The "Northernisms" of the Israelite Narratives in Kings

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C.F. Burney, in his *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Kings*, pointed out that the language of the "northern" narratives in Kings (1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 10) exhibits certain peculiarities that "probably belong to the dialect of North Palestine".[1] Burney's work has become fundamental in the interpretation of these linguistic forms. Thus Cogan and Tadmor in the introduction to their 1988 commentary on 2 Kings note that in their work "evidence for a residue of the north-Israelite dialect of Hebrew embedded in the Elisha cycle, which was earlier collected and commented on by Burney ... has been confirmed."[2] This interpretation has had a profound effect on scholarly discussion of the question of whether there was a distinctive "northern Hebrew" in the pre-exilic period.[3] Thus G. A. Rendsburg in his recent wide-ranging discussion of northern (Rendsburg: Israelian) Hebrew begins with "the assumption that those stories which concern the northern judges and the northern kings originated in the northern regions of the country ... An examination of the language of these pericopes reveals that these stories include a disproportionate number of grammatical and lexical items which are non-standard within BH (= Biblical Hebrew) but which often have parallels in Phoenician, Moabite, Aramaic etc... the point was demonstrated long ago by C. F. Burney ..."[4].

In this article we shall suggest that merely viewing the list of northernisms which Burney collected as a totality gives a misleading impression of the possible interpretation of that list. It is important, rather, to investigate how these variant forms are used in these chapters. We shall concentrate our discussion on those variations in Burney's list involving common grammatical markers as being the most clear-cut cases of divergences from a possible standard form of language,

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[1] Oxford, 1903, p.208-209. Reprinted in one volume with *The Book of Judges*, London, 1918: New York, 1970.

[2] M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1988, p.9.

[3] Usually understood as the Hebrew of the northern kingdom, Israel, as opposed to that of the southern kingdom, Judah, which is often assumed to be identical with Standard Biblical Hebrew. On this dichotomy, see below, with note 30.

[4] G.A. Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*, SBL Monographs 43, Atlanta, 1990, p.8-9.

hence leaving out of the main discussion Burney's entries dealing with syntax[5] and general vocabulary.[6]

Not surprisingly, all usages of the second person feminine suffixes ending in *-ky*, and the second person feminine singular pronoun *ʾty* are found in direct speech, within these chapters. They are all addressed to the prophet's widow and the woman of Shunem, mostly by the prophet Elisha, but also by the woman of Shunem's husband (2 Kings 4: 1-37; 8: 1-6). Elisha exclusively uses *-ky*, while sharing *ʾty* with the husband. The one verse in which the husband uses *ʾty* (4:23), also evidences the participle form *hlkty*. What is important to note, however, are the larger number of standard forms of these suffixes and pronouns which appear in the same texts dealing with these women.

The single use of the demonstrative pronoun *zōh* is in the words of Elisha to the blinded Aramean soldiers (2 Kings 6:19). It is important to note that it is not used on its own but coupled with the masculine *zeh*.

Burney points to the use of an Aramaic form for the infinitive construct in 2 Kings 5: 18: *bĕhištaḥăwāyātī*. This is in the words of the Aramean Naaman to the prophet Elisha. We should note, however, that this is the second use of this grammatical category, the infinitive construct, for the same verb, "to bow down", in the same verse, and that the first infinitive construct is the standard form: *lĕhištaḥăwōt*.

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[5] The non-syncopation of the definite article after the preposition *beth* occurs in 2 Kings 7: 12 in the words of the Israelite king, so could fit in with the theory proposed below. The distribution of examples cited in *GKC*, p.112 (n), could indicate that the non-syncopation was a departure from classical style which became more common in Late Biblical Hebrew. We note also that the unusual uses of *ʿad* which Burney cites (p.209) are to be found in the words of the lookout observing the approach of Jehu.

For this and what follows, cf. the evidence that speech in Hebrew literature tends to contain its own peculiarities of diction in J. MacDonald, Some Distinctive Characteristics of Israelite Spoken Hebrew, *BO* 32, 1975, p.162-175. We should not assume, however, that therefore we have verbatim representations of the spoken language. Speech tends to be translated into the High language when it appears in written form in diglossic societies: C.A. Ferguson, Diglossia, *Word* 15, 1959, p.334. (For pre-exilic Hebrew as a diglossia situation, see below).

