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HONOR,  
PATRONAGE,  
KINSHIP, AND  
PURITY

SECOND EDITION

UNLOCKING  
NEW TESTAMENT  
CULTURE



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## HONOR AND SHAME

### *Connecting Personhood to Group Values*

THE CULTURE OF THE FIRST-CENTURY WORLD was built on the foundational social values of honor and shame. Seneca, a first-century Roman statesman and philosopher, wrote: “The one firm conviction from which we move to the proof of other points is this: that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable” (*De Ben.* 4.16.2). Four centuries earlier, Aristotle had also spoken of “the honorable” as “that which is desirable in itself” (*Rhet.* 1.9.3), as opposed to being desirable as a means to some other end. According to Seneca’s statement, the “honorable” is a “final topic”—a determinative and decisive consideration—in his own and his contemporaries’ thinking. If one urged someone to spend a great deal of money on a public building, she might ask, “Why should I use my wealth in that way?” If one were to answer that such a show of generosity would redound to her fame and increase the esteem in which she was held in the city, she would *not* ask, “And why should I desire honor?” Seneca expects the people in his world to choose one course of action over another, or to approve one kind of person over another, and, in short, to organize their system of values, fundamentally on the basis of what is “honorable.” From the wealth of literature left to us from the Greek and Roman periods, including the New Testament, it appears that Seneca’s analysis of the people of his time was correct.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Classical scholars would concur. J. E. Lendon, for example, affirms, “Honor was a filter through which the whole world was viewed, a deep structure of the Greco-Roman mind, perhaps the ruling metaphor of ancient society” (*Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1997], 73). Ramsey MacMullen says of *philotimia*, “desire for honor,” that “no word, understood to its depths, goes farther to explain the Greco-Roman achievement”

Honor was certainly not the *only* motivator in the Greco-Roman period. In his principal treatise on ethics Aristotle lists “the noble, beneficial, and pleasant” (*kalou, sympherontōs, hēdeōs*) as incentives to action and “the shameful, harmful, and painful” (*aischrou, blabrou, lypērou*) as disincentives to action (*Nic. Eth.* 2.3.7 [1164b31–32]). Later in the same work, he reduces these motives to two: “Pleasure and nobility (*ta hēdea kai ta kala*) between them supply the motives of all actions whatsoever” (*Nic. Eth.* 3.1.11 [1110b11–12]). Consideration of the honorable is prominent in both lists and, indeed, was often affirmed to be the first and foremost consideration. Isocrates, an Athenian orator who was Aristotle’s senior, advised his reader that, while honor with pleasure was a great good, pleasure without honor was the worst evil (*Ad Dem.* 17). Those who put pleasure ahead of honor were considered to be more animal-like than human, ruled by their passions and desires. He also placed the value of honor above one’s personal safety (*Ad Dem.* 43), an evaluation that would persist through the Roman period.

When Aristotle turned his attention to the practice of persuasive speech in fourth-century BC Athens, he observed that speakers urged for or against adopting a course of action on the basis of whether or not it would prove “advantageous” or “disadvantageous” (“harmful”; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.3.5). What leads to the preservation or increase of honor would not be the only consideration where “advantage” was concerned. It is noteworthy, however, that when Aristotle gave more practical advice concerning the course of action for which speakers might successfully advocate, he pointed them to considerations of honor: “if you seek to advise, consider what you would praise” (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9.35–36; my translation). Three centuries later, the anonymous author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* continued to affirm that speakers trying to persuade an audience to adopt a particular course of action should demonstrate it to be the most “advantageous” for them. He divided “advantage” into two principal subcategories: security and honor

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(*Roman Social Relations, 50 BC to AD 284* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974], 125). Important studies include Arthur W. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960); Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Douglas L. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

