Kim, Dong-Hyuk


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The discipline of sociolinguistics, the study of the way in which language is affected by the social context of its usage, is steadily beginning to occupy the place it deserves in the study of the Hebrew Bible, but until now we did not have a book-length treatment of this important subject. Hence the publication of this monograph by Dong-Hyuk Kim, originally a PhD thesis from Princeton (2011), is a feast for all Hebraists. Following a short introduction to the history of diachronic study of Biblical Hebrew, this volume presents an extensive summary of the discussion between the school of linguists favoring a diachronic approach, such as Avi Hurvitz, Frederick Dobbs-Allsopp, Mats Eskhult, Jan Joosten, and the present reviewer (wrongly labeled “traditionalists”), and the challengers of this method, Ian Young, Robert Rezetko, and Martin Ehrensvärd.

In addition, the reader will find a short introduction to the methods of sociolinguistics, in particular in its historical branch, and to the variationist approach, which centers on the use of different, linguistically equivalent forms and lexical words, such as, in American English, the use of the endings -ing versus -in’ and the (non)pronunciation of final /r/. The use of such equivalents shows language usage in variety and in flux. These introductions are followed by eight short case studies of items that in diachronic research are regarded as hallmarks of the difference between Early Biblical Hebrew (EBH), the
state of the Hebrew before the exile, and the postexilic stage of Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH).

According to the challengers of this approach, it is impossible to set these states apart since EBH texts (like preexilic epigraphic texts) can be shown to contain many features that are characteristic of LBH, whereas late texts reveal a mixture of EBH and LBH features. The cases studied include a few issues of grammar: the form of the suffix following the plural of the feminine noun (-ot-am versus -otey-hem); wayhi/wēhāyāh with k/b+infinitive construct opening temporal clauses versus the nonuse of wayhi/wēhāyāh; the king X versus X, the king; the construction of the preposition beyn (doubling versus beyn … lē-). In addition, Kim discusses a few lexical issues: the indication of the temple as house of Yhwh versus house of God; the terms for “kingship” (mamlākāh versus malkūt), and for the “congregation” (‘ēdāh versus qāhāl; in the end Kim finds, correctly in my view, that this is not an a proper lexical shift); and a phonological issue, the interchange of sā‘aq versus zā‘aq, both meaning “shouting.” The work is concluded by a general evaluation.

It is the aim of this work to propose a method to settle the discussion (to “adjudicate,” in Kim’s terms) between the diachronic approach and the challengers. To this purpose Kim points to some important distinctions that are well known in sociolinguistics. Fast adopters who are quick to take up a new form or lexical item are to be set apart from conservative speakers who stick to the nonshifted form and the old item. In addition, Kim urges the distinction between shifts imposed from above by innovations in the parlance of the higher classes and shifts coming from below, intruding into “standard” language from lower-class vernacular and, for example, regional dialects. The distinction between quoted discourse (“reported speech”) and narration provides Kim with a possibility to discern some the import of the shifts from below, since quoted discourse may contain traces of the vernacular. The main argument is that changes from above, such as words of French origin in (Middle) English and the Akkadian borrowings in Hebrew/Aramaic, are culturally conditioned and are known as such to the speaker/writer. By contrast, changes from below are unconscious and thus are not open to the speaker’s awareness.

Analysis of the eight items selected for discussion enables Kim to conclude that most changes are from below and thus not open to the writer’s consciousness. Thus, the writer would not be able to stay clear from shifts of this type, whereas he would be able to consciously avoid such terms as “the house of God” or malkūt. In this sense Kim accepts the principles of the diachronic school versus the challengers. On the other hand, however, he argues that the biblical text does not enable us to make out conservative language users and innovative speakers. Since it is always possible that a biblical author adheres to a conservative style, we cannot know whether the use of EBH items is to be
ascribed to a preexilic or to a conservative postexilic author. Moreover, the changes from below analyzed in this study are not dependent on the role of the Babylonians and the Persians. In these respects, then, Kim accepts the conclusion of the challengers. He also accepts the argument that all authors in all periods would have had access to Aramaic, which could have influenced their parlance as a prestige language (like French in Tolstoi’s novels).

