

Aramaic Passages in Hebrew Texts

E Bruce Brooks

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

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Aramaic came to Judah with the Babylonian conquest. Thus no Aramaic passage in any Biblical text can be earlier than the Exile. There are four such passages, one of which is potentially problematic.

1. **Ezra 4:6 - 6:18 and 7:12-26.** Besides presenting official letters in Aramaic, part of the *narrative* is also in Aramaic. Identity of language between narrative and documents shows that both are from the same hand. Someone knowing Aramaic, and proud of it, has simply not known when to stop. Wright **Rebuilding** 35 suggests “the Artaxerxes correspondence, rather than representing an authentic source, has been composed ad hoc for the book of Ezra-Neh.” The supposedly earlier conditions described in the Ezra letters are unknown to Nehemiah. Ezra probably meant to add to the picture given in Nehemiah, and Ezra should thus be dated after Nehemiah.¹

2. **Daniel 2:4b-7:28.** The text dates from Maccabean times,² and mentions the desecration of the Temple under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (0168).³ Barr 591 suggests “that the procedure is in conscious imitation of Ezr,” and continues, “Our author . . . takes it to be proper, in starting with the new language, to insert the tab ‘in Aramaic’ which he found in the received text of Ezr (4:76).” The Ezra passage was relevant in Daniel’s time since it ends with the dedication of the rebuilt Temple (Ezr 6:16-18). The use of Aramaic was probably an effort, as had earlier been the case with Ezra, to lend an air of historical verisimilitude to his account. But as with Ezra, the Aramaic portion overlaps the structure of the text. Dan 1-6 are stories about Daniel and his companions under the Babylonian and Median kings; Dan 7-12 record four separate visions. But the Aramaic part extends to Dan 7, overlapping that division. This is not an interpolation, but the overenthusiastic work of the original author of Daniel.

3. **Jeremiah 10:11** interrupts a poem on the power and wrath of God. It says, “Thus shall you say to them: The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.” Who is the “you” here? It can only be Jeremiah. But the poem begins, with Jeremiah himself speaking: “Hear the word which the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord.” 10:11 is a clumsy later insertion, apparently using Aramaic to lend gravity and authenticity to what it interrupts.

¹and after Haggai and at least Protero-Zechariah, both of which are mentioned in Ezra 6:14.

²and is written in a later version of Aramaic; see ABD 4/174 (Stephen A Kaufman).

³Psalms 44, 74, 79, and 83 have been referred to this period; see Creelman. Of them, only Psa 44 and 74 are likely to have been composed for the occasion; see Brooks **Psalms 114-116**.

4. **Gen 31:47.** Laban and Jacob have parted. Jacob has served Laban seven years for his daughter Rachel, and another seven years for his daughter Leah, and yet another four years for good measure. Rachel has stolen Laban's household gods, and taken them with her. Laban pursues, and overtakes Jacob. A search is made, but the gods (hidden under the saddle of Rachel's camel) are not discovered – it turns out that Rachel is menstruating, and thus unclean, so she and her camel are not searched.

Then there follows a peacemaking scene:

[**Gen 31:45**] And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar. [46] And Jacob said unto his brethren, Gather stones, and they took stones, and made a heap, and they did eat there by the heap.

[47] *And Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha [Aramaic], but Jacob called it Gale-ed [Hebrew].*⁴ [48] *And Laban said, This heap is witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Gale-ed* [49] *and Mizpah, for he said, Yahweh watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.* [50] *If thou shalt afflict my daughters, and if thou shalt take wives besides my daughters, no man is with us; see, God is witness between me and thee.*

[51] And Laban said to Jacob, Behold this heap, and behold the pillar, which I have set betwixt me and thee. [52] This heap be witness, and the pillar be witness, that I will not pass over this heap to thee, and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and this pillar unto me, for harm.[53] The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge betwixt us. And Jacob swore by the Fear of [the god feared by] his Father Isaac.

It is conspicuous that Laban has two concerns, which the oaths by the heap of witness will prevent: in v50 it is Jacob's treatment of his daughters, but in v52 it is attack. Given the tensions with which the story started, the latter version makes more sense. The oath, and the setting of a boundary between them, amounts to a peace treaty between enemies, not a promise of future personal kindness.

Then Gen 31:47-50 (italicized and indented above) must be an interpolation. This separates it from the authorship, and this the date, or dates, of the rest of Genesis. This is a most welcome result. Otherwise it would follow that all of Genesis must date from the time of the Exile. This would cause considerable trouble elsewhere.

So here is an interpolation It was made for a readership which prizes emotional engagement over the merely narrative virtues of a consecutive story line. Specifically, it substitutes tenderness (Laban's concern for his daughters) for the enmity between Laban and Jacob.

Many late passages sentimentalize issues in this way.

Works Cited

- J Barr. Daniel; in Peake (rev Black) Commentary on the Bible (1962) 591-602
 E Bruce Brooks. Psalms 114-116 and Their Neighbors. Alpha v2 (2022) 72-78
 Harlan Creelman. Are there Maccabean Psalms? The Old and New Testament Student, v15 (1892) 94-104 and 192-201
 Jacob L Wright. Rebuilding Identity. de Gruyter 2004

⁴Both names mean "heap of witness."