

Lexical Anachronisms of the Pentateuch

Hebrew is a Semitic dialect or language that developed in Canaan between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea during the latter half of the second millennium B.C. Biblical Hebrew was a conservative literary language, which coexisted with other linguistic (spoken) languages and dialects until the Babylonian Exile (6th century B.C.). A distinction must be made between linguistic Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew, because the spoken language was more susceptible to regional cultural influences, independent linguistic development and dialect diversity. With the literary form of Hebrew, scholars have noted that Biblical Hebrew before the Exile exhibited marked differences from Biblical Hebrew of literary works after the Exile:

Classical Biblical Hebrew (Biblical Hebrew Proper) – This encompassed the Pentateuch and other Old Testament books written before the Exile.

Based on the earliest pieces of Hebrew writing in possession (such as the Gezer Calendar dated 900 B.C.), there is evidence that it belonged to the Canaanite group of languages.

Late Biblical Hebrew – This described the literary language of the Old Testament books after the Exile.

The morphology, phonology, and lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew exhibit a significant Aramaic influence. For example, the Masoretes (6th century A.D.), responsible for establishing the vowel system for the consonant only Hebrew lexicon, used vowel features found in Aramaic.

After the Exile, Classical Biblical Hebrew disappeared from everyday life and was used primarily for literary, liturgical, and administrative purposes until the fall of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.

Because so little data is available for study, limited largely to the Old Testament, the origin of Hebrew is unknown. Without the ability of examining primary sources, scholars have developed other theoretical approaches to study the question of the origin and literary transmission of Hebrew such as historical reconstruction, comparative studies with other local languages and tracing dialect geography.

Late Words

Identifying lexical anachronisms is one method that destructive critics use to deny Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Lexical anachronisms are the use of words that may not have existed during a certain period of time and their presence provides evidence of inconsistency with the dating of that manuscript. For example, if the word “computer” were found in a manuscript purportedly dated in the 1600 A.D., this “late” word would refute that early dating of authorship. In a similar manner, it is alleged that some words found in the Pentateuch were used after Moses’ time.

While this approach does have merit, there are several problems that affect the interpretation and conclusion of the data. Among them:

1. Current scholarship does not have an extensive record of Ancient Hebrew; thus, there is no clear lexical basis for determining what is ancient or not. For example, Biblical Hebrew only has 8000 lexical terms preserved in the Old Testament, which isn’t even enough to support a spoken language. Yet there is ample evidence that much of Biblical Hebrew is indeed ancient.

Biblical Hebrew has names of places and people that are not found in Late Biblical Hebrew or mentioned in any other ancient texts.

The popular etymologies of practically all of the patriarchal names are explained by synonyms rather than by their true roots, which indicates that their original meaning are unknown or forgotten.

Lexical Anachronisms of the Pentateuch (page 2)

Over a quarter of the words in the Bible appear just once, and 289 of them belong to root words used only once in Biblical Hebrew. While the meaning of most were determined on the basis of Rabbinic Hebrew or Comparative Semitics, there are several in which only the approximate meaning of a term can be discovered.

2. Some words found in the Pyramid Texts (2400 BC) disappear in usage until they were used in writings of the Greco-Roman period (300-30 BC). If dating based on the presence of late words was used, then the Pyramid Texts would be incorrectly dated at the later date.

3. Aramaic words, thought to be evidence of Late Biblical Hebrew, created when the Jews were replacing Hebrew with Aramaic, have turned out to be either Hebrew, Phoenician, Babylonia, or Arabic words. Some of these words are of linguistic languages that were concurrent with the time of Moses.

An example of this can be found in Genesis 31:47 where Jacob and Laban used different languages to name a heap of stones. Jacob used the Hebrew term "Galeed," and Laban used the Aramaic term "Jegarsahadutha."

4. Scribal traditions during the second millennium B.C. are unknown. It is not known when scribal glosses, intended to clarify the text (or update archaic terms or grammar), have been inserted as part of the text during the process of duplication. However, glosses introduced late words, which has been used to erroneously refute the early dating of the Pentateuch.

Late Spelling Patterns

In another approach, some scholars have studied the orthography of the Pentateuch to gain a better understanding of how the Bible was written and transmitted. In general, the older the text, the greater number of terms that will be spelled in an old fashioned manner. This principle of conservative spelling is used in all philological studies interested in determining the origin of any language.

For example, the pronoun "you" is spelled "thee" and "thou" in early English manuscripts dated hundreds of centuries earlier than today.

From objective studies, the Pentateuch has been found to be the most conservative of all the books of the Old Testament. Within the Pentateuch, the books can be ranked in order of most to least conservative spelling: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Genesis, and Deuteronomy.

It has been determined that it is the priestly material that contains the most conservative spelling. Exodus and Leviticus are dominated by priestly material followed by Numbers and Genesis.

As an example of more technical detail, Genesis has a common 3rd person singular pronoun form *-hw*; Joshua and later works breaks this into masculine and feminine forms.

From another orthographic perspective, destructive critics have used spelling patterns as a basis to deny Mosaic authorship. They point to Proto-Semitic inscriptions on Semitic mining camp huts and stone tablets found in Southern Sinai dated around 1800 B.C., which have 27 consonants. Destructive critics contend that since Hebrew is probably a descendant of ancient Northwest Semitic (Proto- Semitic), it could not be possibly the language of Moses' time since it has only 22 consonants; thus, it had to be the product of later Hebrew authors.

Lexical Anachronisms of the Pentateuch (page 3)

1. Because the Semitic family of some 70 languages shares similar phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary, various scholars have argued that linguistic unity is the result of a common linguistic origin including the possibility common race or peoples. Their historical approach includes a hypothetical family tree of Semitic languages, which presumes the existence of a series of proto languages, which is not supported by any archeological data.

There is no archeological data to confirm these speculative presumptions, hypotheses and theories. Archeological data can only take scholars to a period in which there was already more diversity than unity, with distinct peoples across a wide area speaking languages, which have certain elements in common and undergoing a variety of independent developments.

Because of the absence of archeological data, there is considerable skepticism of scholars who use a family tree as part of their theory to explain the existence of a Semitic language.

2. Newer methods of investigation such as dialect geography and their contact points with other cultures, prove that the traditional classification of Semitic languages into 5 principle languages is inadequate (Akkadian, Canaanite, Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic).

There is growing recognition that before the first millennium B.C., Northwest Semitic languages may not be simply seen as two distinct language groups Canaanite or Aramaic but rather as a group of languages with various features in common.

How Hebrew began still remains a mystery. Scholars are discovering that early language development was more complex than traditionally thought. The lack of archeological evidence has prompted some to impose hypothetical historical reconstructions as valid theories, which some destructive critics have used to deny the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. At this time, the lexicon and orthography of the Pentateuch provide more positive evidence for an earlier dating of second millennium B.C. than a later dating of first millennium B.C.; the evidence of lexical anachronisms has been presently insufficient.

References:

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