(*Rhet. Her.* 3.2.3).<sup>2</sup> While audiences would naturally be concerned about what course of action leads to security or safety, however, this author recognizes that they would not choose a “safe” course that also appeared to be “dishonorable” (*Rhet. Her.* 3.5.8-9). He thus provides further evidence for the correctness of calling honor and shame “pivotal” values, even if they were not the only values in play.<sup>3</sup> Quintilian, a teacher of rhetoric from the late first century AD, held up the “honorable” as *the* fundamental factor in persuading people to adopt or avoid a course of action since, he asserted, nothing dishonorable could be truly advantageous (*Institutes* 3.8.1). From Aristotle to Quintilian, then, successful orators were the ones who could demonstrate that the course of action they advocated would lead to the greatest honor.<sup>4</sup>

Honor and dishonor played a prominent part in moral instruction as well. In his collection of advice *To Demonicus* (*Ad Dem.*), Isocrates repeatedly uses the phrases “it is noble (*kalon*)” and “it is disgraceful (*aischron*)” (rather than “right” or “wrong,” “profitable” or “unprofitable”) as sanctions for and against behavior. An aversion to disgrace and a concern to preserve or increase honor would guide the student’s conduct in friendships, in enmity, in private life, and in public office. One can observe a similar phenomenon in the book of Proverbs (or in other Jewish wisdom literature, like the Wisdom of Ben Sira): the promise of honor and threat of disgrace are prominent goads to pursue particular practices and to avoid others.<sup>5</sup> Thus the students

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<sup>2</sup>An honorable course of action would be one that aligned with a virtue held in esteem by the group, most frequently conceived of as the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage (*Rhet. Her.* 3.2.3). *Rhet. Her.* 3.3.4–3.3.5 provides an extensive catalog of behaviors related to and manifesting each of these virtues; this becomes a useful ancient catalog of honorable practices. On the relationship between virtue and honor, see also Aristotle, *Virt. vit.* 1.1-2.

<sup>3</sup>Gerald Downing (“‘Honor’ Among Exegetes,” *CBQ* 61 [1999]: 53-73) voiced the important caveat that “the issue of honor, of respect in community, is important, and may even *on occasion* be of prime importance. It does not help to assume—irrespective of the evidence—that it always must be dominant.” To call honor and shame “pivotal” values, of course, is not to claim that they are *exclusively* valued (so, rightly, Zeba Crook, “Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited,” *JBL* 128 [2009]: 591-611, esp. 595).

<sup>4</sup>For fuller discussions of ancient texts attesting to honor and shame as primary, though by no means not the only, considerations in decision-making, see David Arthur deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. *Studia Biblica* 21 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 39–66; *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 14–26.

<sup>5</sup>See, further, deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 74–83 (on Proverbs) and 107–28 (on Ben Sira).

of the Jewish sages are led to value giving alms and pursuing justice in their dealings with other people, since these lead to honor (Prov 21:21), while they are led to fear adultery, oppression of the poor, and disrespect toward parents as the road to disgrace (Prov 6:32-33; 19:26, respectively).<sup>6</sup>

Honor is a dynamic and relational concept. On the one hand, individuals can think of themselves as honorable based on their conviction that they have embodied those actions and qualities that the group values as “honorable,” as the marks of a valuable person. This aspect of honor correlates with “self-respect.” On the other hand, honor is also the esteem in which a person is held by the group he or she regards as significant others—it is the recognition by the person’s group that he or she is a valuable member of that group. In this regard, it is having the respect of others. It was a problematic experience when one’s self-respect was not affirmed in the respect shown by others, but strategies could be developed to cope with discrepancy here. While the powerful and the masses, the philosophers and the Jews, the pagans and the Christians all regarded honor and dishonor as their primary axis of value, each group would fill out the picture of what constituted honorable behavior or character in terms of its own distinctive (though, of course, often also overlapping) set of beliefs and values, and would evaluate people both inside and outside their group accordingly.