On the other hand, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions about the anticipatory pronominal suffix, given its distribution in *GKC*, p.425-426. Nor need it be significant that there is a proportionately larger number of uses of the indefinite use of *ʾeḥad* in stories which do not deal with Jerusalem or Judeans, given 2 Samuel 18: 10 and 2 Kings 12: 10, and the volume of stories in Samuel and Kings which actually do deal with events north of Jerusalem. In any case we cannot be certain that the appearance of these linguistic features in these texts is anything more than coincidental, and therefore we cannot draw reliable conclusions from this section of Burney's evidence.

[6] As Burney points out, there are some words characteristic of the sources, and a number of *hapax legomena* which could also be dialectal. However, the difficulty, without a much larger corpus of texts, is in affirming that this is certainly the case. It has long been suspected that the Aramaisms appear as local colour in order to characterize the Arameans as foreigners. For example, the root *śpq* "to suffice" in 1 Kings 20: 10, which Burney cites, appears in the words of the Aramean king: cf. I. Young, The Diphthong **ay* in Edomite, *JSS* 37, 1992, p.27-30 and references.

The relative pronoun *š-* which is widely considered a northernism in the pre-exilic period appears only once in these chapters, in 2 Kings 6:11.[7] This is in the words of the Aramean king to his servants. The rest of the uses of the relative pronoun in these chapters are of the standard *ʾăšer*.

Finally, there is the word *ʾykh* in 2 Kings 6:13. This again occurs in the speech of the Aramean king to his servants.

From this sample of the forms in Burney's list, we may see the following. All the variant grammatical forms appear in direct speech. All, with the exception of the woman of Shunem's husband, are spoken by the prophet Elisha or by Arameans. No form is used by both Elisha and the Arameans.[8] In evaluating this evidence, we must first of all be cautious about the word "all" in these conclusions, since we have dealt with only a relatively small number of forms. Nevertheless, the limited evidence suggests certain conclusions. The fact that there are numerically more standard forms in these chapters than the variants may be explained in one of two ways. Either the standard forms were originally dialectal usages which have been "fixed" at an earlier stage of the history of the text, or there is a conscious variation by the author(s) of those texts between standard and non-standard linguistic forms. To back up the second alternative are two observations. Firstly, if a revision of the text was undertaken, the question arises about why it was so inconsistent, leaving a scattering of non-standard usages. Secondly, there seems to be an obvious intentionally in the placement of certain of the variant elements. This is especially the case with the Aramaic-looking infinitive construct in 2 Kings 5: 18 which appears closely following its standard equivalent. This suggests an intentional playing on standard and variant forms.

It has long been noted that it is a feature of Biblical style to characterize foreigners by the use of peculiar linguistic expressions. Into this category would evidently fall the unusual forms discussed above which appear in the mouths of Arameans. Often, as far as our knowledge goes, these linguistic forms are appropriate for the characters who use them i.e. Aramaisms in the mouth of Arameans.[9] In this connection, however, the sole appearance of *š* in Kings, in the mouth of the Aramean king, is a problem. We do not know of this word in our Aramaic sources at all.[10] We must therefore raise the possibility that beside genuine foreign and dialectal forms, the Hebrew author could also draw on a body of cliched "non-standard" forms. To draw some modern analogies, while parodies[11] of foreign or dialectal speech will utilize certain language features which are felt to be absolutely characteristic of the target of the parody (e.g. Ja = German; Och Aye = Scottish[12]),

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[7] On the text of this verse, see J. A Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings* (ed. H.S. Gehman; I.C.C.) Edinburgh, 1951, p.382-383, and Cogan and Tadmor, *op.cit* (n.2), p.72-73.

[8] It may not be significant, but it is worth noting that Elisha uses the word *ʾayyeh* (2 Kgs 2: 14) as opposed to the Aramean king's *ʾykh* (2 Kgs 6: 13), cf. also Elisha's *ʾānāh* in 2 Kgs 6: 6.

