CHAPTER 3

The Sociolinguistic Landscape of Ancient Palestine

Introduction

This chapter attempts to demonstrate that ancient Palestine was a multilingual speech community and that Greek was its prestige language and lingua franca. It is important to establish this prestige language and lingua franca, as it points to the default language the general populace, including Jesus and his disciples, would have used to communicate with those from outside their own family and ethnic groups and with those who were not able to speak their own native language. This prestige language and lingua franca also functions as the default language the first-century people would have used in more public settings where speech accommodation is required for the benefit of various social and ethnic groups that are present in a speech event, as well as in some social settings where use of the lingua franca seems most appropriate.1

I have taken two approaches to achieve this objective. The two major sections of this chapter expound on these approaches by way of analyzing two sets of data. The first set of data deals with the history of ancient Palestine’s successive military conquests, while the second one examines the geography, inhabitants, and population of the land. The theory behind the analysis of these two sets of data derives from the first of the three levels of analyses of the sociolinguistic model outlined in the previous chapter. My sociolinguistic model, it should be recalled, attempts to investigate three levels or areas of my subject of interest: (1) the sociolinguistic landscape of ancient Palestine; (2) the sociolinguistic environment and network of Jesus and his multilingual proficiency; and (3) the languages of Jesus in various sociolinguistic contexts in the Gospel of Matthew. This chapter will thus map out the sociolinguistic

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1 Most scholars who study the linguistic situation of ancient Palestine agree that Greek was the language of the politically and economically dominant groups, although some have questioned whether the language was actually the “dominant” one during the first-century (see, for example, Catherine Hezser, Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine [Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001], 240). As this chapter will make clear, however, from the perspective of an entire speech community, there needs to be a “dominant” (and prestige) language that would function as the lingua franca of various ethnic groups and individuals that interact within a speech community (although linguistic proficiency will of course vary between individuals).
landscape of ancient Palestine. The sociolinguistic concepts involved fall under the topic of societal multilingualism.

The first section below shows the language shifts of the speech community from a historical standpoint, using the concepts of language contact, language maintenance and shift, and language decline and language death. Language shifts do not always or necessarily entail the total abandonment of a particular language, but they do reveal how each of the four languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin—came to be spoken at various time periods in the history of ancient Palestine under different military regimes. These linguistic shifts highlight the process ancient Palestine has undergone from being a monolingual speech community during the united monarchy period to being a multilingual speech community during the time of Jesus. It should be noted that my interest in these “language shifts” is focused upon the broader historical development of the entire ancient Palestinian community and not upon any particular geographical region within it, such as Judea, Samaria, Galilee, etc. Nonetheless, I have treated the major geographical areas (eight in total) individually in the following section, but my interest there is in the area’s geography, inhabitants, and population, and their correlation with the languages spoken in those communities.

The second section, therefore, uses the concepts of dialects, language boundary, and isogloss to examine the geography, population, and inhabitants of the major provinces and cities of Palestine, showing geographically what the multilingualism of the entire Palestinian community would have looked like. I summarize my findings and conclusions and provide a table of the various languages spoken in each geographical area at the end of the chapter. Before turning to the first section, I discuss first the concept of speech community, as I view the geographical land of ancient Palestine (and the various regions within it) as a “speech community.”


3 Some studies treat individual settlements and villages within a geographical region. See, for example, Mark A. Chancey, The Myth of a Gentile Galilee (SNTSMS 118; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63–119, on the inland settlements of Galilee; Bradley W. Root, First Century Galilee (WUNT 2, 378; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); and Ariel Lewin, The Archaeology of Ancient Judea and Palestine (Los Angeles: The Paul J. Getty Museum, 2005), 44–177, on various cities of Palestine.