*Shame* has several important, distinguishable, but related senses in the Greco-Roman world (and, indeed, in honor cultures more generally). In one sense, “shame” names the experience of being regarded as less than valuable because one has behaved in ways that run contrary to the values of the group. The person who puts personal safety above the city’s well-being, fleeing from battle, loses the respect of his neighbors as far as the report of his failure travels. His worth is impugned, and he “loses face”; he is disgraced and viewed as a disgrace. The coward experiences the emotion of shame and,

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<sup>6</sup>The desirability of honor and the undesirability of being put to shame in Israelite culture is evident throughout the Jewish Scriptures. Psalms provides ample testimony as the psalmists express their deep concern that their own honor be preserved or vindicated and their detractors be put to shame—which are two sides of the same action where honor is considered a “limited good” that is generally acquired in tandem with someone else’s loss of honor. See, e.g., Psalms 6:10; 9:5-6; 22:6-8; 25:2-3, 20; 27:6; 31:17-18; 35:4, 15-16, 26; 38:16; 40:14-15; 41:5; 42:10; 69:10-12, 19-20; 70:2-3; 71:13, 21, 24; 109:13, 15, 29; 119:31, 51, 80. The ongoing use of the Psalms in public liturgy and private prayer positioned these texts to continue to shape Jewish consciousness where honor and shame are concerned.

indeed, is likely to be ashamed in his own estimation (that is, before his own conscience, which will have internalized the association of courage with honor). Correspondingly, the group jeopardized by the coward's actions *shames* him, perhaps through censure, marginalization, or some other actions that express his diminished value in their eyes, which would also tend to elicit the emotional response of shame. "Shame" can also refer to a positive, even essential, character trait, namely a sensitivity to the opinion of the group such that one avoids those actions that bring disgrace. The Greeks frequently used the noun *aidōs* to name this "moral feeling, reverence, awe, respect for the feeling or opinion of others or of one's own conscience, and so shame, self-respect . . . [or] sense of honour."<sup>7</sup> Out of shame of this kind, a woman refuses an adulterous invitation and a soldier refuses to flee from battle.

Those living or reared in Asiatic, Latin American, Mediterranean, or Islamic countries have considerable advantage in their reading of the New Testament in this regard, since many of those cultures place a prominent emphasis on honor and shame.<sup>8</sup> Readers living in the United States or Western Europe may recognize immediately that we live at some distance from the honor culture of the first-century Greco-Roman world (including the Semitic peoples in the East). We wrestle with "worth" and with "self-esteem"; we are attuned to the "respect" that we believe ourselves and others to merit and sense when "disrespect" has been shown; "what other people will think" factors into our decision-making processes; we would always prefer to avoid embarrassment. In short, we still want to know that we are valuable, worthwhile people, and we want to give the impression of being

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<sup>7</sup>*LSJ*, 36. Cairns (*Aidōs*, 2) defines this as "an inhibitory emotion based on sensitivity to and protectiveness of one's self-image." The more common noun *aischynē*, however, functioned essentially as a synonym by the Hellenistic period, being defined as both a "sensitivity respecting possibility of dishonor, modesty, shame" in addition to the negative "experience of ignominy that comes to someone, shame, disgrace" (thus *BDAG*, 29-30; cf. *LSJ*, 43; Franco Montanari, *Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 48, 59).

<sup>8</sup>Important work has been done in regard to thinking about the gospel in terms that would speak more directly to people in honor cultures—really, letting the first-century gospel speak in its own idiom again—as a way to facilitate missions and evangelism in such cultures. See, for example, Werner Mischke, *The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World* (Scottsdale, AZ: MissionONE Resources, 2015); Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

such. However, in our culture the overriding value in decision-making is not always (indeed, perhaps rarely) identifying the honorable thing to do. Our decisions tend not to reflect “the seriousness with which the people who inhabit [an honor culture] protect their honor and fight to retrieve it if it has been lost,” nor do we seek and contest honor with the same intensity as those who “see honor as a limited good.”<sup>9</sup>

