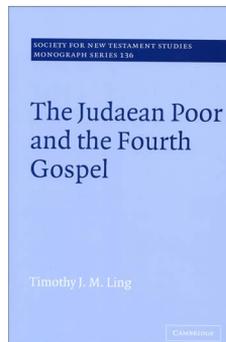


○ **REVIEW OF TIMOTHY J.M. LING, *THE JUDEAN POOR AND THE FOURTH GOSPEL*. SOCIETY FOR NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES MONOGRAPH SERIES, 136**

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This is a slightly revised version of Ling's PhD thesis in which he outlines the concept of the religious virtuoso as social actor in first century Judea and then highlights the importance of this concept for the thought-world of, and background to, the Fourth Gospel. Ling also has in his sights the Context Group's analysis of a pan-Mediterranean honour/shame culture which he considers to be a simplistic generalization which needs some prudent revision. As such, throughout the work, aspects of the Context Group's analysis and its members' theses are repeatedly critiqued. It is no wonder that Bruce Malina's own review of this work (RBL, 2008) is so bellicose.

In fact, despite the title, the Fourth Gospel plays second fiddle in this book. Ling is concerned much more with an exploration of social actors over against social modeling, although the difference between the two seems to be relatively moot. Ling seeks to undermine one social model which he argues does not have the sophistication necessary for an understanding of the specific situation in Judea, but then proposes in its place a social model, in all but name, drawn from alternative contemporary sociological theories about ascetism and the religious virtuoso. So, whilst Ling is happy to criticise the Context Group for applying their (anachronistic?) model back onto the Gospel text, his own (anachronistic?) theoretical agenda seems to be immune from the same criticism. Ling proposes that the difference between his 'interpretivist' model and other social-scientific approaches to the text of the Fourth Gospel is that he explores the role of social actors (especially the poor, women, religious virtuoso), whereas others have only looked at abstracted systems. The reader will need to decide whether this difference is either relevant or real.

The book commences with a clear introduction, setting the parameters of the work, before launching into a major assault on the Context Group reconstruction of Mediterranean hon-

our/shame culture in the second chapter. It is clear that the Context Group's hypothesis and its members' interpretations of the Fourth Gospel have some serious critics. Some of these criticisms are brought together in this chapter alongside some independent research on social theory which adds more fuel to the fire. It could be argued that Ling does not give the Context Group a fair hearing and the difference between the two positions is not as great as he argues. Ling does not question the honour/shame construct but suggests that it is more complex than the Context Group have suggested (or as Ling argues that they have suggested). One positive aspect is the emphasis on regional variation and on religious differences which affect the model. Ling also proposes a review of the gender-association of shame and seeks to highlight that women in the first century had a greater role to play than is often portrayed and that poverty is a misunderstood concept. Although these latter points are debateable in themselves, it is probable that the Context Group would wholeheartedly agree with the initial diversification of the model. As long as the basic sociological analysis remains true at the centre – that first-century Mediterranean societies, social cohesion and interpersonal relationships were generally based on concepts of honour and shame – the Context Group would not argue against a complexification or regionalisation of their construct. Ling does not demur from this basic analysis.

At the end of the second chapter, Ling proposes that the Context Group's analysis does not leave enough room for the religious actor or for the effects of religion on the system as a whole. This leads into chapter three's introduction of the concept of the religious virtuoso, drawn from Weber's analysis of Euro-American sociology. The emphasis on the social actor stands apart from other sociological models of the first century in that it seems to argue for a much more individualistic model of behaviour than the dyadic model offered by the majority of sociologists of the ancient Near East. Another aspect is Weber's tendency to explore ascetism as either 'subsumed within the social world' or standing apart from that world in a sectarian environment. Ling rightly criticizes this unnecessary polarity and gives some helpful insights into more positive understandings of religious social actors.

