Chapter 2

Sociolinguistics and the New Testament

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I survey a number of studies that have dealt with the languages of ancient Palestine and of Jesus, including the concomitant topic of the Greek of the New Testament. The objective of that survey was to show the state of play and the diversity of scholarly opinions regarding our subject of interest. The survey indicates that previous studies have argued their case via mostly historical means and logical inferences. Whether which language or combination of languages forms the linguistic repertoire of Jesus and his contemporaries largely depends upon a particular proponent’s explanation of the linguistic evidence. Some presuppositions about the historical setting of ancient Palestine or the sociocultural background of Jesus and his contemporaries often influence the views of various proponents. Many scholars find it hard to believe that Jesus and his contemporaries could have been multilingual speakers simply because they were Jewish natives whose mother tongue was Aramaic. This scenario generally characterizes much of the scholarship on the linguistic situation of ancient Palestine from the period of its inception until approximately the 1960s.

Scholarship on this subject has not been one-sided, however. Many scholars are now beginning to appreciate the multilingual nature of the society of ancient Palestine, especially shortly before and at the turn of the twenty-first century. The discovery of a plethora of multilingual artifacts in various locations near the Dead Sea can hardly be ignored in pointing to the fact that ancient Palestine was almost certainly a multilingual community. These scholars acknowledge that Jesus and his contemporaries would have been multilingual speakers, because the linguistic evidence for multilingualism is simply undeniable. However, scholars until today are still concerned with how to best interpret the linguistic evidence. How do or can we show that Jesus and his contemporaries were indeed multilingual speakers? On what occasions and circumstances would Jesus speak Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, or Latin?¹ Was

Jesus able to use Aramaic in all speech situations in that ancient multilingual society? Scholarship since the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s, has begun to invoke and use sociolinguistics to solve these problems. In fact, sociolinguistics has been used to investigate not only the linguistic environment of ancient Palestine, but also other areas in New Testament studies. It is fair to say that most scholars now at least acknowledge the multilingual elements that composed the community of first-century Palestine, with some even using sociolinguistic theories to investigate the linguistic evidence. Nevertheless, it is important to note that none of these studies (so far as I know) has offered an adequate explanation for how the multilingual dynamics of communication are at play in that ancient community, let alone developed a systematic methodological framework to investigate the linguistic evidence. Scholarship has yet to see how various sociolinguistic theories can be combined and applied to our primary evidence—the New Testament and its related literature. And it is for this reason that I offer this present chapter.

This chapter has two major sections. The first section surveys previous sociolinguistic approaches to New Testament studies, which include studies on the linguistic situation of ancient Palestine, Bible translation, and biblical interpretation. The second section presents my proposed sociolinguistic approach to the multilingualism of ancient Palestine. The items discussed in this section encapsulate the research methodology of this study. I first provide in this section an overview of the discipline by describing sociolinguistics, sketching its history and development, and stating some of its usefulness and limitations as a methodological tool. From this overview, I then present my proposed sociolinguistic model, articulating my approach to its utilization and application. My model combines various sociolinguistic theories that I develop into a multi-level and multi-dimensional framework, which I applied to various historical, geographical, archaeological, and sociolinguistic data (chapters 3 and 4), notably the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 5).

Matthew’s Gospel serves as a means by which I can tap into the linguistic milieu of the first-century community to study the various situational contexts of Jesus’ speeches and actions. Of course, the recorded events in the Gospels, Matthew in my case, do not necessarily entail an exact replication of the actual events. It is possible that some details of the actual events were redacted to suit the Gospel author’s purpose and goal. The question is whether these recorded events are historically reliable to the extent that they can represent the kinds of situational contexts that occurred in the first century CE. The answer to this question seems straightforward, since, undoubtedly, the Gospels are the only few available sources (but perhaps the best ones) that we have and that we can use for this end.