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Textual History of the Bible

2.4.2 Greek

(2,460 words)

Part of [2. Baruch/Jeremiah](#) - 2.4. Letter of Jeremiah

2.4.2.1 Nature and Significance

The Letter of Jeremiah is a short work (seventy-two verses) that purports to be a letter from Jeremiah to those about to be exiled to Babylon (preface). In it, the speaker warns the people about the idols and false gods they will encounter abroad and encourages them to stand firm in their worship of the one, true God.

The Hebrew version of the Letter of Jeremiah, if it existed, was written sometime between the sixth and first centuries B.C.E. However, there is debate over whether or not the Letter of Jeremiah is a translated text (see [2.4.1.1.3](#) and below, [2.4.2.4](#)). The Greek text, however, certainly came into existence after Alexander's conquests, likely in the third or second centuries B.C.E. Other early versions (e.g., Latin [2.4.4](#), Coptic [2.4.6](#), Syriac [2.4.3](#)) are derived from the Greek text and so must be dated later. There is insufficient evidence to make a case for the provenance of the text, although Egypt (specifically Alexandria), Babylon, and Palestine have been proposed.¹

In the manuscript tradition, the Greek text of the Letter of Jeremiah is consistently placed at the end of the Jeremianic corpus, following Lamentations (Θρῆνοι) ([L13–17.1.1.4](#)), which in turn follows Baruch.² This placement is important as, unlike its position in the Latin tradition where it is appended to Baruch ([2.4.4](#)),³ it is physically separated from Baruch, thus reinforcing its independent nature, distinct perspective, and original content.⁴ However, Kratz has argued that the Letter of Jeremiah was originally written to be appended to the end of the Hebrew version of Jeremiah.⁵

2.4.2.2 Manuscripts and Witnesses

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2.4.2.2.1 Early Papyri and Parchments

The only papyrus of the Letter of Jeremiah is 7Q2, a small fragment of a Greek text found at Qumran that is thought to contain Ep Jer 43–44 in a textual form later represented by the Lucianic recension (2.4.2.2.3) and the Syriac version (2.4.3).⁶ The certainty of this association is by no means assured as the fragment is very small, containing only twenty-two letters. However, if this fragment is a portion of the Letter of Jeremiah, then it provides the first evidential support for its existence and a firm *terminus ante quem*.

2.4.2.2.2 Early Uncial Codices

The Greek text of the Letter of Jeremiah is found in Alexandrinus (LXX^A) and Vaticanus (LXX^B), but is missing in Sinaiticus (LXX^S), probably as part of the lacuna after Lam 2:20. The Letter of Jeremiah is also extant in Codex Marchalianus (LXX^Q), a sixth-century C.E. uncial manuscript originally copied in Egypt and known for its Hexaplaric material (I.1.3.1.2), as well as Codex Venetus (LXX^V), an eighth to ninth-century C.E. manuscript. All of these manuscripts of the Letter of Jeremiah are complete and LXX^A and LXX^B are not too difficult to read due to their clear, uncial handwriting and generous line spacing.

There are few textual differences among the codices, none of which are substantial. The text of LXX^B appears to be superior, not only because it is the oldest (palaeographically dated to the fourth century C.E.), but primarily because there are fewer scribal errors and clear evidence of the text having been corrected to an exemplar. LXX^A is also a good textual witness for the Letter of Jeremiah, although it has more independent readings.

In addition to the majuscule codices, the Letter of Jeremiah is also found in thirty-three ninth to fourteenth century C.E. miniscule texts.⁷ These manuscripts are not particularly distinctive, but help show the stability of the Greek text of the Letter of Jeremiah and its transmission history.

2.4.2.2.3 Origenic and Lucianic Manuscripts

There is little evidence of Origenic material (I.1.3.1.2) in the Letter of Jeremiah. The primary exception is the one instance of an asterisk (*, usually denoting a “minus” in LXX) in LXX^Q, which is very small and located in the text at Ep Jer 21 marking the word χελιδόνες “swallows.” LXX^Q is known for its paratextual markings and other books in the codex show a much greater number of recensional notations. It is uncertain, however, why this word was signaled by the scribe as it is included in every other Greek manuscript (except LXX²³⁹, which has a minus of the clause χελιδόνες καὶ τὰ ὄρνεα “swallows and the birds”).

