Conclusion: Final Remarks and Implications of This Study

Summary Findings

This study has attempted to show the various ways ancient Palestine could be seen as a multilingual speech community and to propose that Jesus was an active speaker of Aramaic and Greek, and a passive speaker (to some degree) of Hebrew and Latin as a resident of that community. Without having that level of multilingual proficiency, Jesus would not have been able to interact with various social groups in his speech community nor would he have been able to perform his duties as a Jewish rabbi. Whether Jesus actually attained that proficiency level, however, is a debatable point, as nobody today will ever know what actually happened. We can only discuss this issue today in terms of likelihood and probability. With little reservation, the speech community of first-century CE Palestine was almost certainly multilingual (with Greek as its lingua franca), and Jesus was most likely a multilingual speaker. Many people, even biblical scholars, may not be convinced of this theory, however. Thus, it is critical that a theory be adjudicated by its own merit. In other words, this study should be assessed on the basis of its method of investigation. My methodology derives from a single, workable theoretical framework that I have formulated through consolidation of various sets of sociolinguistic theories (see chapter 2). This approach suggests that a theory needs to be evaluated not only on the basis of the reasons and explanations one gives to support the theory, but also on the basis of how and where one derives those reasons and explanations. This approach highlights the difference between a method-driven theory and an intuitively derived theory: “Jesus was a multilingual because the sociolinguistic world he lived in was multilingual” is better than “Jesus was a Hebrew or Aramaic speaker because he was of Jewish descent.”

Applying my methodological framework to the historical and textual data has generated some plausible and even highly probable findings. First, it is clear from a historical standpoint that the Jewish nation encountered consecutive language shifts (i.e., Hebrew→Aramaic→Greek) from the period of the Babylonian captivity (sixth century BCE) to the time of Jesus under the Roman Empire (first century CE). Second, the geographical distribution of the languages of ancient Palestine indicates a highly complex level of multilingualism. Linguistic evidence for the use of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin (including other language varieties) are distributed throughout the various
regions of ancient Palestine, with specific combination of languages concentrated upon each region. Third, the use of Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin is also distributed throughout the various social institutions that compose ancient Palestine; each language has its own social function within the various social institutions of the speech community. A set of sociolinguistic rules governs the probable use of a particular language in a particular social situation (see chapter 5). Fourth and last, it seems that during the time of Jesus, most Jews would have acquired either Greek or Aramaic as their native tongue or first language, that is, the language people have learned from birth or within a critical period during their childhood. Some Jewish children might have spoken Aramaic in the home and in more private social settings, but would have inevitably spoken Greek outside of the home and in more public social settings, especially because Greek was the lingua franca and the prestige language of the time. In fact, because Greek was introduced to the speech community three or four centuries ago, it is possible that at least the first and second earlier generations would already have been Greek speakers by Jesus’ time. These findings can hardly be ignored in evaluating the linguistic environment of ancient Palestine.

Implications for New Testament Research

This study has several implications for several areas of New Testament research. The first implication relates to the issue of method-formulation in New Testament research. We have now entered the era of “data overload” in New Testament research. Too many views and arguments have already been put forward on a specific subject; it will be a challenge now to find new things to theorize or argue. Thus, the discipline needs more sophisticated methods for the investigation of a particular area of research, methods that are clearly defined and applicable to the primary data and text. This ensures that we continue to contribute or supplement new insights to scholarship. This is what I have tried to offer in this study.

The second implication concerns my findings regarding the multilingualism of ancient Palestine and of Jesus (see above). Those findings help and influence our understanding of the sociolinguistic composition of early Christianity and the early Church. An early Christianity that is set against a multilingual social milieu could be radically different than one that is set against a strictly or predominantly Jewish setting.

This leads to the third implication, which touches upon the research areas of the sociocultural background of Jesus and Jesus’ literacy. Future research