The Linguistic Ethos of the Galilee in the First Century C.E.*

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What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture.

—Sir Thomas Brown, *Hydriotaphia: Urne-Buriall*

1 Introduction

Language evolution within a society reflects the history of that society; “the history of language and the history of culture move along parallel lines.”1 A society shapes its thought and expression of reality through language and its grammar. Language choice and language change can be socially loaded. For this reason, language choice within a culture is not passive; it distinguishes religious and national affiliations, as well as social class. Language preserves social behavior and acts as a social marker between social groups; it is “a complex social fact.”2 An ancient (or modern) society cannot be adequately depicted apart from the language(s) it used to communicate its needs, ideas, and emotions. While the language of Galilee in the Early Roman period (63 B.C.E.–135 C.E.) has been a matter of some debate, quite often studies on Early Roman Galilean society have paid too little attention to the language(s) used3 by Galileans as a foundational force that shaped and expressed Early

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* In loving memory of Hanan Eshel ז”ל, for Esti.


3 Language use refers to both literary and spoken manifestations of a language. The literary form of a language quite often preserves a different register of the language than the vernacular form(s) in which a language manifests itself. Any investigation of an ancient language encounters particular problems in discussing the spoken form(s) of that language due to the paucity of materials that can be clearly identified as reflecting the spoken register of a language, and even those materials that reflect the spoken form of a language are too few to draw systematic conclusions. Moreover, an ancient multi-lingual society, as existed among Jews living in the land of Israel at the end of the Second Temple period, often viewed
Roman Galilean society. Therefore, language allows one to observe social change in process prior to its crystallization and standardization within a social structure. A diachronic analysis of a language tells the story of a culture. The language(s) used by the Jewish people living in the land of Israel in the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods at the same time reflect and were a crucial part of the social forces that shaped Jewish society in the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods in Galilee and Judea.

The virtual absence of literary and epigraphic materials from Galilee during the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods complicates the construction of the linguistic ethos of Galilean society. Many scholarly investigations of the languages used by Galilean Jews in the Early Roman period tend to rely upon analyses of Greek texts (e.g. Josephus and the New Testament) and parallels drawn from the literary and epigraphic remains in Judea and the

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