

Diskussion

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How Old Is the Hebrew Bible? A Response to Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten

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Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten have published a widely noted book on the subject of the linguistic dating of biblical texts, an approach which hitherto has been either neglected or insufficiently considered in reconstructing the growth of biblical literature.¹ It is an accessible book that provides an apt introduction to the current mainstream position in the field of linguistic dating of Biblical Hebrew. But it does raise some questions that shall be addressed in the following remarks.

1 Does the book answer its title's question?

To a certain extent, yes indeed, but overall, critical readers probably would tend towards a negative answer. Why? From this book, they learn in a competent way about linguistic variation in Biblical Hebrew and the possible historical locations of Classical Biblical Hebrew, Transitional Biblical Hebrew, and Late Biblical Hebrew (henceforth CBH, TBH, and LBH). Of course, all of this is relevant for discussing the age of the Hebrew Bible. But there are several problems with

1 For their evaluation of past scholarship neglecting linguistic evidences see idem, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 5–10.

Article note: This paper originated as a talk at the SBL Annual Meeting in San Diego (November 23rd 2019). Jacqueline Vayntrub and David Lambert organized a book review session, in which I participated regarding Ronald Hendel's and Jan Joosten's publication, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible? A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). This article was submitted to ZAW before Jan Joosten's conviction in France for possessing child pornography and is published here with the explicit approval of the ZAW board in order to interact critically with Joosten's scholarly views.

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applying these points successfully to the question of how old the Hebrew Bible is, and Hendel and Joosten themselves are quite explicit about these difficulties.

Firstly, a linguistic approach can only show small peculiarities within expressions, at best sentences. Strictly speaking, only these specific expressions or sentences can be dated linguistically. But the resulting dates do not necessarily hold true for the immediate or broader literary contexts – unless these are proven to belong to the very same literary strata. But this is a question that lies beyond the reach of linguistics. Hendel and Joosten acknowledge that the Hebrew Bible is a layered text: »Any biblical book may turn out to contain strata and fragments composed at wholly different periods.«² Linguistic peculiarities within small contexts may be the object of linguistic dating, but complex sentences, texts, or even books are a different case.

Secondly, there is a basic methodological asymmetry when identifying CBH and LBH, and this generally impacts the question of dating: »A text with enough late features is regarded as LBH, while a text with no late features, or very few, is regarded as CBH.«³ Nevertheless, Hendel and Joosten try to identify some positive CBH markers such as the expression הַנְּהִינָה, temporal כִּי, and the *passive qal* instead of *niphal*,⁴ but it is obvious that such criteria remain spotty.⁵ With regard to the title question of the book, the CBH-LBH distinction tends to date the Hebrew Bible as being old, which means that significant portions would belong to the pre-exilic period, simply because CBH is the default position.⁶ Again, this is nothing that Hendel and Joosten would hide from us, but a certain bias towards early dating remains inherent to the approach and impairs its validity to answer the question »How Old is the Hebrew Bible?«

² *Ibid.*, ix.

³ *Ibid.*, 43f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44f.

⁵ See e. g. Ian Young and Robert Rezetko, »Can the Ages of Biblical Literature be Discerned Without Literary Analysis. Review Essay of Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten. *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible? A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2018; xvi + 221)«, *The Bible and Interpretation*, online publication (University of Arizona) 10: »Yes, הַנְּהִינָה (hinneh-na') is used in Genesis, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—note the different rates of usage—but it is not found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. That means that in terms of actual distribution, the latter five CBH books are identical in (non-)usage to, for example, the five LBH books of Esther–Chronicles.« In addition, הַנְּהִינָה is limited to direct speech.

⁶ See on this Shimon Gesundheit, »Introduction–The Strengths and Weaknesses of Linguistic Dating«, in *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz et al., FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 295–302.

Thirdly, large textual portions of the Hebrew Bible cannot be classified within the CBH-LBH scheme. Or in Joosten and Hendel's words: »CBH is found in Genesis through 2 Kings, LBH in Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Daniel. The clear implication of this division is that many biblical passages fall outside the CBH-LBH opposition.«⁷ On the level of books, »many« means about 50 %, a ratio that significantly increases if we also count individual texts. Accordingly, from a linguistic perspective, the title question »How Old is the Hebrew Bible?« is only applicable to specific portions of the Bible.