[9] See note 6.

[10] W.R. Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000-586 B.C.E.*, Philadelphia, 1985, p.85; cf. S. Kaufman, "Siʾgabbar, Priest of Sahr in Nerab", *JAOS* 90, 1970, p.270-271.

[11] As opposed to genuine imitation, say, by a character actor.

[12] It is not important whether every Scotsman constantly uses the expression "Och Aye", only

other accent features used will be from the general category of "funny speech", which is built from a mishmash of many different varieties of "non-standard" language.[13] Parody for the sake of characterization does not rely on total accuracy for its effectiveness. The appearance of e.g. *š* in a text may thus not directly be evidence of local dialectal variation at all. On the contrary, it may itself be a literary expression, a cliche recognized by the intended audience as a marker of "foreign speech".

We now turn aside to consider some of the conclusions which have been drawn from the Kings material in relation to the question of "northern Hebrew". Firstly, the feminine singular demonstrative pronoun *zōh* has been considered a northernism.[14] This is based on its appearance in four texts which are apparently related to the northern kingdom. We believe this to be a misleading reading of the evidence. In the form *zō*, it appears only in Hosea 7:16. This is clearly a northern text. The other three commonly cited appearances of this demonstrative pronoun in supposedly northern texts all involve an idiomatic pairing with the masculine *zeh*. We have already mentioned 2 Kings 6:19 which appears in the words of Elisha. Judges 18:4 and 1 Kings 14:5 both concern the expression *kāzōh wĕkāzeh*. 1 Kings 14:5 is in the words of the Lord to the northern prophet Ahijah. Jud 18:4, however, although in a northern setting (the highlands of Ephraim) is actually the words of the "young Levite" from *Bethlehem of Judah* who had joined with the Micah of the story. In this connection it is interesting to note that the other usage of this expression *kāzōh wĕkāzeh* is in the speech of King David the Bethlehemite in 2 Samuel 11:25. Thus, although we may note that all the prose occurrences of this idiom are found in speech, it does not seem likely that it is meant to be taken as a specific marker of only one type of speech. This may, rather, be a case of the attraction of a particular idiom to the literary representation of direct speech,[15] possibly as part of a pool of general markers of foreign/dialectal speech. Once we free ourselves from the connection *zōh* = northern, we realize that its other occurrences, in Ezekiel 40:45 (the angel speaking to Ezekiel) and Qoheleth 2:2, 24; 5:15, 18; 7:23; 9:13; (first person monologue style?) need not be explained as cases of direct or indirect northern influence on these texts (nor indeed on Mishnaic Hebrew).[16]

The relative pronoun *š-* is very commonly considered a marker of either pre-exilic northern or post-exilic southern Hebrew. There are a number of apparently quite strong arguments which support the northern connections of *š*. It is quite possibly used to the exclusion of *ʾăšer* in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, a chapter which

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that the audience will immediately identify the dialect being parodied.

[13] Here it is harder to give clear examples since the type of "error" varies with the individual style of each "performer". Note, however, commonly, the replacement of English "w" with "v" e.g. "vill" for "will", or the tendency of all parodies of Asians to include elements like "Ah so!".

[14] See e.g. recently: J.R. Davila, Qoheleth and Northern Hebrew, *Maarav* 5-6, 1990, p.83; Rendsburg, *op.cit* (n.4), p.89.

[15] See note 5, above.

[16] Cf. also the use of *zū* as a demonstrative in Habakkuk 1:11 etc. The preceding paragraph is a modification of my somewhat uncritical acceptance of *zōh* as a northernism in: *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew* (FAT 5), Tübingen, 1993.