In the corporate world, for example, the “profitable” frequently acts as the central value. In many circles, ethical considerations of right and wrong are also prominent, but these are based on internalized values or norms rather than values enforced by the group’s acclaim or censure. Judicial sanctions, of course, undergird considerations of the legal and illegal. But our move toward individualism and our fortifying of the boundaries of our private spaces and lives—and the accompanying reluctance to communicate openly with others, especially those beyond our circle of acquaintances, friends, and kin—has generally tempered the dynamics of honor and shame in our culture. We are less likely to openly challenge others or to openly censure them where they transgress values we consider to be central to our group or to the society.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of our experience and our culture that do come closer to the cultural environment of the first-century world and perhaps can help us get in touch with the social dynamics of that world. We are aware, for example, of the effects of peer pressure, particularly on adolescents. Those who do not conform are ostracized, insulted, and often the targets of physical violence (or at least the threat of violence). All of this is unofficial from the standpoint of the authority figures in the schools, but it is nevertheless a potent force in the lives of the students. Moreover, belonging in one group—conforming to its culture and finding affirmation there—often means conflict with another group. The intellectuals (“geeks”) are a close-knit bunch, affirming one another in their group culture, but their worth as persons comes under the attack of the more physical crowd (“jocks”), and vice versa. There is also the artsy crowd, the social crowd, the rebel crowd, the drug crowd, and so forth. Within each group, peer pressure enforces conformity and castigates difference. Those too deeply

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<sup>9</sup>Crook, “Honor Revisited,” 593.



touched by the jeers of others may change their whole images to secure approval rather than ridicule. Additionally, those readers who have been exposed to the cultures of gangs, whether in urban or suburban environments, have encountered a culture in which “respect” is a primary value (indeed, valued above human life), and “disrespecting” is a challenge that cannot go unanswered.

This is not to suggest that the world in which the early church developed was like an immense high school locker room, nor that Mediterranean culture was developmentally more primitive than modern culture (something that might be inferred from the adolescent model of peer pressure above). Far from it. That world was every bit as culturally and socially sophisticated as ours and, in some ways, far clearer and more articulate about the values that defined and guided each group. However, we do need to become sensitive to the social dynamics—to the social *power*—of honor and shame in the lives of the first Christians and their contemporaries if we are to hear the texts of the New Testament with their full force. Placing a mental bookmark in our own memories of experiencing (and contributing to) peer pressure can begin to open up those parts of us that are still sensitive to honor and shame to the challenge and the gifts of the Christian Scriptures.

### THE VOCABULARY OF HONOR

Before we look at the New Testament, we need to learn the language of honor and dishonor in the first-century Greco-Roman world (which includes the Jewish subculture, one of many native cultures that had been absorbed into first the Greek then the Roman Empire). Words like *glory* or *reputation* (*doxa*), *honor* (*timē*), and *praise* (*epainos*), together with their related verbal and adjectival forms, are frequent. Their antonyms, *dishonor* (*aischynē*), *reproach* (*oneidos*), *scorn* (*kataphronēsis*), *slander* (*blasphēmia*), together with the adjectives and verbs derived from these roots, are also prominent. Such word searches provide a starting place for us to “hook into” the texts as first-century Christians would have, but they are only starting places. Many concepts and terms would also resonate directly with considerations of honor and dishonor for them, but to hear this we have to learn more about these resonances.

First, honor can be attributed (or “ascribed”) to a person on account of accidents of birth or grants bestowed by people of higher status and power. A person’s parentage and lineage became, in many ways, a starting point for honor: “A person’s honor comes from his father,” wrote Ben Sira (Sir 3:11). This is confirmed by the practice of the eulogy, which began celebrating the deceased person’s honor by recalling the honor of his or her ancestors and immediate parents.<sup>10</sup> Thus a person of the “house of David” begins with a higher honor in the Jewish culture than a member of the “house of Herschel.” Thus insults (or assaults on a person’s honor) also often involve unflattering claims concerning a person’s descent (“You spawn of snakes” [Mt 3:7, my translation]; “You are of your father, the devil” [Jn 8:44, my translation]). A person’s race could also become a factor in the esteem or lack of esteem with which he or she was held. In Judea, *Samaritan* was a term of reproach; in Hellenistic Egypt, native Egyptians were regarded as less honorable than the Greeks who comprised the ruling class. A person’s attributed or ascribed honor could change, for example, through adoption into a more honorable family, as Octavian, later the Emperor Augustus, had been adopted by Julius Caesar as a son. Octavian’s honor rating rose considerably by that grant. It could also change through grants of special citizenship status or grants of office. All of these are, again, prominent in the New Testament, as Christians are said to be adopted by God, made citizens of heaven, or given the honorable office of priesthood (see, for example, Gal 4:4-7; Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 2:9).

