

# LETTER OF IEREMIAS

## TO THE READER

### EDITION OF GREEK TEXT

The New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) version of the Letter of Jeremias (Jeremiah) is based on the critical edition of Joseph Ziegler (*Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Göttingensis editum XV: Ieremias Baruch Threni Epistula Ieremiae* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957]). The verse numbering follows that of the critical text.

### TRANSLATION PROFILE OF THE GREEK

#### *Translation from Hebrew?*

Although in the Septuagint the Letter of Jeremias (LetJer) is a discrete unit, in the Vulgate it forms chapter 6 of the book of Barouch. Many scholars are convinced that, even though no Semitic *Vorlage* for the Greek text is extant, it is indeed a translation. A number of features of the book are more typical of original Greek composition, however. Carey Moore identifies “three lines of linguistic evidence” that he considers probative for concluding that the Letter originated as a translation.<sup>1</sup> First, a number of Greek readings seem to stem from misreadings of a Hebrew parent text. So, for example: (1) In v. 11 the Greek claims that the idols of the Gentiles cannot save themselves from “rust and foods (βρωμάτων).” The “translator” has apparently confused two possible pointings of מֵאֲכָל—one meaning “from a devourer” (so, for example, in Mal 3.11 a consuming insect, locust or moth) and one meaning food;<sup>2</sup> (2) γνώριμοι in v. 14 represents a mistake on the part of the “translator,” who evidently read ἰσχυροί as a noun rather than a participle;<sup>3</sup> and (3) in v. 71 the translator produced “from the purple and marble (μαρμάρου) that rots upon them.” Of course, marble does not rot, and here we see a confusion of the Hebrew word for “alabaster” or “marble,” יָשָׁן, with its homograph, which means “fine linen.”<sup>4</sup> Second, a Semitic original seems the best explanation for the existence of some variant readings. So, for instance, in v. 54, the Greek reads, “like crows (κορώναι) between heaven and earth,” for which the Syriac has “ravens.” The inherent difficulty of the verse and the Syriac’s “ravens” together suggest that the Greek “translator” may have read a Hebrew כְּעֶרְבִים, “as the clouds,” as כְּעֶרְבִים, “as the crows.”<sup>5</sup> Third, Moore notes the presence of what he identifies as “Hebraisms,” such as the use of the Greek future tense as a present tense and what looks like the rendering of the Hebrew infinitive absolute in v. 4—μὴ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀφομοιωθέντες τοῖς ἀλλοφύλοις ἀφομοιωθήτε, “lest you too, having been made like the allophyles, become like them.”<sup>6</sup> One last bit of evidence that we have in LetJer is that in v. 69 the Greek has, “For like a scarecrow in a cucumber patch,” a phrase that occurs in the Hebrew of Jer 10.5, but not in the Greek, which indicates that the author of the Letter drew on the Hebrew of Jeremiah, and the Greek translator rendered what he had before him.

Each of these “lines of linguistic evidence”—misreadings, variant readings, and Hebraisms—are characteristic of the translation process, and they could point to the genesis of LetJer as a translation. At least two of Moore’s examples are somewhat weak, however. First, the use of γνώριμοι in v. 14 might not be a misreading at all, since the Greek word can just as well be an adjective as a noun. Second, two obstacles stand in the way of understanding the phrase ἀφομοιωθέντες τοῖς ἀλλοφύλοις ἀφομοιωθήτε as reflecting an infinitive absolute in a presumed Hebrew *Vorlage*. Both the existence of paranomasia in the Greek and the interposition of τοῖς ἀλλοφύλοις between the participle and the verb, since the infinitive absolute in Hebrew keeps the two verbal forms immediately adjacent to one another, mitigate the force of this interpretation.

<sup>1</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (AB 44; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 327–328.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 352–353.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

*Composition in Greek?*

Whereas Letler undeniably contains elements indicative of translation, other features of this work are not typical of the kind of Greek normally seen in the Septuagint. One of the most frequently occurring is the use of Greek particles. Letler often uses as connectors particles that require second position in the clause—a feature not found in Hebrew grammar. The numbers are really quite staggering for a book of a scant 72 verses: οὐν, 12x; γάρ, 16x; δέ, 23x; τε (counting its use as a coordinator of all types, including the negative οὐτε) 33x. Some entire books of the Septuagint do not contain 23 occurrences of δέ. The appearance of these particles might suggest that the Greek writer was interested in the logical connection of one clause to another, but that is by no means apparent in the frequency with which these words appear. In fact, their logical force is almost blunted by how many times they appear sequentially in one clause after the other.

