Introduction: The Multilingualism of Ancient Palestine and of Jesus

Defining the Issue and Problem

The languages spoken by Jesus continue to be a subject of scholarly interest. Scholars still hope to reach a consensus regarding the extent to which Jesus would have spoken Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin, as well as the composition of the linguistic repertoire of first-century CE (or ancient) Palestine. In this absence of a consensus, recent scholarship has nevertheless acknowledged the multilingual environment of Jesus' world.1 But it needs to be mentioned that this scholarly scenario is radically different from nineteenth- and most of twentieth-century scholarship, which mainly portrayed Jesus as an exclusively Aramaic speaker. Few today will contend that Jesus only spoke Aramaic. As Hans Dieter Betz states: “a knowledge of Greek can no longer be denied to Jesus.”2 For the most part, the recognition of Jesus’ multilingual environment is greatly induced by the discovery of the widespread literary and non-literary artifacts in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly in Qumran and other Judean Desert sites. This discovery reveals the existence and use of at least four languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin—in ancient Palestine.3 The evidence provided by the New Testament that was virtually transmitted in Greek also establishes the fact that Greek, not Aramaic, was the prestige language of the time (see especially chapter 3), although scholars have generally failed (or refused) to recognize it. Because scholars have become

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3 For surveys of the evidence of these artifacts, see the bibliographical list in Stanley E. Porter, The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals (2nd ed.; JSNTSup 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2004), 140–1 n. 31 and 32. See also Lee, Jesus and Gospel Traditions, 106–10, 156–60.
aware of these facts, their main concern since has been with determining how to interpret the available linguistic evidence and to identify the language(s) Jesus would have spoken.4

As will be seen in the next chapter, previous scholarly works mostly used conventional means, such as logical inferences, identification of linguistic and grammatical characteristics, historical arguments, or a combination of these in their investigation of the linguistic evidence. In some ways, it is easy to see that these studies have provided a wealth of information and a number of theories regarding the multilingual situation of ancient Palestine. In other ways, however, it is also fair to say that their methods of inquiry do not (as they probably cannot) really enable them to paint a clear portrait of the multilingualism of ancient Palestine. The earlier argument that Jesus typically or exclusively spoke Aramaic, or that he also spoke Greek on occasions, must now be spelled out clearly and explicitly. In the light of this discussion, I wish to note that Michael O. Wise’s insight two decades ago is unpersuasive; he states: “Unfortunately, the nature of the linguistic evidence from ancient Palestine makes a complete linguistic analysis impossible. The best one can hope for is an approximation of the facts.”5 If one were to accept Wise’s argument, then it follows that future scholarly research cannot result in any hopeful investigation, let alone paint, even in the broadest strokes, a correct picture of the multilingual situation of ancient Palestine.

It is with regard to Wise’s remark that I wish to situate this study. On the one hand, I do not believe that scholarly hopes for understanding the multilingual landscape of ancient Palestine should rest solely on approximation of facts. Even though we cannot make absolute claims for our findings, we can still continue to find new ways and develop new methods to understand better the linguistic milieu of the first century CE; assuredly, the responsibility of a research and development department is not just for the upkeep of the business, but also for its continuous growth and improvement. Thus, on the other hand, it still remains a noble goal to strive for a scholarly consensus, but only under two agreeable conditions: first, scholars must be willing to set aside, at least temporarily, what theological convictions are associated with particular

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4 Robert H. Gundry, “The Language Milieu of First-Century Palestine: Its Bearing on the Authenticity of the Gospel Tradition,” *JBL* 83.4 (1964): 404–408, here 405, observes “that usually the strongest arguments in favor of conflicting views are left largely unfuted, the weight of discussion being put on evidence favorable to the author’s viewpoint.”