Second, honor can be achieved on the basis of a person’s moral character, actions, or performance (if the achievements are recognized as such, of course). In the first instance, this occurs as one persists in being “virtuous” in one’s dealings, building up a reputation—a name—for being honorable and embodying virtues prized by the group. Thus the soldier who displays

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<sup>10</sup>The eulogy (or *encomium*) served to reinforce a society’s values by holding up those individuals who have exemplified those values as praiseworthy, honorable members of the group, thus rousing the audience to emulate the deceased with a view to their own honorable remembrance. Extensive lists of topics under which a person’s honor might be developed and celebrated in eulogies (*encomia*) appear in *Rhet. Her.* 3.6.10-11, 13-15; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.9.35-36; also in Theon, *Exercises* 9, and Hermogenes, *Preliminary Exercises* 7 (both available in George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003], 50-52, 81-83). On *encomia* as windows into honor in the classical world, see deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 50-53; Bruce J. Malina and J. H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 19-63.

above-ordinary courage is singled out for special honors, the generous benefactor is proclaimed at public festivities and commemorated in inscriptions, the loyal client or friend comes to be known as such and is welcomed by other patrons into the household on that basis, and the Torah-observant Jew is seen to be pious and held in high regard by fellow Jews. Again, the importance of such achieved honor is reflected in the incorporation into the funeral oration of accounts of the virtues of the deceased and the ways in which these virtues were enacted throughout life.

In the second instance, honor can be won and lost in what has been called the social game of challenge and riposte.<sup>11</sup> It is this “game,” still observable in the modern Mediterranean, that has caused cultural anthropologists to label the culture as “agonistic,” from the Greek word for “contest” (*agōn*). The challenge-riposte is essentially an attempt to gain honor at someone else’s expense by publicly posing a challenge that cannot be successfully answered. When a challenge has been posed, the challenged must make some sort of response (and no response is also considered a response). It would fall to the bystanders to decide whether the challenged person successfully defended his (and, indeed, usually “his”) own honor. These exchanges tended to occur between people of similar social status, since people were generally reared to show respect toward those whose honor and status were, by common consensus, greater than their own. The gods, rulers, one’s parents, and one’s patrons were all to be shown respect at all times. Challenging the honor of such persons would more likely result in disgrace in the eyes of the public who regarded these obligations as sacred.<sup>12</sup> It could, moreover, be very risky

<sup>11</sup>Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. John G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 27; Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 25–66, esp. 30.

<sup>12</sup>The goddess Nemesis, the deification of the emotion of indignation, guarded against “the deliberate dishonouring of those one should honour” (N. R. E. Fisher, *Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* [Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992], 193). Honoring a superior could also become an opportunity to enhance one’s own honor. In 2 BC, Mazaeus and Mithridates, two of Augustus’s most successful freedmen, erected a monumental gate to the main agora in Ephesus in honor of Augustus. The inscription, however, bearing their names quite prominently, makes this no less a monument immortalizing their success in life, their beneficence toward the city, and their virtue in honoring their patron. In such instances, the inherent claim to honor is made—quite literally—at one’s own expense rather than at another’s expense, as in the “challenge-riposte” interaction described above.

for a person of lower status to challenge someone with significantly greater power and authority (whose “riposte” might be savage, utterly crushing the upstart). Nevertheless, it is clear that people of lower status did at least occasionally challenge those of greater status *and* that, even in these cases, those viewing the challenge and riposte would be the ones to decide, in each case, whose honor is damaged and whose elevated or vindicated.<sup>13</sup>