This methodical argumentation merits serious consideration. Unfortunately, the thesis is marred by many, too many, shortcomings in the execution. First and foremost, the collection of the data is not faultless and might be overdependent on computerized listing and counting. For instance, for the construction “the king X” Kim mentions one case in Deutero-Isaiah, which, however, is difficult to find (119; hardly Isa 41:21). Such questions arise since Kim does not provide lists for the cases counted. It is true that sociolinguistic discussions often refrain from presenting the answers given to the interviewer’s questions, since that material would be too bulky. But for philological research such data are indispensable and generally not really unwieldy. Moreover, the organization of such lists makes it possible to discern patterns that previously had not been recognized. As to counting, Kim sometimes presents figures such as 3-2, with the latter representing 40 percent, or 3-4, making for 57 percent. The percentages are impressive but extremely misleading, since the change of a single item can overturn the table. If the data are dependent on such small numbers, they can only be of secondary importance and often are better disregarded.

Third, the samples are problematic, since Kim lumps all non-P together, where a distinction between various segments could have been helpful. Moreover, all the material from Joshua until 2 Kgs 25 is brought together under the heading DtrH. Given the size of this section, subdivision would have been in its place, all the more so in view of the well-known difference between redactional-parenetic and narrative language. It is true that the redaction of this corpus is late preexilic/early exilic, but this periodization is not universally accepted for the narratives in, say, Judges and 1–2 Samuel. The distinction would have been helpful for, for example, the position of reported speech in the case of "bēyn": in 2 Sam 19:36 and 1 Kgs 3:9 the examples for "bēyn ... lē-" are the only ones in quoted discourse in Samuel and Kings, respectively (128).

This brings me to matters of theory. Let me state first of all that the history of research is in need of amplification in connection with two issues. First of all, the role of Abba Bendavid, whose Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1960; 2nd ed., 2 vols., 1967–1971) aims at separating the biblical strain in modern Ivrit from the “Mishnaic” (Middle Hebrew) strain and bristles with factual data and linguistic (and sociolinguistic) insights. In Israeli biblical research this book is a real lynchpin. For the understanding of
Kutscher’s role it is important to note that his introduction to the linguistic analysis of the Isaiah scroll, which appeared in Hebrew in 1959, provides a broad platform for the sociolinguistic discussion of the Hellenistic–early Roman period and was, already at that “early” date, much influenced by Uriel Weinreich’s epoch-making Languages in Contact (1953).1 These works provided the foundations for the research of Avi Hurvitz, who turned the implicit criteria and methods of his predecessors into an explicit system that was geared to answer questions concerning the place of biblical pericopes within the periodization of biblical literature. Notably, Hurvitz does not claim that linguistic analysis is the only criterion, only that it must take precedence before exegetical considerations, since it is more specific and more open to control than the theological-literary discussion.

A second problem relates to sociolinguistic literature. Kim highlights Labov’s success in establishing the relationship between language stratum and social class. It is, however, worth stressing that one of Labov’s particular merits relates to his insight that the speaker’s way of speaking often is related to his or her attitude and to what we would today characterize as positioning vis-à-vis oneself and others. Thus the employees of the more expensive department store were found to pronounce final /r/, whereas the employees of the cheaper store did not, and the employees of the in-between store would sometimes pronounce it and sometimes would not. Notably, these employees belonged to the same social class. Another issue relates to the principle that “the linguistic variations and changes of the past should be no different from the linguistic variations and changes of today,” for which Kim quotes Labov and Bergs (56 n. 42). However, Bergs indeed quotes Labov’s thesis to this affect but continues to argue that this principle can only be relative, since it relates in the end to human interaction, the modes of which may have changed in social history.2

Of particular importance is the fact that Kim does not discuss bilingualism, a phenomenon that is much studied since the second half of the twentieth century and that is of vital importance for understanding the relationship between Aramaic and Hebrew in the Neo-Babylonian and the Persian eras. A second issue that is not touched upon is the matter of the transmission of language norms from generation to generation (or within a given period), that is to say, “language maintenance,” as studied in particular by Joshua

Fishman. This issue is crucial for understanding the preservation of language features and language conservation. Thus the question in which framework it would have been possible to preserve all language features of EBH, by which means and to which extent, is not even raised. Kim’s rhetorical assertion that the scribes always must have had access to Aramaic cannot serve as substitute for a study of the social context of the scribe’s acquaintance with and mastery of Aramaic, before the exile, in the scribal chancery of the autonomous Israelite/Judean kingdom, and after the Babylonian/Persian conquest, at the service of an empire in which the language of the administration is official (or imperial) Aramaic. Nor can one separate a conservative attitude toward a certain language, in this case Hebrew, from the social environment of communication (and the issue of time span and generational gap).

Kim asserts that much work is still to be done in the field of historical sociolinguistics of biblical Hebrew. Hopefully this study, which I deem highly valuable in spite of my criticism, will stimulate more research in this area.