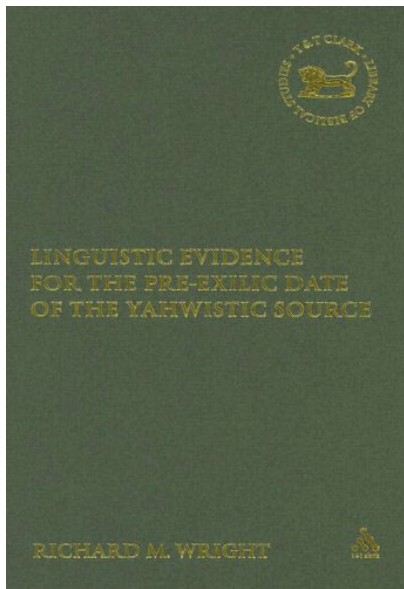


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Linguistic Evidence for the Pre-exilic Date of the Yahwistic Source

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The development of the Hebrew language has, generally speaking, no more than marginal importance for the history of Hebrew literature. The reasons can be found on both sides. As far as the language is concerned, in remarkable contrast to the history of biblical literature, which extended from at least the ninth to the second century B.C.E., Old Testament Hebrew is characterized by an astonishing uniformity. It is for the most part impossible to distinguish linguistic stages in its historical development. Where the literature is concerned, the writings of the Old Testament, starting from their earliest compilation, developed unremittingly through internal biblical interpretation, and in this way they have become so complex from a literary point of view that it is hardly possible to isolate significant reference texts for a particular linguistic stage. The Pentateuch, for example, extends from the twelfth century—the possible date of the Song of Miriam (Exod 15:21)—until the Hellenistic period, from which some of the subsequently interpolated oracles of Balaam in Num 24 derive. That is almost a thousand years. The book of Proto-Isaiah contains eighth-century texts (e.g., Isa 6; 8:1–4), as well as texts dating from the end of the third or the beginning of the second century (e.g., Isa 24–27). The matter becomes even more complicated because it is not only the books that have many strata; the same is true even of the individual pericopes. It is not unusual for passages of only a few verses to derive from several centuries.

But although we can establish that the language has in general little significance for the literary history, there is one well-known exception. In the books of Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Daniel, Esther, and Ecclesiastes, there is one linguistic level that differs clearly from Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH). We are indebted to A. Hurvitz in particular for his valuable research into Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH). He has gathered together the morphological, syntactical, phraseological, and lexematic characteristics of this linguistic stage and has described its difference from SBH, as well as the features it shares with Qumran Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew. The influence of Aramaic on LBH emerged clearly. Hurvitz used this finding to show that the language of the Priestly Code is SBH, not LBH. On the basis of this result, he considers it possible to maintain that the Priestly Code was composed in the preexilic period.

The present doctoral dissertation—it was submitted at the Graduate School of Cornell University, Department of Near Eastern Studies, under the supervision of Professors Gary Rendsburg, David Owen, and Martin Bernal (the author also studied at the Baptist Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary, both in Richmond, Virginia)—proposes to extend Hurvitz’s proof to the other great pentateuchal source, the Yahwist. It is now shown that its language is SBH, not LBH. The immediate reason for putting this forward is that in recent years an exilic-postexilic date for the Yahwist has found increasingly wide acceptance.

It must be said at once that the outcome of the investigation is trivial, for no one with understanding of the language of the Old Testament has ever doubted that the books that do not represent the LBH linguistic stage are written in SBH. It is not merely the Priestly Code and the Yahwist that are written in SBH. The same is true, with a few exceptions, of the whole Torah. That is the premise of the investigation. But if the premise is then declared to be the result, the word “proof” cannot properly be used.

The question is not whether by far the greatest part of the Old Testament represents the linguistic stage SBH—that goes without saying. The real question is when the transition from SBH to LBH can be *dated*. The assertion that the borderline was the exile is unproven and also unprovable. Of the reference texts for LBH, Chronicles, Daniel, Esther, and Ecclesiastes certainly date from the Hellenistic period, while Wright himself places Ezra-Nehemiah between 400 and 300 (11 n. 50). Consequently, a gap of two centuries yawns between the beginning of the exile and the observable beginning of LBH. Hurvitz and Wright disregard this gap. With such a *petitio principii* it is impossible to refute the opposite view, that the greater part of Old Testament literature that is written in SBH was composed precisely during these two hundred years, that is, in the sixth and fifth centuries.

The book has been written with a mental reservation. The author is “not convinced personally of the existence of a ‘J’ source” (4). With this he follows the assumption of his teacher Gary Rendsburg, who has attempted to prove the unity of the book of Genesis. Unlike Rendsburg, Wright assumes a late preexilic, not an early preexilic, date for “J” (always set in quotes, to indicate the doubt). In his definition of the source, he follows J. Carpenter and G. Harford-Battersby (1900), S. R. Driver (1891; 9th ed. 1913; repr., 1957), M. Noth (1948, ET 1981), G. von Rad (Genesis, 1949, ET 1972) and O. Eißfeldt (1934, ET 1965, without his distinction between L and J). What emerges from the consensus of these six scholars is a minimum corpus for the J source and thus for the text that has to be considered (list on 20–21).