A number of extant manuscripts have been identified as Lucianic (e.g., LXX^L = LXX²², LXX³⁶, LXX⁴⁸, LXX⁵¹, LXX⁹⁶, LXX²³¹, LXX³¹¹, LXX⁷⁶³; and LXX^l = LXX⁶², LXX¹⁹⁸, LXX⁴⁰⁷, LXX⁴⁴⁹; I.1.3.1.2) and Ziegler has argued that, in addition to manuscripts LXX²⁶ and LXX⁵³⁶, the Syriac version of the Letter of Jeremiah provides evidence of a Lucianic base text.⁸

2.4.2.2.4 Patristic Quotations

Greek Patristic authors made few references to the Letter of Jeremiah. Origen (as given by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.2) and Epiphanius (*Pan.* 1.8.6) refer to the Letter of Jeremiah in the context of canon lists and, together with Lamentations, group it with Jeremiah; Epiphanius here speaks of “letters” of Jeremiah and Baruch, which may be understood to designate both the Letter of Jeremiah and Baruch as a “letter” (ἐπιστολῶν αὐτοῦ τε καὶ <τοῦ> Βαρουχ “letters by him [Jeremiah] and also the one by Baruch” conj. Dindorf; cf. Epiphanius, *Mens.* 5).⁹ The only possible citation of the Letter of Jeremiah by a Greek author is Clement, *Protr.* 78.3, although the wording is sufficiently different from Ep Jer 71 so that it is not certain that this verse is the specific referent. This dearth of citations and references suggests that the Letter of Jeremiah was not an important book for Patristic authors and that it was not seen to be useful for them in their exegesis and argumentation.

2.4.2.3 Modern Editions and Auxiliary Tools

A diplomatic text edition of the Letter of Jeremiah based on LXX^B (with brief critical apparatus referring to LXX^A and LXX^Q) appears in the third volume of Swete’s edition of the Septuagint from 1905.¹⁰ The most recent hand edition of the text of the Letter of Jeremiah (with brief critical apparatus), is the 2006 *editio altera* of Rahlfs’ Septuaginta, edited by Hanhart.¹¹ Although both of these editions are functional, they engage in a limited fashion with the Greek texts, primarily drawing from the major Greek majuscules, and do not discuss the different translations. Of these two, the Rahlfs–Hanhart edition is to be preferred and successfully achieves its goal of binding all of the LXX in one, affordable volume. The standard (eclectic) critical edition of the Greek text of the Letter of Jeremiah is the latest version of Ziegler’s edition.¹² This fine edition takes into account all of the readings found in the codices, including the minuscules and readings evidenced by later translations, which are provided in the critical apparatus, and should be the text used for serious study of the Letter of Jeremiah. In addition to the text, Ziegler provides a lengthy introduction to the manuscript traditions, their characteristics, and family groupings.¹³ Most recently, I have produced a diplomatic edition and translation of LXX^B, which follows the sense-unit divisions of the manuscript.¹⁴

2.4.2.4 Translation or Composition?

A major issue in the study of the Letter of Jeremiah is determining its language of composition. The Letter of Jeremiah has been heavily criticised for having poor Greek.¹⁵ In particular, the scholars who disparage the quality of the work’s Greek also have sought to explain the strange phraseology and words of the Letter of Jeremiah by positing a Hebrew original that was either misread or corrupted through use and time. For example, there are places in the Letter of Jeremiah in which an alternate reading that would make better sense can be proposed based on a corruption or misreading of unpointed Hebrew (e.g., Ep Jer 10 “moths” vs. “food”; Ep Jer 71 “marble” vs. “linen”). One key piece of evidence for the Letter of Jeremiah’s dependency on the Hebrew rather than the Greek text of Jeremiah is Ep Jer 69 and its reference to a scarecrow in the cucumber field. This verse strongly parallels the Hebrew text of Jer 10:5, the phrase in

question being absent in surviving LXX versions. This scholarly position led a majority of scholars in the twentieth century to read the Greek text through a Hebrew lens and attempt to reconstruct portions of the “original” Hebrew in order to explain a perceived difficulty in the Greek.¹⁶

The theory of a Hebrew original was not always dominant. In the nineteenth century a number of scholars thought that the Letter of Jeremiah was originally composed in Greek. For example, Fritzsche firmly held this position, and Schürer thought the text was “certainly of Greek origin.”¹⁷ Recently, the question of original language has been revisited by Wright, who investigated the features of the Letter of Jeremiah that do not sit comfortably with what we typically expect of texts that are translated from Hebrew (e.g., lack of parataxis, verbal adjective, interpositional words or phrases).¹⁸ This approach was also adopted in my commentary, in which I interpreted the Greek text by making minimal recourse to a presumed Hebrew original.¹⁹

2.4.2.5 Influence of Earlier LXX Books

The Letter of Jeremiah’s relationship to the book of Jeremiah is clear (L7), not only in its subsequent incorporation into the Jeremianic additions, but most explicitly through its authorial attribution to Jeremiah. In particular, the ability to attribute a letter to Jeremiah is thought to arise from Jer 29(36):1, in which Jeremiah sends a document to those in exile: “These are the words of the book (τῆς βίβλου/רִהְסִפְרָה) that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem ...”²⁰ Additionally, the Letter of Jeremiah shows strong a strong connection with the first half of Jeremiah 10 and the critique of the idolatrous practices of the nations.²¹ However, beyond Jeremiah, there is little explicit evidence of Septuagint influence.