Fourthly, to quote Hendel and Joosten again: »The distinction between CBH and LBH by itself does not yield more than a relative dating.«⁸ To answer the question »How Old is the Hebrew Bible?«, one would like absolute dates, which requires additional information—information that is once again beyond matters of linguistics. To be sure, Joosten and Hendel provide such information, but this entails a series of additional problems that lead to the next point.

2 How accurate is the linguistic approach in terms of absolute dating?

There are basically two arguments that Hendel and Joosten adduce in order to transform the relative dating of CBH and LBH into an absolute dating.

A first clue for the absolute historical approach of CBH results from the inscriptional findings of the preexilic period, which through some linguistic peculiarities coincide with CBH: »The language of Judean inscriptions from the eighth to sixth centuries BCE stands close to CBH. Admittedly, some of the specialized vocabulary of the inscriptions, closely related to the subject matter, is not found in the biblical corpus.«⁹

Unfortunately there is no comparable extra-biblical corpus for LBH: »Between the beginning of the sixth and the middle of the third century, there is a large gap in our documentation. Practically no epigraphic texts in Hebrew have been found from this period. This gap makes it impossible to map the evolution of Hebrew against the language of dated inscriptions.«¹⁰ Only the Qumran Hebrew in the sectarian writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially from the 2nd and 1st centu-

7 Hendel and Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 45.

8 *Ibid.*, 46.

9 *Ibid.*, 71.

10 *Ibid.*, 71f.

ries BCE, provides some empirical clues, but they already pertain mostly to the further development of LBH.¹¹

More important therefore is the second argument: In order to date the development from CBH to LBH in absolute terms, Hendel and Joosten rely on so-called »Transitional Hebrew« (TBH), which they allocate to the 6th century BCE.¹² According to Hendel and Joosten, the argument for this is surprisingly simple, because TBH is found above all in Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, and these texts point to the 6th century BCE: »Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zech 1–8 are set partly or wholly in the sixth century. Lamentations was likely written in reaction to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE. Second Isaiah mentions Cyrus and looks forward to an imminent return from the Babylonian Exile.«¹³ Because TBH can be dated to the 6th century BCE, the absolute date of CBH and LBH must be as follows: »By implication, CBH, which precedes TBH, must be preexilic, and LBH, which follows it, postexilic.«¹⁴

Is something wrong with this reasoning? Yes, because the argument regarding TBH from the 6th century BCE does not distinguish sufficiently between the time of the narrators and the narrated time of these books. Hendel and Joosten write: »Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zech 1–8 are set partly or wholly in the sixth century.«¹⁵ If a text is *set* in the 6th century, this does not mean that it *must have been written* in the 6th century. It is not older, but it may well be younger. Based on redaction-historical research on the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, there are good reasons to hold that these books were written between the end of the 7th century (Jeremiah) or the beginning of the 6th century BCE (Ezekiel), on the one hand, and the late 3rd or early 2nd century BCE, on the other.¹⁶ TBH, as

11 See Elisha Qimron, *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, HSS 29 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008); Jan Joosten, »Late Biblical Hebrew and Qumran Hebrew: A Diachronic View«, in *The Reconfiguration of Hebrew in the Hellenistic Period: Proceedings of the Seventh International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira at Strasbourg University*, ed. idem et al., STDJ 124 (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 93–103.

12 Hendel and Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 79.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 84.

15 *Ibid.*, 79.

16 See e. g. Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Jeremia 25–52*, HAT 1/12,2 (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2019); Thomas Römer, »Jeremia«, in *Einleitung in das Alte Testament: Die Bücher der Hebräischen Bibel und die alttestamentlichen Schriften der katholischen, protestantischen und orthodoxen Kirchen*, ed. idem et al. (Zürich: TVZ, 2013) 400–411; Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezekiel*, ATD 22/1.2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996/2001); idem, *Ezekiel: Der Stand der theologischen Diskussion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008); William A. Tooman and Penelope Barter, eds., *Ezekiel: Current Debates and Future Directions*, FAT 112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). For a discussion of Aaron Hornkohl, *Ancient Hebrew Periodiza-*

attested in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, thus *may* begin in the 6th century BCE, but it is hardly limited to this epoch. Therefore, mapping CBH to the pre-exilic period and LBH to the post-exilic period is not a safe assumption.