The Gospels are full of these exchanges, mainly posed by Pharisees, Sadducees, or other religious officials at Jesus, whom they regarded as an upstart threatening to steal their place in the esteem of the people and whom they therefore seek to put back in his place.<sup>14</sup> Consider, for example, Luke 13:10-17:

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. . . . When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Jesus’ violation of the prohibition of work on the Sabbath day suggests to the synagogue leader that Jesus claims to be “above the law” (specifically, Torah) on account of his power to heal. The synagogue leader does not cast doubt on Jesus’ abilities in this regard; he assumes it. He does, however, challenge Jesus’

<sup>13</sup>Crook, “Honor Revisited,” 599-604.

<sup>14</sup>See Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 44-52, for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon and its appearance throughout Matthew’s Gospel. On Jesus’ probable social status (apart from—and discordant with!—his growing following and fame), see John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 124-36; K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 117-20; Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Peasants*, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008).

right to perform a work, even a good work, on the Sabbath. Even though his words are directed at the crowd, it is nevertheless a challenge directed at Jesus. Jesus does not miss this and offers a piercing response (riposte), pointing out that the synagogue leaders themselves will care for their animals on the Sabbath. How much more ought he, then, care for “a daughter of Abraham” (notice also the use of genealogy here to highlight the woman’s value)? The result, according to Luke, is that Jesus wins this exchange. His rivals lose face on account of their unsuccessful challenge (they are “put to shame”), while Jesus’ honor in the crowd’s eyes increases (they rejoice at his works).

A second and more complicated example appears in Mark 7:1-16. Jesus’ disciples eat their food without performing a ritual purification of their hands (the Pharisees were not concerned here with hygiene but with maintaining ritual purity), so the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ honor—what kind of teacher can he be if his disciples transgress the revered “tradition of the elders” (which, for them, was attaining a status equal to the written Torah)?<sup>15</sup> Jesus responds, this time with a counterchallenge. He challenges the Pharisees’ honor as followers of the Torah, citing an instance where their tradition stands in contradiction to the written Torah (indeed, one of the Ten Commandments), allowing him even to apply a devastating quotation from Isaiah in his riposte. The reader is reminded of the public nature of this exchange as Jesus addresses his last comment to the crowd (Mk 7:16). Presumably, Jesus has successfully warded off the challenge and even caused his opponents to lose face with the counterchallenge. In telling these stories, moreover, the Gospel writers make the Christian readers into a “public” that witnesses the exchanges and gives its own verdict on who won and who lost. Their own positive estimation of Jesus (as an honorable person and as a reliable teacher of the way to please God) is confirmed as they read these challenge-riposte stories actively and approvingly.

Such exchanges characterize Jesus’ relationship with the religious leaders and groups with which he is, in essence, in competition.<sup>16</sup> Even those scribes

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<sup>15</sup>Against Downing (“‘Honor’ Among Exegetes,” 66), Mark 7:5 looks far more like a “put down” that is successfully deflected and turned against Jesus’ critics rather than “a serious and important question” asked “with every show of respect.”

<sup>16</sup>In Luke’s Gospel alone, see 4:1-13; 5:29-39; 6:1-5, 6-11; 7:1-10 (not hostile); 7:18-23 (not hostile); 7:39-50 (notice that the challenge does not even have to be articulated!); 10:25-28; 11:14-20; 11:37-54; 13:10-17; 14:1-6 (Jesus initiates here); 15:1-32 (the three parables are an extensive riposte

who appear to ask a polite and “innocent” question are actually seen to be posing challenges, trying to trip up Jesus, to cause him, at first, to lose face (and, with it, his following) and, later, to step into a chargeable offense. Challenges are not always hostile but can even come from those who are well-disposed toward the person. An individual’s honor can be put on the line, as it were, when the individual receives a gift from a social equal. Since failure to reciprocate will result in diminished honor, this is also a challenge-riposte situation, although it is not a hostile one. Thus Isocrates advises his student to “consider it equally disgraceful to be outdone by your enemies in doing injury and to be surpassed by your friends in doing kindness” (*Ad Dem.* 26), that is, to take pains to win when presented either with negative or positive challenges, so that his honor will remain undiminished.

