

BOOK REVIEW

Lee, Sang-Il, *Jesus and Gospel Traditions in Bilingual Context: A Study in the Interdirectionality of Language* (BZBW, 186; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2010). xviii + 522 pp. Hbk. \$168 USD.

A scholarly monograph derived from a dissertation instantly raises questions regarding its contribution to its field of study. In the study of the linguistic situation of ancient Palestine (and the languages of Jesus), it is fair to say that Lee's book can be considered to be one of the small number of published monographs related to this issue. I say 'related' because Lee's study is not primarily about this linguistic issue. Rather, his study seeks to describe the nature of the transmission of the Jesus and Gospel traditions via a theory of the linguistic situation of first-century Palestine. His thesis is that the transmission of these traditions is not unidirectional, that is, from Judeo-Palestinian to Hellenistic traditions (geographical), from oral to written traditions (modal) and from Aramaic to Greek (linguistic) traditions. Lee contends, based on his theory of the bilingual milieu of first-century Palestine, that we should see an interdirectional (or two-way) transmission of these traditions. For instance, he says, 'If they [previous scholars] had taken bilingualism into account more seriously, they might have concluded that the Greek Jesus traditions were translated into Aramaic, as Aramaic traditions were translated into Greek' (p. 37). There is much to commend in the author's use of multilingualism theory as an interpretive tool to analyze the Jesus and Gospel traditions. However, some significant problems with Lee's use of multilingualism theory cast serious doubts on the validity of his thesis. I will point out some of these problems after I give a general overview of the chapters of his book.

Lee's book is divided into two major parts. The first part, Chapters 1 to 5, gives a review of the history of research on the transmission of the Jesus and Gospel traditions and introduces Lee's new proposal. Chapter 1 discusses what Lee wants to call the three hypotheses of unidirectionality employed by previous scholars. Lee argues against such

hypotheses and asserts that the transmission of these traditions is interdirectional. Consequently, Chapter 2 compares bilingualism with diglossia, in order to suggest that the linguistic situation of ancient Palestine should be characterized as 'bilingual without diglossia' (p. 88). Lee defines bilingualism as the 'coexistence' (p. 102) of two or more languages and follows William Mackey's definition that '*bilingualism* is not a phenomenon of language; it is a characteristic of its use' (p. 77). Based on this bilingualism theory, Chapters 3 and 4 inquire into the bilingualism of Palestine and the Diaspora, which Lee believes to be the stage of the origins of the transmission of the Gospel traditions. He discusses regional and personal bilingualism, deducing that Jesus' audiences spoke both Aramaic and Greek regardless of whether they belonged to the upper or lower echelons of society. He also points out that the border between Judeo-Palestinian and Hellenistic churches was fluid and thus both Greek and Aramaic traditions existed and circulated simultaneously in both Greek and Aramaic forms. For all these reasons, Lee concludes that there was probably an interdirectional translation and retranslation of the Jesus sayings among 'Aramaic-matrix' and 'Greek-matrix' eyewitnesses during Jesus' ministry. Accordingly, in Chapter 5, with the recognition that the populace in Palestine and the Diaspora was largely bilingual, Lee claims that the Jerusalem church should also have been a bilingual community. Lee argues that, in the book of Acts, the term 'Hebrews' refers to Aramaic-matrix speakers, whereas the term 'Hellenists' refers to Greek-matrix speakers; thus, he rejects the theory of the early schism or the distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The second part of the book, Chapters 6 to 8, attempts to show the nature of this two-way transmission of the Jesus and Gospel traditions at the levels of syntax, phonology and semantics. Chapter 6 argues against the theory that interprets syntactic features in the New Testament text as Semitic interference (Semitisms or Septuagintalisms). Drawing upon cognitive linguistics, Lee points out that syntactic changes occur within a language itself in the grammaticalization process caused by human cognition regardless of language contact. Lee presents a number of verbs, conjunctions and adverbs that are found in classical and Hellenistic Greek and other languages that have lost their lexical meanings and as a result have altered their grammatical functions without any syntactic interference. Chapter 7 argues that the bilingualism of ancient Palestine and the Roman Near East brought about

variant spellings in the four Gospels and Acts when Semitic words or sentences were transliterated into their Greek equivalents. Phonologically variant spellings are understood as abnormal in the conventional orthographical view, such that one tries to distinguish between ‘correct’ and ‘corrupted’ spellings in order to arrive at the ‘original’ word, which is assumed to have originated from the Gospel writer. However, transliterated variant spellings are considered to be allolexemes in the variational view, which means that ‘the original spelling cannot be the correct spelling but one of the many conventional correct spellings’ (p. 304). As such, this implies that Semitic spellings do not have temporal priority over Greek spellings. Chapter 8 deals with the Aramaic embedded spellings, words, phrases and sentences called Semitisms or Aramaisms at the level of semantics. Lee posits that these Semitisms or Aramaisms must be regarded as code-switchings (not borrowings or interferences), which, according to him, is an intentional literary device that must be investigated at the ‘*pragmatic* level rather than the phonological, morphological, or syntactic levels’ (p. 333). One of his illustrations of the linguistic phenomenon of code-switching is Jesus’ alternate use of Greek and Latin before Pilate in Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*, in order to underscore the idea that the Gospel writers switch between codes in creating vividness, emphasis, politeness and/or solidarity. He remarks, ‘Gibson intends to convey vividness by using code-switching’ (p. 347).

