de Waard, Jan

A Handbook on Jeremiah

Text Criticism and the Translator 2


Richard D. Weis
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities
New Brighton, MN 55112

This is the second in a series of volumes intended “to provide translators additional help in applying the results” of the United Bible Societies’ Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (HOTTP) in the work of translating the Bible and thereby also to assist a wider audience in appropriating the results of this project (viii). Thus in the present work de Waard does not aim to offer new arguments or decisions concerning text-critical cases in Jeremiah but rather to make more accessible and useful for Bible translators the work of the HOTTP, especially as it is available in D. Barthélemy, Critique textuelle de l’Ancien Testament (OBO 50/2; Fribourg: Éditions universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

A Handbook on Jeremiah begins with a brief introduction giving an overview of the textual situation for the book of Jeremiah. The bulk of the book is a verse-by-verse presentation of textual cases, the decisions of the HOTTP committee concerning the cases, and proposals for translating the text preferred by the HOTTP committee. CTAT for Jeremiah (2:466–862) covers 371 discrete textual cases. By this reviewer’s count, de Waard covers 256 of them in the present work. This is no surprise, since de Waard has alerted the reader from the first page of the introduction that cases of no translational consequence will not be carried over from CTAT. Also omitted were cases where the NEB
stands alone against the other modern translations used by the HOTTP to generate cases. Essentially, these cases are of no textual consequence.

Each entry for a verse, which may discuss multiple, related textual cases, has three parts: “Textual Decisions,” “Evaluation of Problems,” and “Translation Proposals.” In the section on “Textual Decisions” de Waard identifies the textual problem(s) under discussion, reports the testimony of the witnesses for the case(s), summarizes the arguments set forth in CTAT, and reports the decision of the HOTTP committee. Thus the “decisions” referred to here are those of the HOTTP committee concerning the case(s) in the cited verse. Not surprisingly, this section in every case is based almost entirely on the discussion in CTAT; at some points essentially presenting a translation of key sentences. On a number of occasions, de Waard has taken advantage of the availability of the Hebrew University Bible volume on Jeremiah and has supplemented the information derived from CTAT with additional data gleaned from the HUB apparatus.

The section “Evaluation of Problems” examines the problems the case poses for translators and reviews and assesses modern translation options responding to those problems. Here the discussion of text transmissional history and the textual decision in CTAT is used to assess the relative worth of the modern translation proposals. In this section also much of the content is a summary of material found in the much more extensive entries of CTAT. However, here the reader sees as well the results of de Waard’s own expertise in translation and his review of a wide and interconfessional array of modern translations.

The section “Translation Proposals” concludes the entry for a given verse. Here de Waard offers practical advice for translators on how effectively to render the Hebrew text preferred by the HOTTP committee. Most often this takes the form of commending one or more of the wide array of contemporary translations as a model.

The considerable strengths of this work derive partly from the strength of the underlying work of the HOTTP committee mediated through CTAT and partly from de Waard’s own expertise and work. The work’s reliance on CTAT means that it benefits from a sound text-critical method that identifies cases based on actual divergences among the extant witnesses for a text. Another consequence of the reliance on CTAT is that textual discussions in A Handbook on Jeremiah are grounded in a thorough grasp of the history of the text’s transmission as well as of modern discussions of that history, seen through the lens of an appropriately complex understanding of the dynamics of textual transmission. In the particular case of Jeremiah, CTAT is an exceptionally valuable foundation for a work such as this. The HOTTP committee recognized that the Old Greek of Jeremiah in many instances differs from the proto-MT because it translates a variant
Moreover, it recognized that those variations are a mixture of changes due to redactional interventions that led to the proto-MT and of changes arising from the transmission of text the two editions held in common. Although one may argue with the conclusions in particular instances of OG/MT variation, the committee’s approach appropriately avoids the twin extremes of correcting the MT on the basis of a Vorlage that actually belongs to another work (i.e., the first edition of the book) or assuming that none of the OG/MT variations are relevant to establishing the text of the edition of the book handed down through the MT.

