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**Review of The Multilingual Jesus and the Sociolinguistic World of the New Testament with Special Reference to the Gospel of Matthew by Hughson T. Ong**

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## **Hughson T. Ong**

*The Multilingual Jesus and the Sociolinguistic World of the New Testament with Special Reference to the Gospel of Matthew.* Leiden: Brill, 2016. Pp. xii + 422.

In this revised doctoral dissertation at McMaster Divinity College and under the supervision of Stanley E. Porter, Hughson T. Ong attempts to reconstruct the situations in which Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin were used by the historical Jesus, focusing mainly on the narratives in the Gospel of Matthew. While many biblical scholars in the past have demonstrated the multilingual character of Jesus and his first-century social location through mainly philological and historical analysis, this project attempts to go further by identifying what language Jesus would have used in his social interactions. After surveying both the existing languages in first-century Palestine (Chapter One) and the use of sociolinguistic studies in New Testament scholarship (the first half of Chapter Two), Ong argues that a close reconstruction of the multilingual Jesus requires three different levels of sociolinguistic analysis: a macro-level, a micro-level, and a textual level (the last section of Chapter Two). The macro-level analysis focuses on the larger sociolinguistic world of ancient Palestine (Chapter Three), employing varieties of sociolinguistic theories such as language contact, decline, and death. At the micro-level, the analysis aims at explaining the sociolinguistic situation of Jesus's world through the use of social networks theory (Chapter Four). And lastly, the textual analysis takes the data from the macro- and micro-level analyses to examine the narratives of Matthew's Gospel (Chapter Five). These three levels of analysis are the backbone of the entire project.

This book is an impressive project for many reasons, and let me state three of them here. First, Ong displays a great deal of familiarity with sociolinguistic studies through his extensive theoretical discussion and elaboration throughout the book. The wealth of theoretical materials in this book is undoubtedly its greatest strength. Second, Ong successfully shows the limitation of past research, ranging from the works of Bruce J. Malina, Peter Cotterell, David A. Lamb, and Todd Klutz to even his own supervisor, Stanley F. Porter (pp. 69-101). By locating this project in the larger context of biblical scholarship, Ong is able to demonstrate how his theoretical framework contributes to the conversation on the sociolinguistic world of Jesus (pp. 102-128). And lastly, the three levels of analysis are helpful for readers to understand not only the particularity of Jesus's sociolinguistic situation, but also the larger temporal and spatial contexts in which those languages were used. Ong goes from a more general context to the particularity of Jesus's sociolinguistic context, and this well-structured

methodology makes it easy for readers to follow the flow of thought throughout the book.

This project, however, also has some areas of methodological shortcomings. First, the construction of the so-called “fixed social domains” (i.e., family, friendship, government, transactional, religion, and education domains) as a way of determining Jesus’s social networks can be too rigid and reductionistic. These fixed domains are designed and used as the prime template for mapping out Jesus’s sociolinguistic behavior in the Gospel of Matthew. To be clear, the concept of social domains as “fixed” institutions is not known in sociolinguistic studies. Joshua Fishman introduced social domain analysis in his research of language behavior among Puerto Rican bilingual speakers, but it is worth noting that he doesn’t speak about it as a “fixed” entity. Ong also points out that even Janet Holmes speaks of domains as “typical interactions” (p. 196). It is not clear why Ong employs the stronger adjective, “fixed.” I suspect it is an effort to solidify multilevel social networks that might be fluid and unstable. However, the exact correlation between Lesley Milroy’s social networks theory and Fishman’s domain analysis in Ong’s work is also not clearly articulated; Ong somehow blends them without giving his readers any coherent elaboration or explanation.

The second problem is related directly to the first. Ong states that he only focuses on the first order zone in Jesus’s social networks (p. 229) – that is, those who are in direct contact with Matthew’s Jesus – without any detail explanation. Again, I suspect that this is also an effort to simplify the multilevel social relations in Milroy’s theory. This effort, however, fails to stand when it comes to his close analysis of the stories in the Gospel of Matthew. For example, it is obvious that not everyone present during Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew can be simply put in the first order zone (p. 304). The same is true also with the story of Jesus feeding four thousand people (p. 309). Even though Jesus speaks directly to them, not everyone in the crowds can be placed in his first order zone. By limiting his analysis only to the first zone, Ong runs the risk of overlooking the sociolinguistic dynamic in the second, third, or even fourth zones.

Third, there are some central concepts in this project that Ong does not clarify in a critical way. For example, he employs the public-private binary as one of the bedrocks for his “sociolinguistic rules for language selection in ancient Palestine” (pp. 277-79). There have been many works published, especially among feminist thinkers, to deconstruct this public-private binary. However, Ong seems to be either unaware or ignoring them altogether, and this results in his inconsistent use of the concept. For example, he uses the term “private” to refer to spatial signification – namely, “home” (pp. 197, 220, 224-25, 258) – but

in other places he uses it as a relational category, especially in the context of Jesus's conversation with his disciples (pp. 198, 298, 300). Public-private discourse is multifaceted and complicated because of its gender, class, and social status implications.

Finally, the enterprise of sociolinguistic studies in general is not free from criticism. When Ong discusses the limitations of sociolinguistics, he focuses primarily on its usefulness for historical analysis (pp. 109-112). However, there is a more serious problem with sociolinguistic studies that has been pointed out by many linguists, such as, among others, Jacob Mey, Alistair Pennycook, and Glyn Williams. Sociolinguistics has failed to take seriously the question of unequal power relations and the question regarding social justice. Its chief goal is to describe linguistic social behaviors "objectively." This is precisely what Ong's project strives to do – that is, mapping out the language(s) Jesus would have used in the particularity of his social relations. However, it must then be asked: "So what?" To put it differently, what does the knowledge of whether Jesus used Greek or Aramaic or Latin with his disciples contribute to our understanding of power differentials in social relations? Unfortunately, Ong is silent on this question when he discusses the implications of this research at the end of his book.

Let me conclude this review by stating the need for biblical scholars to take sociolinguistic studies seriously and thanking Ong for presenting an excellent example of this engagement. The merit of this project lies not only in its well-articulated methodology, but also Ong's lucid and cogent writing style. Those who are interested in the social dynamic of language in the ancient world in general and the historical Jesus in particular will find this book insightful and engaging. My hope is that it will stimulate further research on how sociolinguistics and biblical studies may inform each other.

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