Finally, there are a number of places where the Greek text really makes little sense, or, at least, one has to work very hard to wrest some sense from it. In other books of the Septuagint, scholars often understand such difficult passages as indicating the translator's inability to make sense of the Hebrew *Vorlage*. Perhaps the best example of such a case in Letler is vv. 40–41. In these two verses, one is often at a loss to know what the writer is trying to communicate. In v. 40 the claim is made that the Chaldeans dishonor their gods. The Greek as we have it, however, really does not satisfactorily say how they do this. They encounter and then bring a mute person to Bel—but then the uncertainty really begins. The third clause of the verse, because the object is not explicit, is not clear as to whether the Chaldeans expect the mute person to speak or whether it is their god Bel who should talk. In v. 41, the Greek grammar suggests that the Chaldeans, even though they understand that their gods cannot speak or make the mute speak, cannot abandon their gods and thus are as senseless as they. How, one wonders, does their inability to leave their gods dishonor them? Perhaps this logical difficulty is what prompts both the NRSV and Moore to render the text so that, contrary to the Greek, the Chaldeans do *not* perceive and thus they actually *do* abandon their gods—precisely the opposite of what the Greek grammar would lead one to think. Moore's and the NRSV's English translations at least bring a logical consistency to the passage and the actions could thus be understood as dishonoring the idols.

One approach to this conundrum would be to conclude that the difficulty reflects a translator who did not understand the full import of a Hebrew parent text or who got lost in a difficult Hebrew sentence, and as a result he made something of a mess out of these verses. A possible way to check or confirm this explanation might be to reconstruct a possible Hebrew *Vorlage* for these verses. Although any attempt at retroversion from Greek into Hebrew ought to be undertaken with caution, these verses do not retrovert into Hebrew very readily at all. Indeed, the complexity of the verses really looks more like an overworked stab at Greek rhetorical style than a translation.

*Inconclusive Evidence*

So, Letler presents us with a confusing situation. On the one hand, several features of this text could be the result of the process of translating from Hebrew to Greek. On the other hand, the relatively frequent appearance of elements of compositional style and certain normal features of Greek, such as the extensive use of particles and the occurrence of verbal adjectives ending in -τεος (for which there is no Hebrew equivalent) indicate that the writer is working at the least at the discourse level (and perhaps originally in Greek). When one surveys the entire work, there is a notable absence of telltale signs of the different translational styles that one finds elsewhere in the Jewish-Greek corpus. Further study of this problem in Letler seems necessary and would benefit from an analysis of the letter's Greek style, which seems a desideratum for the work. At best, then, we can conclude that the evidence for Letler being a translation is inconclusive at this juncture.

## THE NETS TRANSLATION OF THE LETTER

Since Letler does display at least some evidence of being a translation, I have taken a practical approach and followed all of the usual NETS guidelines for a translated text. In those cases where the Greek could be a misreading of a missing Semitic parent, I have retained the "misreading." So, for example, even though marble does not rot, that is what the Greek writer produced and that is the text I have translated. In several cases where the Greek is awkward or even close to nonsensical, I have retained that flavor in NETS, while maintaining grammatical English. As a result, the NETS translation varies from the NRSV (and Moore's translation incidentally) at quite a number of places, since the NRSV assumes that the Letler is a self-standing Greek text that should be comprehensible on its own. NETS does not make such assumptions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The best commentary on the Letter to date is Carey A. Moore's Anchor Bible Commentary—*Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (AB 44; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977). For other literature on Letter, see Moore's bibliography, AB 331–332.

BENJAMIN G. WRIGHT

A copy of a letter that Jeremias sent to those who would be led as captives into Babylon by the king of the Babylonians to proclaim to them just as it was commanded to him by God.

1 On account of the sins that you have sinned against God, you will be led into Babylon as captives by Nabouchodonosor, king of the Babylonians. <sup>2</sup>When, therefore, you come into Babylon, you will be there for rather many years, even for a long time, as long as seven generations. But after this, I will bring you from there with peace. <sup>3</sup>Now then, you will see in Babylon silver and gold and wooden gods being carried upon shoulders causing fear to the nations. <sup>4</sup>Beware, therefore, lest you too, having been made like the allophytes, <sup>a</sup>become like<sup>a</sup> them and reverence for them<sup>b</sup> seizes you <sup>5</sup>when you see a crowd before and behind them doing obeisance to them, but say in thought, "It is necessary to bow down to you, O Master." <sup>6</sup>For my angel<sup>c</sup> is with you, and he himself is seeking out your souls.