deals with the northern tribes to the exclusion of Judah.[17] Apart from the title (1:1), it is used exclusively in the Song of Songs. Some scholars have suggested that the strange language and acquaintance with northern geographical locations in this work are to be explained by a northern origin for the Song.[18] It appears three times in the stories about the Manassite Judge Gideon (see appendix, below). The misleading impression has sometimes been given of a standard northern Hebrew which employed *š-* as its regular relative pronoun as opposed to *ʾăšer* in the south. However, neither the Song of Deborah nor Song of Songs is written in what might be considered Standard Biblical Hebrew. Judges 5 belongs to the Archaic Biblical Hebrew style which had a much greater openness to variant forms than Standard Biblical Hebrew.[19] The language of the Song of Songs, while having some affinities with that of the Song of Deborah, is unique.[20] The problem with considering the language of these two texts as standard northern Hebrew is brought into sharp focus by the books of Hosea and Amos. These two eighth century prophets preached in the northern kingdom. Even though Amos was a southerner, we presume he used a form of language familiar to his hearers. However, as Rabin has noted on a number of occasions, the most remarkable thing about these sources is their similarity of language to that of contemporary Judean sources.[21] This is especially striking in the case of the issue at hand, the status of the relative pronoun *š-*. Both Hosea and Amos exclusively use *ʾăšer*. There was no clear-cut distinction between standard Hebrew in the north and south in the matter of relative pronouns. The evidence from the prophets is backed up by a fragment of an inscription, dated also to the mid-eighth century, from Samaria. It reads *ʾšr*, with a clear word divider after the *resh*, making it extremely probable that it is the word *ʾăšer*.[22] The relative pronoun *š-* does not seem to have been the first choice in

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[17] On *baʾăšer* in Jud 5:27, see R.G. Boling, *Judges Introduction, Translation and Commentary* Anchor Bible, New York 1975, p.115, who explains it as a noun "in the place".

[18] S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 9th edition, Edinburgh, 1913, p.436-453; followed e.g. by Rendsburg, *op.cit* (n.4), p.11.

[19] I. Young, The Style of the Gezer Calendar and Some "Archaic Biblical Hebrew" Passages, *VT* 42, 1992, p.362-375.

[20] On these Songs see my *Diversity* (n.16), p.157-168. It is not the language of these Songs alone that indicates a connection with northern Hebrew, but rather the clear northern connections of the Song of Deborah. Note, however, the caveat on this line of argument on p.165-166 of *Diversity*.

[21] C. Rabin, *A Short History of the Hebrew Language*, Jerusalem, 1973, p.33; The Emergence of Classical Hebrew, in: A. Malamat (ed.), The Age of the Monarchies: Culture and Society, *World History of the Jewish People* 1/5B, Jerusalem, 1979, p.77-78; Leshonam shel Amos ve-Hoshea, in: B.Z. Luria (ed.), *Iyyunim be-Sefer Tre-Aser*, Jerusalem, 1981, p.117-136. Certain peculiarities of Hosea's language may represent features of Samaria Hebrew. Nevertheless, these peripheral features do not affect the clear uniformity with the language of the southern prophets.

[22] E.L. Sukenik, Note on a Fragment of an Israelite Stele Found at Samaria, *PEFQS*, 1936, p.156; S.A. Birnbaum, The Sherds, in: J.W., G.M. Crowfoot, K.M. Kenyon, *The Objects from Samaria*, London, 1957, p.33-34. There are no Hebrew epigraphic attestations of the relative *š*: Garr, *op.cit* (n.10), p.85. There is a seventh century B.C. attestation on a seal that has been variously considered as Phoenician (N. Avigad, Two Phoenician Votive Seals, *IEJ* 16, 1966, p.248) or Ammonite (e.g. D. Sivan, On the Grammar and Orthography of the Ammonite

standard northern Hebrew. Returning to Kings, we find this observation to be borne out by the single use of *še-* in 2 Kings 6:11. In the "northern" narratives in Kings, *ʾăšer* is used normally, whereas *še-* is used only here. If the story in 2 Kings 6 derives from northerners, this is in fact evidence that the northerners themselves thought *še-* was a strange form to appear in a standard literary text, reserving it for characterizing a foreigner (the Aramean king). Therefore, once we leave aside non-standard texts (Song of Deborah, Song of Songs), it becomes clear that the relative pronoun *š-* cannot be classed as a standard form in northern Hebrew. Further, once this is acknowledged, it may become easier to accept that *š-* can appear not only in pre-exilic northern texts, but also as a non-standard form in pre-exilic southern texts.[23]