A second objection has to be raised. What about deliberate archaisms, that is, imitations of CBH in post-exilic times? Hendel and Joosten are of course aware that linguistic conventions can be intentionally changed or overruled. It is conceivable that later authors, in post-exilic times, could use older language conventions. That is, they may have written CBH, although LBH would be closer to them. But Hendel and Joosten are convinced that CBH could not be imitated without errors in postexilic times. If biblical authors tried to imitate CBH, this would only lead to what Hendel and Joosten call »pseudoclassicisms« that resemble CBH but are not in fact authentic CBH: »Pseudoclassicisms [...] undermine the idea of ›perfect archaizing‹: however proficient later authors may have been in classical Hebrew, they inevitably tripped up in one way or another.«¹⁷

This argument needs closer attention. It says: A pure CBH text must be genuine. If it had been written later, it would have been betrayed by some slips. Such an argument shows a considerable self-immunization strategy.¹⁸ It is, however, both methodologically and historically untenable. Firstly, in this argument the existence of CBH texts from post-monarchic times is excluded *by definition* from the outset. And secondly, this possibility does not need to be pursued further because we know that CBH belongs to the pre-Persian period. Thus, the following quotation from their book remains a claim, not a result: »In sum, the argument that Persian or Hellenistic-Roman period scribes could write in perfect CBH lacks evidential warrant. It is a thought experiment, a logical possibility [...] It lacks consilience with the historical and linguistic data.«¹⁹ The lack of consil-

tion and the Language of the Book of Jeremiah: The Case for a Sixth-Century Date of Composition, SSSL 74 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), see Konrad Schmid, »How to Date the Book of Jeremiah: Combining and Modifying Linguistic- and Profile-based Approaches«, *VT* 68 (2018) 1–19.

17 Hendel and Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 97.

18 See Erhard Blum, »The Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts—An Approach with Methodological Limitations«, in *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz et al., FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 303–326. In addition, it is very difficult to methodologically distinguish between later linguistic updates in a genuine CBH text and »slips« in an allegedly faked CBH text from the post-exilic period. See e. g. the LBH elements in the Joseph Story that Jan Joosten identifies which, according to him, do not qualify as »slips«. Rather, »they reflect *ad hoc* updating or modernization by Persian-period scribes.« (idem, »The Linguistic Dating of the Joseph Story«, *HeBAI* 8 [2019] 24–43: 33). How are we to distinguish one from the other?

19 Hendel and Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 125.

ience with historical and linguistic data only exists when the historical data are construed from an exclusively linguistic perspective.

Regarding historical research into the Hebrew Bible's composition, if we widen our perspective beyond linguistic approaches and assume for a moment that other approaches are not completely mistaken in their results, then we have to maintain that it is precisely the »historical data«, in their reconstructed sum, that warrant a revision of this assumption that later scribes could not successfully imitate CBH. The best examples of Persian period texts written in CBH are the book of Leviticus, vast portions of the book of Numbers, and texts like Joshua 24 or 1 Kings 8 in its latter half. A number of Hendel and Joosten's colleagues date these texts to the Persian period, and they do not do it lightheartedly or apart from arguments.²⁰ For the bulk of the book of Numbers, for instance, it is virtually impossible to avoid such a dating, as demonstrated by the book's conceptual, sociological, and theological parallels with the book of Chronicles.²¹ These parallels pertain to the role of the Levites, the highlighted significance of Pesach,