7 For their tongue has been smoothed by a craftsman, and they are overlaid with gold and silver. Yet they are fake and are not able to speak. <sup>8</sup>And just as for a maiden who loves ornamentation, taking gold, <sup>9</sup>they construct crowns upon the heads of their gods. But it is also the case that the priests, purloining gold and silver from their gods, will spend it on themselves. <sup>10</sup>And they will give of them also to the prostitutes at the brothel. And they adorn them<sup>b</sup> with clothes like human beings—gods of silver and gold and wood. <sup>11</sup>But they are not kept safe from rust and food<sup>d</sup>. When they are dressed in purple clothing, <sup>12</sup>they have their face wiped because of the dust from the house, which is rather much upon them. <sup>13</sup>And he<sup>e</sup> has a scepter like a human district judge, he<sup>e</sup> who will not destroy the one who sins against him. <sup>14</sup>And he has a hand-knife in his right and an ax but will not deliver himself from war and robbers. Whence they are recognizable as not being gods. Do not, therefore, fear them.

15 For just as when a person's implement, when broken, becomes useless, <sup>16</sup>such are their gods, though they are established in houses. Their eyes are full of dust from the feet of those who enter. <sup>17</sup>And just as the courtyards are fortified all around against anyone who has wronged the king as though sentenced to death, the priests secure

their houses with doorways and bolts and bars, lest they be stripped by robbers. <sup>18</sup>They burn lamps even more than for themselves, none of which they<sup>b</sup> can see. <sup>19</sup>Just like one of the beams of the house they are, and they do not notice that their hearts, it is said, are licked out, as the creeping creatures from the earth devour both them and their clothing, <sup>20</sup>blackened in their face by the smoke from the house. <sup>21</sup>Bats, swallows and birds ride upon their bodies and their heads, just as also the cats do. <sup>22</sup>Whence you will know that they are not gods. Do not, therefore, fear them.

23 For the gold, which they wear for beauty, unless someone wipes off the corrosion, they will not make it shine, for they were not sentient, even when they were cast. <sup>24</sup>Those things in which there is no breath are bought at all cost. <sup>25</sup>Lacking feet they are carried upon shoulders displaying their dishonor to people, and even those who attend to them are ashamed <sup>26</sup>on account of the fact that they are made to stand up by them, lest it<sup>e</sup> fall to the ground. Not even if some one makes it stand upright, will it move by itself, nor if it leans over, will it straighten itself up, but gifts are placed before them, just as before the dead. <sup>27</sup>But their priests, by selling their sacrifices, use them<sup>b</sup>. And likewise also their wives preserve some of them<sup>f</sup>, but they do not share any with the poor or disabled. <sup>28</sup>One who sits apart<sup>g</sup> and one who has just given birth touch their sacrifices. Since you know, therefore, from these things that they are not gods, do not fear them.

29 For on what basis can they be called gods? Because women serve up for gods of silver and gold and wood! <sup>30</sup>And in their houses the priests take their seat with their tunics torn and their heads and beards shaved, whose heads are uncovered. <sup>31</sup>And they howl and shout before their gods as some do at a funeral feast for a corpse. <sup>32</sup>Taking from their<sup>b</sup> clothing, the priests clothe their wives and children. <sup>33</sup>Whether they experience evil from someone, or whether it be good, they will not be able to repay. They can neither empower a king nor can they remove him. <sup>34</sup>Likewise they can neither give wealth nor money<sup>h</sup>. If anyone, professing a vow to them, does not keep it, they will not demand it. <sup>35</sup>They will not deliver a person from death nor rescue a weak person from a strong one. <sup>36</sup>They will not restore a blind person to sight; they will not rescue a person who is in anguish.

<sup>a</sup>I.e. are assimilated to <sup>b</sup>I.e. the gods(') <sup>c</sup>Or messenger <sup>d</sup>Perhaps corrosion <sup>e</sup>I.e. the god <sup>f</sup>I.e. the sacrifices  
<sup>g</sup>I.e. is menstruating <sup>h</sup>Or copper

## LETTER OF IEREMIAS

945

<sup>37</sup>They will not have pity on a widow nor treat an orphan well. <sup>38</sup>These things that are made of wood and overlaid with gold and silver are like stones from a mountain, and those who attend to them will be put to shame. <sup>39</sup>Why then should they be thought to be or be called gods?