2.4.2.6 Relevance for Exegesis

There is very little explicit engagement with (Greek) Letter of Jeremiah by Jewish and New Testament authors. The possible exception is an oblique reference in 2 Macc 2:2 to a letter sent by Jeremiah to the exiles. This may not be a specific reference to the Letter of Jeremiah, although the description of “the gold and silver statues and their adornment” fits well with the description of idols found throughout the Letter of Jeremiah. Dimant has suggested that 2 Macc 2:2 might be influenced by 4QApocryphon of Jeremiah C (4Q385a) and not the Letter of Jeremiah.²² However, she does raise the possibility that 4QApocryphon of Jeremiah C might be dependent on the Letter of Jeremiah. It is in this interconnection amongst Jewish texts that we see the importance of the Letter of Jeremiah for our understanding of Second Temple Judaism. Specifically, the Letter of Jeremiah provides evidence of a strong tradition of adopting Jeremiah (and characters found within the biblical book) for pseudepigraphical composition.²³

Another important contribution that the Letter of Jeremiah offers for exegesis is its relationship to polemical writings against idols.²⁴ Although the Letter of Jeremiah is distinct in that the entire text is a tirade against worshipping foreign gods, it is part of a wide tradition of polemics against the folly and danger of idols (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 13–14; *Apocalypse of*

Abraham 1–8). Not only does the Letter of Jeremiah provide insight into this literary form, it also suggests that the issue of idolatry continued and was a pressing historical concern for a number of Jewish authors in antiquity.

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Notes

1. For dating and provenance, see Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 148–50.

2. Note, however, the potentially different place of both Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah in Codex Sinaiticus (LXX^S), now probably lost in a lacuna after Lam 2:20; in this codex, Lamentations follows Jeremiah.
3. P.-M. Bogaert, "Le livre de Baruch dans les manuscrits de la Bible latine: Disparition et reintegration," *RBén* 115 (2005): 286–342.
4. S.A. Adams, "Epistle of Jeremiah or Baruch 6: The Importance of Labels," *Journal for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* 44 (2011): 26–30.
5. Kratz, "Die Rezeption von Jeremia 10 und 29," 2–31.
6. **DJD* III, 143 and Planche XXX.2.
7. For a list of miniscule manuscripts that include the Letter of Jeremiah, see Ziegler, *Jeremias*, 8–11.
8. Ziegler, *Jeremias*, 79–85.
9. G. Dindorf, *Epiphaniï Episcopi Constantiæ opera*, Vol. 2 (Leipzig: Weigel, 1859).
10. Swete, **Old Testament*, 3.379–84.
11. Rahlfs–Hanhart, **Septuaginta*, 2.766–70.
12. Ziegler, *Jeremias*.
13. Ziegler, *Jeremias*, 7–108.
14. Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*.
15. E.g., C.J. Ball, "Epistle of Jeremy," **APOT*, 1.596–611 (597); Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah*, 327.
16. E.g., Ball, "Epistle of Jeremy," 597–98; Kratz, "Der Brief des Jeremia," 9; Assan-Dhôte and Moatti-Fine, *Baruch, Lamentation, Lettre de Jérémie*, 329. For an Aramaic *Urtext*, see C.C. Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), 65–66; R.H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times: With an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Harper, 1949), 430.
17. O.F. Fritzsche, *Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zu den Apokryphen des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1851), 206; E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (5 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 3.195. The opinion of a Hebrew original given in the updated version is that of the revisers. See E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (rev. ed; eds. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–1987), 3.744.
18. Wright, "The Epistle of Jeremiah," 126–42.

19. Adams, *Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah*, 150–55.

20. Assan-Dhôte and Moatti-Fine, *Baruch, Lamentation, Lettre de Jérémie*, 289–94.

21. Kratz, “Die Rezeption von Jeremia 10 und 29,” 2–31.

22. D. Dimant, **DJD XXX*, 107–08.

23. Adams, “Jeremiah in the Apocrypha,” 359–78; This practice is especially found in Jewish letters written in Greek. Cf. L. Doering, *Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* (WUNT I 298; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 154–58.

24. Brooke, “The Structure of the Poem,” 107–28.

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