20 See e. g. Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, BZAW 189 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990); Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch*, BZAR 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003); Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden (London: Continuum, 2005); Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006); Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus*, FAT II/25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Eckart Otto, *Das Gesetz des Mose* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007); Hans-Peter Mathys, »Numeri und Chronik: Nahe Verwandte«, in *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers*, ed. Thomas Römer, BETL 215 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008) 555–578; Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); idem, »Numeri«, in *Einleitung in das Alte Testament: Die Bücher der Hebräischen Bibel und die alttestamentlichen Schriften der katholischen, protestantischen und orthodoxen Kirchen*, ed. idem et al. (Zürich: TVZ, 2013) 256–269; Christian Frevel et al., ed., *Torah and the Book of Numbers*, FAT II/62 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); David M. Carr, »Changes in Pentateuchal Criticism«, in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation; Vol. 3: From Modernism to Post-Modernism (the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries); Pt. 2: The Twentieth Century—From Modernism to Post-Modernism*, ed. M. Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) 433–466; Konrad Schmid, »Von der Diaskeuase zur nachredaktionellen Fortschreibung. Die Geschichte der Erforschung der nachpriesterschriftlichen Redaktionsgeschichte des Pentateuch«, in *The Post-Priestly Pentateuch: New Perspectives on its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles*, ed. Federico Giuntoli and Konrad Schmid, FAT 101 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015) 1–18; idem, »Jews and Samaritans in Joshua 24«, *HeBAI* 6 (2017) 148–160; Bradford A. Anderson, *An Introduction to the Study of the Pentateuch* (London: T&T Clark, 2017); Thomas B. Dozeman, *The Pentateuch: Introducing the Torah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

21 Mathys, »Numeri und Chronik«: 555–578.

the stressing of the tenth, the regulations about temple funds, the numbering of the people, the absence of the notion of collective guilt, the specific concept of holy war, and other matters. To be sure, Joosten himself admits late passages in Numbers, such as Numbers 36.²² But linguistically, it is only possible to see parts of the picture, not the whole.

3 What overall picture of biblical literature's growth does the linguistic approach suggest?

Distinguishing between »Classical Biblical Hebrew« (CBH) and »Late Biblical Hebrew« (LBH), with their alleged, respective datings to pre- and post-exilic settings goes back to Wilhelm Gesenius' classic book »History of the Hebrew Language and Scripture«.²³ Gesenius provided the main linguistic observations and the corresponding evaluations that are still used in today's scholarly literature. For Gesenius in his pre-Wellhausen context, it was self-evident that the bulk of Genesis to Kings, at least its prose, is pre-exilic, whereas Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations, Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 are exilic, and Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Ester, Qohelet and Daniel are post-exilic. The main reason for these allocations is that Gesenius did not differentiate fundamentally between historical Israel and biblical Israel.²⁴ For him, the biblical books are more or less historically reliable and basically stem from the time period in which they are set—with the exception of the primeval history.

To be sure, this picture is not mistaken for certain parts of biblical literature, namely the traditional LBH corpus, which consists of Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Qohelet and Daniel, though it is quite imprecise. Today's historical scholarship is not and cannot be satisfied with the categories »pre-exilic«, »exilic« and »post-exilic«. Especially for »post-exilic« literature one would like to know whether it belongs to the Persian, Ptolemaic, Seleucid, or Roman period.

For other parts of biblical literature, however, the standard allocation of CBH texts to the pre-exilic period cannot be maintained on methodological grounds that are structurally the same as that of the linguistic distinction between CBH and LBH: If a text's social, political, philosophical or theological ideas are akin

²² Jan Joosten, »Diachronic Linguistics and the Date of the Pentateuch«, *The Formation of the Pentateuch. Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz et al., FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 327–344.

²³ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Geschichte der hebräischen Sprache und Schrift* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1815).

²⁴ See Reinhard G. Kratz, *Historical & Biblical Israel: The History, Tradition, and Archives of Israel and Judah*, trans. Paul Michael Kurtz (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

to ideas in datable texts such as, for instance, Chronicles, then it is not very likely that these ideas belong to a completely different era of biblical literature than Chronicles.

4 What is the status of linguistic dating with regard to other dating methods for biblical literature?

It goes without saying that for a task like dating biblical texts to certain periods, all available evidence and all available methods should be considered, evaluated critically, and weighed against each other in order to reach a balanced conclusion.