<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, though the Chaldeans themselves bring them into disrespect—when they see a mute incapable of speech, bring him and request that Bel utter an articulate sound, as though he<sup>a</sup> were capable of sensation—<sup>41</sup>they are incapable of abandoning them<sup>b</sup>, though they themselves have observed it. For they<sup>c</sup> have no sense. <sup>42</sup>And the women, wrapping cords around themselves, sit in the streets burning bran as incense! <sup>43</sup>And when one of them is drawn away by one of those who passes by to have sexual intercourse, she chides her companion, because she was not valued as she herself was, nor has she had her cord<sup>d</sup> torn. <sup>44</sup>Everything that happens for them<sup>b</sup> is fake. How then should one consider or call them gods?

<sup>45</sup> They have been constructed by carpenters and goldsmiths; they are nothing other than what the artisans want them to be. <sup>46</sup>And they who construct them will not themselves be long-lived. <sup>47</sup>How then indeed are the things made by them going to be gods? For they have left behind lies and disgrace for those who come after. <sup>48</sup>For when war or evils come upon them<sup>b</sup>, the priests take counsel with themselves about where to hide with them<sup>b</sup>. <sup>49</sup>How then can one not perceive that they are not gods, who save themselves neither from war nor from calamities? <sup>50</sup>For being wood and overlaid with gold and silver, it will be known thereafter that they are fake; it will be clear to all nations and kings that they are not gods but the works of human hands and that there is no divine work in them. <sup>51</sup>By whom then should it not be known that they are not gods?

<sup>52</sup> For they will not set up a king of a country, nor will they give rain to people. <sup>53</sup>And they will not decide their own case or deliver one who is wronged, since they are powerless. <sup>54</sup>For like crows between the sky and the earth they are. For also when fire attacks a house of gods who are wooden or overlaid with gold or silver, their priests flee and will come through safely, but they<sup>b</sup> will be burned up like

the center beams. <sup>55</sup>And they shall not withstand king or enemies. <sup>56</sup>How then must it be admitted or reckoned that they are gods?

Gods made of wood and overlaid with silver and gold will not be safe either from thieves or from bandits, <sup>57</sup>the strong of whom will strip away the gold and silver, and they make off with the clothing they<sup>b</sup> wear. Nor shall they<sup>b</sup> help themselves. <sup>58</sup>So it is better to be a king who displays his manliness or a useful vessel in a house, which the owner will use, than these fake gods, or even a door in a house that keeps safe those things that are in it than these fake gods, and a wooden pillar in palaces than these fake gods.

<sup>59</sup> For sun and moon and stars are bright, and when they are sent for a service, they are obedient. <sup>60</sup>So also lightning, when it flashes, is conspicuous. And the same wind also blows in every country. <sup>61</sup>And as for clouds, when ordered by God to traverse the entire inhabited world, they accomplish what is ordained. <sup>62</sup>And the fire sent out from above to destroy utterly mountains and woods will do what is prescribed. But these things<sup>b</sup> are similar neither in appearances nor in powers. <sup>63</sup>Whence one should neither think them to be nor call them gods, since they are not able either to judge a case or to treat humans well. <sup>64</sup>Since you know, therefore, that they are not gods, do not fear them.

<sup>65</sup> For they cannot curse or bless kings, <sup>66</sup>and they cannot show signs in heaven among the nations or shine like the sun or give light like the moon. <sup>67</sup>The animals, which, fleeing to shelter, are able to help themselves, are superior to them. <sup>68</sup>It is clear to us that they are in no manner gods. Therefore do not fear them.

<sup>69</sup> For as a scarecrow in a cucumber field guards nothing, so are their gods of wood and gold and silver overlay. <sup>70</sup>In the same way also their gods of wood and overlaid with gold and silver are similar to a thorn bush in a garden on which every bird perches, and so also to a corpse thrown out in darkness. <sup>71</sup>And from the purple and marble<sup>e</sup> that rots upon them you will know that they are not gods. And finally they will themselves be consumed, and there will be disgrace in the country. <sup>72</sup>Better, therefore, is a righteous person who does not have idols, for he will be far from reproach.

<sup>a</sup>I.e. Bel   <sup>b</sup>I.e. the gods(')   <sup>c</sup>I.e. the Chaldeans   <sup>d</sup>I.e. for tying her clothes   <sup>e</sup>Perhaps sparkling cloth

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