De Waard’s clear and dependable summaries of the key points in each case’s discussion in CTAT render the core substance of that work accessible to nonspecialists. His supplementation of the CTAT discussion with data from the recent HUB Jeremiah volume helpfully fills some gaps. De Waard’s expertise in translation theory and practice has enabled a more focused selection of cases that will really matter to the translator. Most of all, it means that this work routinely provides very sound advice about translating the reading preferred by CTAT. His attention to a much broader and more recent array of translations not only strengthens the evaluation of translation problems but provides a very helpful selection of model translations. The result is an exceptionally useful tool for the many translators and exegetes who are not themselves text-critical specialists.

The limitations of this work also are partly a result of limitations in CTAT, and thus not susceptible to change within the framework of this series, and partly a result of matters that one might hope to see addressed in future volumes. The primary limitation of the present work that is attributable to CTAT is the reality that it does not include every instance of a divergence among extant witnesses that would impact translation. Of course, this is a result of the mechanism by which cases were identified for consideration in the HOTTP, a comparison of a small number of guide translations, rather than direct comparison of the surviving witnesses. Thus, while the present volume is unquestionably useful for the cases it presents, the reader should not assume that it includes all potential textual cases relevant for the translation of Jeremiah. For that one must sift through the apparatuses of the HUB volume or await the fascicle on Jeremiah in the forthcoming Biblia Hebraica Quinta.

There are a series of changes that, if made in future volumes of this series, would make them even more useful than this one already is. Since the volumes in this series (Textual Criticism and the Translator) will be employed as reference tools, it would doubtless make them easier to use if the entry for each case were headed not only with chapter and verse number(s) but also with the lemma of the case itself. At the moment, the reader must hunt through the first paragraph of the entry to find the expressions with which the case is actually concerned. When one wants to know whether A Handbook on Jeremiah
includes a discussion of the particular expression one is working with, scanning for that information is more a chore than it needs to be.

It also would aid readers substantially if several matters received fuller discussion in the introduction. The first has to do with the mode of reporting the HOTTP committee’s decisions. The HOTTP committee voted on its decisions and assigned them letters indicating the level of probability they assigned to their preferred text. CTAT reports these details, and *A Handbook on Jeremiah* quite properly does so as well. However, there seems to be no explanation of the process and, more importantly, of the meaning of the letters A, B, C, and D as used by the committee. Thus readers who are not already familiar with these matters will be hindered in understanding the implications of the decisions described by these means as, for example, when de Waard reports that on such and such a case four members of the committee gave a certain reading B votes and two gave it C votes. Second, a more detailed elaboration of the principles for excluding from the *Handbook* cases that were included in *CTAT* would have been beneficial.

Should *A Handbook on Jeremiah* ever appear in a second edition, there is an additional lacuna that I hope the author will consider filling. The introduction currently offers a brief and appropriate review of the discussion behind the evaluation of the Old Greek for Jeremiah as often reflecting a *Vorlage* that diverges from the proto-MT. This is essential background for understanding the HOTTP committee’s assessment of the Old Greek’s testimony and is a real help to the reader. Equally essential and helpful would have been a review of the discussion concerning the nature of the relationship between the *Vorlage* of the Old Greek and the proto-MT and the positioning of the stance of HOTTP within the options in that discussion. Alas, this is almost entirely absent from the current form of the introduction.

However, the limitations just observed do little to detract from the essential usefulness of *A Handbook of Jeremiah*. For its intended audience of Bible translators, this volume achieves in splendid fashion its goal of assisting them in applying the fruits of the HOTTP committee’s work. It will also be an eminently useful tool for all others who work with the Hebrew text, and thus are concerned with finding the best available reading for that text, but are not experts in textual criticism (e.g., seminary students, pastors). For the cases included this is a clear, reliable, and useful presentation of very solid text-critical work and its implications for translation of the text that will serve many readers very well.