Apart from the forms used to characterize the Arameans as foreigners, almost all of the rest of the non-standard elements we have discussed are in the words of the prophet Elisha. This of course may be merely accidental, due to the fact that Elisha is the main character in those particular chapters. Alternatively, it may be a genuine attempt by the author of those stories to characterize Elisha by his speech. We are too much in the dark about the features of different Hebrew dialects to be sure whether the audience would have recognized the peculiarities attributed to him as giving away the place of the prophet's origin. It is interesting, however, that Elisha does not share any of his peculiarities with the Arameans. They are characterized differently. Even more significant, when surveying Burney's evidence, is the lack of common peculiarities of speech with Elisha's master, the Tishbite Elijah. Elijah is, nevertheless, at least once characterized by dialectal peculiarities. This is in some of his most memorable words, on Mt. Carmel, in 1 Kings 18: 27. It has long been realized that the word *śīg* "a turning aside" represents an interchange of *śin* with *samekh*.[24] Similarly, we have argued elsewhere that the word *śīah*, earlier in the same verse, is connected to *sūḥah* in Isaiah 5: 25 meaning "offal", giving a meaning "to defecate". Thus, this is also a case of interchange of *śin* with *samekh*.[25] Elijah and Elisha are therefore both characterized in Kings by peculiarities of speech. However, they are characterized differently.

It may be seen that the author(s) of these stories in Kings had at their disposal an array of non-standard linguistic forms. These they used within the standard framework of their stories as a means of characterization through speech. The same resources were utilized by the Archaic Biblical Hebrew style of poetry which

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Findings, *UF* 14, 1982, p.229). On this basis it is not unreasonable to suggest that *š* was not only known in Hebrew as a variant relative pronoun.

23 E.g. Qoheleth. On Qoheleth see my *Diversity* (n.16), p.140-158. In this connection more consideration should be given to the significance of the appearance of *še-* in Lamentations four times. It is usually taken that Lamentations was written by an eyewitness to the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (e.g. G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, London, 1968, p.298). The use of *še-* by an author from Jerusalem in the period immediately after the destruction of the first temple would seem to imply that *še-* was already part of the language of Jerusalem in the late pre-exilic period at least. Note, however, in line with our evidence from Kings, that both occurrences in chapter 2 of Lamentations are put into the mouth of foreigners.

24 *BDB*, p.691.

25 See on this interchange, provisionally, my, *Diversity* (n.16), p.171-173, 190-191.

used as part of its poetic repertoire the variation between standard and non-standard linguistic elements.[26] The question arises where these variant forms came from. Elsewhere I have argued that pre-exilic Hebrew is best understood as a diglossia situation, with Biblical Hebrew as the High language over a multitude of local dialects.[27] It was from the resources provided by these local dialects that the Biblical authors were able to draw. Within this diglossia situation, it is clearly a mistake to assume that there was merely one "northern" and one "southern" Hebrew beneath the surface of Standard Biblical Hebrew in the pre-exilic period. Despite many areas of disagreement, it is the conviction of modern scholarship that settled Israel in Canaan was the result of a process of bringing together either a greater or lesser number of diverse elements.[28] Diversity of origin would imply diversity of language, albeit usually concealed beneath the High language. Nor is this diversity confined to a basic north-south split, although it is certainly also true that many see the southern and northern tribes as having fundamentally different prehistories.[29] Even the southern grouping which came to be the kingdom of Judah, despite containing less "tribes" than the northern grouping, came to absorb other groups like the Calebites, Kenites, Kenizzites, and Jerahmeelites, quite apart from the tribe of Simeon.[30] It would therefore be a great error to equate Standard Biblical Hebrew with "the" Judean dialect. There were likely many southern dialects just as there were many northern dialects, and standard Hebrew was not identical with any one of them. The Shibboleth story in Judges 12: 1-6 already witnesses to the fact that the Hebrew authors were well aware of different dialects among groups generally classified as "northerners".[31] The evidence from Kings also shows an awareness of a multiplicity of dialects among people who could equally be generally classified as "northerners".