Less clear is the applicability of the model to the ancient Near East and specifically to Judea. Ling moves from Silber's discussion of 'material and symbolic forms of exchange within the laity' and 'virtuoso institutions, religious houses and monasteries' straight into an appraisal of the religious virtuoso in first century Judea without a mention of the sociological jump that is being made here or of the broader socio-political context of first century Judea. Ling leaps from Silber's comparative study of Theravada Buddhism, medieval Catholicism and Ortner's discussion of Sherpa Nepal to argue that similar religious social practice are to be found especially where there is a fundamental discontinuity between everyday life and the central cultural premises held by the community. The parallels drawn between Sherpa Nepal and Judea are interesting although there is a level of generalisation about actual religious practice and belief which is perhaps regrettable. However, these general parallels then become the basis for concluding that the model is appropriate for Judea without any attempt to offer any critical analysis of the anachronism of the model. Although the dependence of the thesis as a whole to Capper's research into Essene communities as proto-monastic communities could well provide the bridge across which Ling readily jumps.

The rest of this important chapter explores first-century Judea in a series of encyclopedia-like entries offering brief snippets of information about the land, the people, the social setting, recent political history. The chapter then explores the possibility of virtuoso religion within first century

Judea, focusing heavily on arguments concerning Essene communities as non-agonistic pietists (p. 94). It may be argued that this presents one side of the Essene picture and that the development of the idea within Capper's work has not met with profound agreement.

Ling regards Judea as a special case and make use of the language of closed systems and religious social worlds. It would be interesting to compare Ling's analysis of Judea with similar analyses of other local regions – Galilee, Samaria, Decapolis, Trachonitis, as well as more distant 'isolated' regions such as those on the Anatolian plateau. Is Judea significantly different from any of those regions, especially the local ones? The importance of the question is highlighted by how Ling makes use of Judea's special identity. He argues that Judea is particularly suited to the development of religious virtuosity and that this form of religious social actor marks out the Fourth Gospel especially and Jesus' ministry more generally. What is not explored is the Galilean focus of Gospel traditions and the possible difference between/comparisons with/political affiliations between the Judean micro-culture and other cultures around about. Is there enough difference to suggest that the Galilean, non-Judean, focus of the (other?) Gospels would suggest an alternative formative background for them with a different concept of poverty and religious virtuosity within them? Or is the assumption that all the Gospels reflect this Judean social identity construct?

Chapter Four explores the role of the poor within Ling's reconstruction of Judean society focusing especially on 'the poor' as a label for a specific kind of religious social actor rather than as a simple economic marker. Exploring specific Gospel texts using *ptochoi* and with an extended excursus on Matthew 5:3/Luke 6:20, Ling attempts to argue for the use of the term in relation to a piety of poverty and as a Judean social marker for the religious virtuoso. Personally, I would have preferred the argument to be a little more clear since it is shrouded in the terminology of virtuoso religion. In the end, the poor are not the economic poor but 'a contested category' – the pious poor caring for the economic poor.

In the final chapter and in order to move away from the Context Group's sectarian analysis of John's Gospel, Ling argues that the indigenous religious virtuosity of Judea provides a better context and hermeneutical key to the Fourth Gospel. The discussion on different forms of sectarianism is not a high point of the book. Now turning more directly to the text of the Fourth Gospel, Ling explores the absence and presence of 'the poor' and the distinctive portrayal of women within the Gospel, arguing that the distinctiveness of this Gospel over against the Synoptics is that it bears witness to a stratum of Judean virtuoso religion which does not appear in the Synoptic traditions.

The book provides an interesting, if at times frustrating, introduction to virtuoso religion as applied to a New Testament text. The discussion and complexification of the Context Group's analysis of Mediterranean culture are paradoxically strengthened by Lings' arguments in that he seeks to moderate their analysis rather than provide a completely different synthesis of the data. Readers will find the discussion of virtuoso religion to be enlightening. However, the suggestion that John's Gospel reflects a distinctly Judean virtuosity and ascetism seems to push the point too far. There is in this Gospel a real 'fleshiness', a celebration of life, hints of extraordinary wealth, and a merging of Galilean and Judean tradition which speaks out against some of the conclusions Ling draws from his study.