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Foreigner Speech: Biblical Hebrew

Foreigner speech appears in the Bible in two main contexts. First, the ancient Israelite authors employed 'style-switching' to reflect

the speech of foreigners, in the following two settings: (a) when the scene shifts to a foreign land; and (b) when a foreigner is present in the land of Israel. An example of the former is Gen. 30–31, with the narrative set in the land of Aram; and an example of the latter is Num. 22–24, with Balaam the Aramean prophet in the land of Canaan (or to be more accurate, in the land of Moab, on the eastern edge of greater Canaan). In these and other cases, the Biblical Hebrew text is tinged with a variety of Aramaic-like features (→ Style-Switching).

Secondly, the prophets of ancient Israel employed 'addressee-switching' in their oracles to the foreign nations. These speeches, (ostensibly) directed at such entities as Phoenicia, Aram, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia, include linguistic elements derived from (or intended to reflect) the language of the addressed peoples (→ Addressee-Switching).

True immigrant speech (or better, the literary representation thereof) may be found perhaps in only one place: the speech of the Hivites of Gibeon to Joshua and the Israelites in Josh. 9. These people claim to have come from a distant land (cf. Josh. 11.3 and Judg. 3.3, which situate the Hivites in the territory from Mt. Hermon northward to Lebo-Hamath); and several linguistic features of their speech appear to represent their foreign status.

The first is the syntagma of the demonstrative pronoun placed before the noun, a feature known from Aramaic and Phoenician (that is to say, in languages spoken in the homeland of these Hivites), witnessed three times in Josh. 9.12–13: זֶה | לַחְמֵנוּ *ze laḥmēnū* 'this our bread'; וְאֵלֶּה נֹאדוֹת הַיַּיִן *wa-ʾelle nōḏōt hay-yayin* 'and these bottle-skins of wine'; וְאֵלֶּה שַׂלְמוֹתֵינוּ וּנְעָלֵינוּ *wa-ʾelle śalmōṯēnū u-nʿālēnū* 'and these our clothes and our shoes' (Rendsburg 2000). The second item is וַנַּעֲשֶׂה *wan-naʿăśē* 'and we did' (Josh. 9.24), which is wholly irregular and unique in the Bible: (a) the expected form is the apocopated וַנַּעַשׂ *wan-naʿaś* (Jer. 35.10); and (b) while long *wayyiqtol* forms of ל"י (final *yod*) verbs occur, the final vowel is always /ɛ/ *segol*, not /ē/ *ṣere* as here (cf. GKC §75hh). One suspects, accordingly, that this form signifies another attempt by the author to portray the immigrant speech of the Hivites, even if in this instance we lack supporting cognate evidence.

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Forgeries of Hebrew Texts

The forging of texts is something that is attested for numerous ancient languages, not only Hebrew, but other Northwest Semitic languages as well (e.g., Phoenician, Aramaic). Among the most celebrated Phoenician forgeries is one referred to as the 'Paraiba Inscription'. During the late 19th century, an inscribed stone was reported to have been found in Brazil, in the region of the Paraiba River, at a site known as Pouso Alto ('high landing'). The inscription was initially assumed to be a putative relic of an assumed ancient Phoenician site (the precise location of this putative Phoenician site in Brazil is still not known). The stone itself has never been seen by an academic, nor are there any photographs of it that are known to be in existence. However, alleged handcopies of the stone soon came to the attention of the academic community and trained epigraphers rapidly and definitively repudiated it as a modern forgery (for discussion see Cross 1968).

During the third quarter of the 20th century Aramaic inscriptions surfaced on the antiquities market and were purported to have come from Egypt. Among these was an Aramaic inscription on a stele which also had the figures of an Egyptian deity and an Egyptian priest, as well as two short Egyptian inscriptions. Based on various anomalies in the Aramaic inscription Naveh (1968) cogently argued that the Aramaic inscription is a modern forgery which was added onto an actual ancient Egyptian stele.

In the case of Hebrew, forgers typically attempt to fashion Hebrew texts that appear to stem from the First Temple Period, but there have also been attempts to forge texts which