This seems to be the approach of Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten as well, at least at the beginning of their book: »[...] the study of language is a necessary partner for the literary history of the Bible.«²⁵ The linguistic approach is a necessary one, but one element among others for dating texts. With this, most scholars would agree. But other statements in their book have a more exclusive ring, for instance in the preface: »In many cases the best evidence—sometimes, though not always, the only evidence—is language.«²⁶ Especially at the end of the book, they claim a rather privileged position for their approach of linguistic dating. They begin in a moderate way:²⁷ »Erhard Blum [...] urges that ›linguistic arguments should be part of a much more comprehensive historical-philological endeavor‹. We concur.«²⁸ But then, one page later, they write: »Linguistic data [...] are better clues for literary history than is the currently dominant approach, which, as Blum remarks, relies on ›dating based on specific traditions in terms of conceptions, ideas, or theologumena‹. We criticize this approach as overly impressionistic and wedded to a ›pigeon-holing‹ model of history«.²⁹

This is a one-sided polemic that is not well substantiated. Dating texts based on the diachronic development of »conceptions, ideas, or theologumena« is well established in both historical and biblical studies. That these »conceptions, ideas, or theologumena« are only derived from the Bible itself and that the corresponding dating methodology would therefore be circular, does not hold true. Epigraphy, archaeology, and comparative cultural perspectives have provided a

²⁵ Hendel and Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁷ They interact with Blum's contribution mentioned above in n. 18.

²⁸ Hendel and Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?*, 98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

wealth of data,³⁰ so that this approach cannot be dismissed as »overly impressionistic« or »pigeon-holing«.

5 What about conflicting evidence?

Hendel and Joosten's last chapter introduces the concept of »consilience« and they argue that their approach is supported by other pieces of evidence. This approach is not wrong, but it is likely to convey false certainties to the authors and their readership. In order to scientifically substantiate a thesis, it is inadvisable to cite everything that further supports it. Better would be to discuss findings that oppose it. And there are quite a few of them, some of which have been mentioned above.³¹

6 Conclusion

Linguistic dating is an important tool which has been neglected in the past and which needs a place in the current discussion, but it is not the key to answering the question of »How Old is the Hebrew Bible?« Linguistic dating is one method among others. Using it alone or predominantly without the checks and balances of other methods can be as misleading as using those other methods in isolated or insulated ways. The task of dating biblical texts is one that can only be achieved by combining different approaches. The linguistic approach is important, it has been underestimated in the past, it needs more consideration, but it cannot serve as a high court for answering the question: How old is the Hebrew Bible.

Abstract: The book »How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?« by Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten is an apt introduction to dating biblical texts linguistically. However, this approach is not capable to reliably determine how old the texts and writings of the Hebrew Bible are. Rather, different dating methods need to be balanced against each other in order to get sound results in that respect.

³⁰ See e. g. the material in Dieter Vieweger, *Geschichte der biblischen Welt. Die südliche Levante vom Beginn der Besiedlung bis zur römischen Zeit. Band 1: Steinzeit bis Bronzezeit; Band 2: Eisenzeit; Band 3: Persische bis römische Zeit* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2019).

³¹ See e. g. above n. 20 f.

Keywords: Linguistic Dating, Redaction Criticism, Classical Biblical Hebrew, Babylonian Exile

Zusammenfassung: Das Buch »How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?« von Ronald Hendel und Jan Joosten bietet eine Einführung in die Fragestellung des »Linguistic Dating«. Doch lässt sich aufgrund ihrer allein nicht zuverlässig bestimmen, wie alt die Texte und Schriften der Hebräischen Bibel sind. Vielmehr sind dazu unterschiedliche Methoden miteinander kritisch ins Gespräch zu bringen.

Schlüsselwörter: sprachliche Datierung, Redaktionskritik, klassisches biblisches Hebräisch, babylonisches Exil

Résumé: Le livre « How Old Is the Hebrew Bible » de Ronald Hendel et Jan Joosten est une bonne introduction à la question du « Linguistic Dating ». Cependant, il n'est pas possible de déterminer de manière fiable l'âge des textes et des écrits de la Bible hébraïque avec cette méthode seule. Il est nécessaire au contraire de comparer ses résultats avec ceux des autres méthodes de datation pour obtenir des résultats fiables.

Mots-clés: Datation linguistique, critique rédactionnelle, hébreu biblique classique, exil babylonien