The proof rests on about forty individual phenomena, each of which is discussed. Wright names five morphological, six syntactic, eight phraseological (idiomatic), and fifteen lexematic characteristics of LBH, as well as a list of twenty-two Persian loanwords. In each case he establishes that they are missing from the Yahwist text (or must be explained differently). This procedure means that throughout the proof is carried through *e silentio*. This is in the nature of the matter, but it considerably restricts the evidence. Sometimes the proof rests on a single instance: the form שְׁתִּיהַ “(the) drinking” (instead of the infinitive שְׁתֵּה or שְׁתוּת) can be found only in Esth 1:8. Wright concludes: “‘J’'s preference for the infinitive construct שְׁתוּת in contrast to LBH שְׁתִּיהַ is further evidence that ‘J’ was composed before the post-exilic period” (36). Similarly “cogent” is the proof in the case of the Persian loanwords, which in several cases are *hapax legomena*.

What is valuable is that the characteristics of LBH are not presented simply on the basis of biblical evidence but are also supported by Qumran texts and Mishnaic Hebrew. In this way the difference between SBH and LBH can be seen in the wider context of the history of the Hebrew language as such. To this the comparison with Aramaic also contributes. But when in the case of the lexical Aramaisms Wright shows the difference from SBH by contrasting the biblical quotations with the text of the Targum (e.g., 89–90, 92, 95, 97, 100, 193, 110), this comparison again, of course, proves nothing but simply shows what we should expect.

One has the right to expect that a grammatical and linguistic study will be accurate. The main complaint here does not rest on the errors in the bibliography or the misprints (e.g., 24 line 12, where the word “long” must be added if the sentence is to be comprehensible). We are even prepared to forgive the writer for twice confusing Rebekah with Hagar (65 line 30; 67 line 30). But what is more serious are faults in the proof itself. For the late long form of first-person singular imperfect consecutive Wright offers as the first instance Gen 32:6 (24). This text derives unequivocally from the J source. Yet Wright concludes: “It is noteworthy that ‘J’ never employs the form וְאֶקְטֹלָה” (25). This

imprecision is not an isolated instance. Again and again the argument rests on instances that according to the list given on pages 20–21 do not belong to the J source (e.g., 74 [לִקַח אִשָּׁה], 77 [עֲשֵׂה הַיֵּשֶׁר בְּעֵינַיִן], 106 [לִקַח]). This is particularly inconsistent because Wright later devotes a separate chapter to the cases that are ascribed to the J source by only a few scholars. The most extreme case is the following: “SHB calendar formulae with יום never place יום at the beginning of the phrase..., whereas in LBH יום often in initial position” (57). The examples from the J source that Wright provides here derive without exception from the Priestly Code: Gen 7:11; 8:4, 5, 13, 14; Exod 12:18; 16:1 (58–59).

The result of the writer’s fixation on the linguistic history is that other possible interpretations of the difference between SBH and LBH are not even considered. Yet they are obvious. The extraordinary consistency of SBH can best be explained if SBH was a language used for religious literature—the “church Latin,” so to speak, of the theological seminary attached to the Second Temple. The stage of linguistic development that had been reached at the end of the preexilic period was “frozen” and reserved for work on the Holy Scriptures, whereas the everyday language went on developing. This explains why what are evidently late writings are still written in SBH, while on the other hand characteristics of LBH can occasionally crop up within books written in SBH: the writers were not always completely attentive and—in rare cases—could relapse into their everyday language. The difference between SBH and LBH can best be understood not as a difference of period but of religious significance. The books written in LBH are marginal phenomena in the canon: the canonicity of Esther and Ecclesiastes was rightly disputed; Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah are mixed compositions, composed of Aramaic and Hebrew sections; and Chronicles itself purports to be a kind of midrash on the historical books of the Old Testament. This does not exclude the possibility that in some cases the difference between SBH and LBH is significant for the history of the literature; for example, the language of the song of Deborah (Judg 5), which is often seen as one of the oldest texts of the Old Testament, is close to LBH.

Wright’s book cannot be considered a contribution to the discussion of the Pentateuch. The author has no more than a sketchy knowledge of the research history, and that at second hand. Abraham Kuenen is listed as A. Keunen (1), and Wright has quite evidently not read a line of what he has written (he is missing from the bibliography). L. Perlitt is supposed to have maintained, like H. H. Schmid, that the sources J (and E) proceeded from the Deuteronomic school (2). That is grotesque and displays complete ignorance of his position. There is no survey of present-day Continental pentateuchal research. The most recent German title in the bibliography is M. Rose, *Deuteronomist und Jahwist*, ATANT 67, Zurich: W. de Gruyter (instead of, correctly, Theologischer Verlag) 1981. But the writer is equally unable to enter into discussion with American studies. As long

as it is merely asserted and not proved that the transition from SBH to LBH was contemporary with the exilic period—and not, perhaps, with the transition from the Persian to the Hellenistic period—the dates proposed by F. W. Winnett and J. Van Seters lose none of their probability.

The only thing that can really be refuted by way of the distinction between SBH and LBH is the thesis of the Copenhagen and Sheffield schools that the Old Testament is a Hellenistic book (163). But we already knew anyway that this is nonsense.