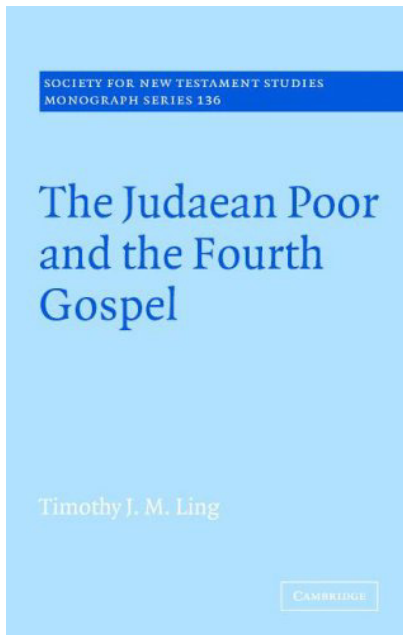


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Ling, Timothy J. M.

The Judaean Poor and the Fourth Gospel

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This book is Ling's revised version of his doctoral thesis, and it reads just like a Ph.D. thesis. The title actually describes the last third of a book that often looks like a patchwork quilt (so well-known in the agrarian regions of the midwestern U.S.). In the introduction (ch. 1) the author states his general problem: "the question of how we can understand a text produced in an ancient social world, which was in all probability, quite different from our own." He approaches this question without a thought to sociolinguistics and hypothesis formation—even though he is dealing with the category of text. Moreover, although the genre of text is determined by some originating social system, the author is little concerned with social systems.

Instead, he endlessly refers to the undefined category of "social world" and begins by stating prevailing solutions to his question that at bottom deals with the problem of crossing cultures (which he calls the problem of incommensurability). This is followed by what he thinks is "a more integrated view of the social world" applied (1) to the areas of social structures and religious aspirations, (2) to the "poor" in the New Testament, and (3) to transcending interpretations of John's Gospel in terms of sectarianism. His magic pill for the last two areas is what Weber has called "virtuoso religion." In line with this

introduction, Ling deals with the opening question of crossing cultures in the next two chapters: “The New Testament World” (ch. 2) followed by “Judaea and ‘Virtuoso Religion’” (ch. 3). Chapter 4 considers “The Poor,” while the fifth and final chapter discusses “John’s Social World.”

His critical and contentious assessment of previous presentations of the New Testament world is largely focused on the Context Group. Ling presents himself as though he personally knows the members of the Context Group and all of their published works and concludes, objectively, of course, that the group has generally been “dogmatic,” “naive,” “crude,” and “unable to recognize cultural differences.” He, of course, is none of these. Yet his main problem seems to be with the mental nosebleed he experiences when dealing with abstractions. After all, models are nothing less than abstract representations of real-world objects and interactions. However, abstractions in cultural anthropological models derive from cross-cultural comparisons, yet there are no cross-cultural comparisons in this work.

Ling thinks that speaking of honor and shame as pivotal values of the Mediterranean is simply naïve and wrong-headed, since what is honorable and shameful changes in different times, regions, and groups. First of all, Ling never defines what he means by “value” in spite of the fact that in the past few years British newspapers have discussed at length “the core values of British society.” In the context of societal analysis, a “value” refers to some quality and the direction of behavior deriving from that quality. There is no “liminal” space between a value and its practice.

Ling does not seem to know that social psychologists’ (and some anthropologists’) choice of honor as the pivotal Mediterranean value derives from that fact that there are only three internalized sanctions human groups use with regard to discordant social behavior: anxiety, shame, and guilt. Although all human beings are capable of experiencing and sensing all three sanctioning feelings, collectivistic societies generally use shame in child-rearing techniques, while individualistic societies use guilt (for the categories in practice, see any issue of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* and the continuing work of Triandis and Hofstede). In his crusade against any possible abstract, general Mediterranean value, I wonder what Ling would say about Carroll Quigley’s contention that common Mediterranean social values are to be found in a region running from Persia to Peru? (Quigley is one of several relevant works Ling does not use.) Ling’s main contribution in chapter 2 is the compilation of recent works about the core or basic values of Mediterranean society along with good discussions on limited good. He avoids touching upon Jerome’s “Every rich person is either a thief or the heir of a thief” (*In Hieremiam* 2.5.2; CCL 74:61). Or, as Pseudo Pelagius put it, “For persons to cease to be greedy, they must cease to be wealthy” (*On Wealth* 2, PLSupp 1:1381). His critique of

scholars citing ancient authors without a fuller context is valid, yet he usually does the same when citing in favor of a position he espouses. Of course, the fact is nearly all documents available to us from antiquity are composed by elites, and it is the elite view that we have. What, then, was the view of those whose goods were extorted?