I now would like to comment on several points that Lee makes. First, Lee does not actually utilize a sociolinguistic approach to his concept of bilingualism, as most of the arguments he makes and the evidence he marshals do not derive from sociolinguistic theories, but rather from previous works that deal with the linguistic situation of ancient Palestine. In particular, he does not really show how theories of bilingualism apply to the linguistic evidence. Instead, he only defines them in general terms; the characterization of the Jesus and Gospel traditions as ‘interdirectional, circular, and hybrid’ (pp. 133, 173, 280, 393) is solely based upon his general conceptualization that the fact that ancient Palestine was ‘largely bilingual’ proves that the traditions were interdirectionally transmitted.

Secondly, the definition of bilingualism that Lee gives is not only confusing but also too simplistic. He posits a maximalist view of bilingualism, yet he follows Mackey, whose theory of bilingualism is quite confusing. On the one hand, Mackey seems to hold a minimalist view,

since he claims that bilingualism belongs to the domain of *parole*, and sees bilingualism as a relative concept involving the questions of degree, function, alternation and interference (Lee fails to note the latter). On the other hand, however, Mackey also argues that bilingualism is indeterminable, as it simply refers to the alternate switching between languages. If bilingualism belongs to the domain of *parole*, the study of the various sociolinguistic factors involved in instances of language use will allow for an explicit description of the bilingualism of a particular community. More pointedly, Lee does not show the linguistic interplay between Aramaic and Greek languages, that is, how these two languages are functionally distributed in the bilingual community of ancient Palestine, although he discusses in passing several aspects of bilingualism. Does he mean that any individual, regardless of the context of the communicative event, simply speaks either Greek or Aramaic anytime they wish? Even if an individual is ambilingual, the choice of one language over the other is largely dependent upon many extralinguistic factors that affect a particular communicative event.

Thirdly, even though I hold a theory of the multilingualism of ancient Palestine, I also acknowledge that the presence of both Aramaic and Greek literature or inscriptions does not automatically support the theory that individuals are biliterate. A bilingual or digraphic artifact needs to be classified as catering either to a single bilingual audience or to two parallel monolingual audiences that may be literate in one of the two writing systems. For example, we cannot be sure whether the sign on top of Jesus' cross (Jn 19.20) was catering to a multilingual group or to various monolingual groups. To stretch this matter further, ancient inscriptional evidence (e.g. a papyrus or an engraved artifact), in my opinion, must now be investigated more carefully in terms of not merely seeing an artifact as 'text-as-text' but also as 'text-as-image'. This is the so-called 'physical materiality' of language, which ties in to the idea of local (seen at the textual level) and global (concerns power relations, identity constructions and societal and political issues) functions of texts.

Fourthly, even though Lee is correct in pointing out that the border between the first-century Judeo-Palestinian and Hellenistic churches was more fluid than is often assumed, he is incorrect in abruptly rejecting the distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. Lee has to reckon with why Paul in Acts and in his letters goes to great lengths in enjoining his congregations to accept Gentile believers. Moreover, Lee

himself claims that ‘the Jewish Diaspora had enough ethnolinguistic vitality to preserve its mother tongue in Antioch and Alexandria when their social status, their population, and educational support are taken into consideration’ (p. 138). The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, however, is used to measure how, as Lee also notes, a social group *maintains* its language by a combination of several sociolinguistic factors or to *explain* multilingualism at times, but probably not to *prove* the existence of bilingualism. As such, by using the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality, Lee contradicts his own argument against previous scholars, as he, by necessity, also assumes at the outset that the ‘Jewish Diaspora of the first-century Roman Empire was composed of Greek-speaking communities’ (p. 137).

Fifthly and last, it is a bit of a stretch to argue that Aramaic and Greek traditions have been translated back and forth, since this particular phenomenon can neither be explained nor proven by a community’s bilingualism. The mere fact that a translation is needed should suggest the presence of groups of monolinguals or low-proficiency or receptive-domain bilinguals. In addition, the interdirectional transmission of the traditions at the levels of syntax, phonology and semantics that Lee presents does not clearly correlate to the linguistic situation of Palestine, since Lee focuses on the cognitive side of the Gospel writers who grammaticalize and make the changes in syntax and the choices of variant spellings in the Gospel materials. To be sure, even if Gibson wishes to emphasize vividness in the conversation between Jesus and Pilate, the code-switch may not have actually happened (though I believed it did); it is merely a pragmatic or aesthetic device used by the producer or writer. It is simply difficult to demonstrate from the surface texts of the Gospels the phenomenon of bilingualism. For bilingualism theories to apply, one has to dig deep into the actual sociolinguistic situation of first-century Palestine and show how the various episodes in the Gospel narratives may reflect such a phenomenon.

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