Once we see that the northern narratives in Kings are not peppered at random with non-standard linguistic features, but rather that these non-standard features are

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[26] See the article cited in note 19. Another possible example of dialectal variation which could be added to those mentioned in the article is the now merely orthographic variation between *rwš* and *r ʾš* for "poison" in Deut 32: 32-33.

[27] *Diversity* (n.16), passim.

[28] *Ibid.*, p.11-19.

[29] Implied in the many variations of the theory that the "Leah" tribes (of whom Judah was the only one which remained politically significant) and the "Rachel" tribes (Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin) arrived in Canaan in two quite separate waves. See e.g. H.H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua Biblical Traditions in the Light of Archaeology*, London, 1950; M. Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2nd ed. Edinburgh, 1965, p.85-90.

[30] Noth, *op.cit* (n.29), p.55-58; J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd edition, Philadelphia, 1981, p.136-137; R. de Vaux, The Settlement of the Israelites in Southern Palestine and the Origins of the Tribe of Judah, in: H.T. Frank and W.L. Reed (eds.), *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, Nashville, 1970, p.108-134.

[31] Ephraim and Gilead. Note that sibilants were also at issue in the characterization of the Gileadite Elijah. Gilead seems to be a separate tribal group in Judges: see H.-J. Zobel, *Stammesspruch und Geschichte*, BZAW 95, Berlin, 1965, p.97-98. The linguistic evidence provided by this incident would be even more significant if Noth's interpretation (*op.cit* [n.29], p.61) of Jud. 12:4 is correct i.e. that the Gileadites were themselves Ephraimite settlers. We should not expect even "tribes" to be linguistically homogeneous.

used in controlled environments, within a standard framework, we lose a strong piece of evidence that standard northern Hebrew was different in essentials from standard southern Hebrew. Burney's statement that "certain peculiarities of diction probably belong to the dialect of North Palestine" is true to the extent that these non-standard forms may (but need not) have been drawn from a number of Israelite dialects. They do not, however, witness to a systematic difference of standard northern Hebrew from standard southern Hebrew.

APPENDIX: š in Judges

In connection with the previous discussion, it is worth mentioning the use of *š* in the Gideon stories in Judges 6-8. This presents some differences to the pattern we saw in Kings. The first use, in Jud 6: 17 is used similarly to Kings, in that it is in the words of Gideon to the Lord. The other two uses, however, are not in speech. In 7: 12 it appears in the colourful (hence tribal?) saying "like sand that (*še*) is upon the seashore for number". In 8:26, furthermore, it appears in a straight narrative talking about garments "that (*še*) were upon the kings of Midian". The author of this narrative, therefore, seems to use his non-standard elements not only to characterize Gideon's speech, but having done this introduces them at other points of the general narrative, almost like "local colour". This shows that different authors used non-standard linguistic forms in different ways in their narratives. The characterization of Gideon may be both as "old time" and "foreign" (i.e. Manassite), from the author's perspective. Note again, however, that on the basis of the Kings evidence, we cannot be certain that *š* was an element of Gideon's local dialect and not simply a "typical" non-standard form.

Abstract:

C.F. Burney's conclusion that the language of the "northern" narratives in Kings (1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 10) exhibits certain peculiarities that may be traced to "northern Hebrew" has been generally accepted. Upon investigation, however, the variant grammatical forms turn out to be concentrated in the speech of the characters in the stories, and are mixed in with a larger number of their "standard" equivalents. This pattern suggests the conclusion that they are used as a means of characterization via "peculiar" speech. That the linguistic features are not always necessarily a reflection of the actual dialect of the characters may be suggested by the use of the relative *š-* by the Aramean king. In fact, the way that the author(s) of these stories treat the variant forms casts doubt on the commonly repeated conclusion that features such as *š-* and the demonstrative *zōh* were standard characteristics of "northern Hebrew". On the contrary, these variant linguistic forms were drawn by the Biblical authors from the multiplicity of dialects which lay beneath the standard language of pre-exilic Israel and Judah.

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