In chapter 3 he deals with “virtuoso religion,” which he describes, following Silber and Hill, as “forms of piety that may lead to the establishment of religious orders” (62). What is typical of religious orders seems to be some form(s) of asceticism. Ling then goes on to deal with asceticism, arguing that like the Context Group, the SBL Asceticism Group (Wimbush, Valantasis, and colleagues), has gotten it wrong. Weber introduced the role of virtuoso religion in contrast with charismatic religion. Very briefly, virtuoso religion offers a disciplined method to attain some religious goal, generally entailing withdrawal from prevailing society. Charismatic religion is volatile, spontaneous, and personal; it cannot last without routinizing the charisma of the central charismatic. Ling is right to reject the charismatic role for New Testament central characters. But his religious virtuoso role better fits the priests, prophets, sages, and saints who in fact did found “religious” orders. Application of this conception to New Testament personages seems ill-advised, since “religious orders” are not in evidence.

Chapter 4 deals with “the poor.” Ling offers a critique of this category of people as an economic category or even as a social category of people who cannot maintain their social status. Rather, he sees “the poor” as a religious category, the Old Testament *anawim*, perhaps centered in Bethany (“House of the *anawim*”?) and the Jerusalem Upper Room located in the Essene section of Jerusalem. Aside from the geographical specificity, Ling actually enters the realm of the many French biblical studies on the religious poor from the 1950s (Gelin, Descamps, and the like), but he ignores them. He might have found van der Ploeg’s identification of *‘anawah* and *islam*, along with *‘anaw* and *muslim*, suggestive.

The fifth and final chapter has as its main point that to understand the “social world” (a tiresome abstraction in this work) of the Gospel of John, the modern sociological category of sect and sectarianism is inappropriate. In this, the reviewer and a number of others in the Context Group believe he is totally correct (yet he does not cite those who agree). The alternative view espoused by some members of the Context Group is that John’s community was an antisociety and the language of John was antilanguage (see Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], a work that the author lists but assiduously avoids engaging).

On the other hand, it does not seem that Jesus was a religious virtuoso at all. If he was anything, he, like John the Baptist, was a “holy man,” another anthropological category avoided by Ling. Further, both John and Jesus were prophets, proclaiming a forthcoming

political religious theocracy (like the one that exists in Iran today). Ling asserts that politics and economics were embedded in religion in Judea. *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis et negatur*. Neither John nor Jesus founded a religious order, as did, for example, Francis of Assisi or Benedict of Nursia. Their activity did result in a *religio*, the Latin term meaning much like Josephus's *eusebia*, which Ling seems to misunderstand (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.170–171: “Religion [*eusebia*] governs all our [Judeans'] actions and occupations and speech”). *Eusebia*, of course, is the virtue that shows respect for those who control our existence—God, king, government officials, parents—and is fundamental to honor as virtue. This is hardly religion in any institutional sense. And neither is religious virtuosity.

Ling ignores what a number of Context Group members have noted: that using contemporary sociology in general and sociology of religion in particular would be anachronistic in reading and analyzing ancient documents. If one is unconcerned with anachronism (as Ling seems to be), then what his sociology of religion does is demonstrate what the ancients would be like if they lived today. Ling's “more integrated view of the social world” of John is woefully incoherent. Perhaps John's Jesus has little to say about “the kingdom of God” (a theocracy) because Judea already was such a kingdom, characterized by supporting values noted in the New Testament, such as contentiousness, vindictiveness, “stiff-neckedness” (meaning: incapable of obeying God properly), envy, greed, and violence, all in the name of Torah and temple (values further evidenced in the Mishnah and Talmud; see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003]).

In sum, with an “authorial voice” that is fully agonistic as well as coolly and patronizingly haughty, Ling proclaims his new insights with the dissertational bravado of one who is unaware of how much more he has to learn to make his case.