In addition to recognizing how a text or speaker weaves in references to topics of ascribed honor or achieved honor, we need also to become aware of how honor and dishonor are symbolized in the physical person, as well as in the “name” or reputation of a person. The way a body is treated is often a representation of honor or dishonor. Thus the head of a king is crowned or anointed, but the face of a prisoner is slapped and beaten (e.g., Mk 15:16-20; Lk 22:63-65). Binding, mutilating, and eventually killing are also part of the assault on (indeed, the erasure of) the deviant criminal’s honor. The relative placement of bodies is also a representation of honor. Thus a king is often seated on a level higher than others, and subjects bow deeply to the ground before a ruler to acknowledge symbolically the difference in honor and the reverence due the sovereign. Once subjected, enemies are thrown at the feet of the victor as a representation of the new order and relationships established (see 1 Cor 15:24-28; Heb 1:13). Seating order at feasts or in synagogues signals the relative status of the guests or worshipers. Jesus’ censure of those who vie for the “best seats” is a critique of the honor-seeking customs of his day (Mt 23:6-7; Mk 10:35-37; Lk 14:7-11). Applying Psalm 110:1 to Jesus—“The LORD says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand’”—places Jesus

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here to the Pharisees’ challenge; the series ends with the surly older brother refusing to welcome his brother and join the party, a parting counterchallenge aimed at the Pharisees and the scribes); 16:14-18; 19:39-40, 45-48 (Jesus initiates, and the riposte comes at the end of the week!); 20:1-19 (the parable is part of Jesus’ counterchallenge/riposte); 20:20-26, 27-40. In Luke 20:41-47, Jesus closes that last series of exchanges with renewed challenges of his own, which go unanswered until the crucifixion.

in the seat of highest honor in the Jewish and Christian cosmos (Mk 12:35-36; Heb 1:13; 12:2). Clothing is also regularly used as a symbol of one's honor or status. Thus Esther can exchange her "robes of honor" for "mourning garments" (Add Esth 14:1-2; 15:1) and King Artaxerxes's honor is so magnificently displayed in visible signs (seating, garments, tokens of wealth like gold and jewels) that Esther faints upon seeing him (Add Esth 15:6, 11-14).<sup>17</sup>

In addition to paying close attention to the way bodies are treated, attired, and arranged with regard to other bodies, we need to consider the way a person's name is treated. The name is another place where a person's honor is symbolized and toward which honor or dishonor can be directed. Praising or "sanctifying" God's name or making God's name "known" are expressions for giving God honor or spreading God's honor (Tob 3:11; 8:5; 11:14; 14:8-9; Mt 6:9; Jn 17:6, 26; Rom 9:17; 15:9). When God's name is "spoken ill of"<sup>18</sup> because God's people disobey God's commands or live immorally (Rom 2:24; 1 Tim 6:1), God's people are participating in the dishonoring of God. God's name is also "spoken ill of" by his enemies (Rev 13:6; 16:9), resulting in God's vindication of his honor through the punishment of those enemies. Doing something or asking for something "in the name" of Jesus invokes Jesus' honor: good works or service becomes a vehicle for increasing Jesus' fame, and answered prayers will result in the celebration and spread of Jesus' honor (i.e., through testimony). The Christians also each have a name, that is, a reputation: Jesus prepares them for the ruin of their "good name" among their neighbors on account of their commitment to Jesus but assures them that the loss of their "good name" here wins them eternal honor before God (Lk 6:22).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>See Matthew 11:7-8, where Jesus begins to extol John for having greater honor and worth than anyone, including "those who wear soft robes" in their "royal palaces." John's clothing, while reminiscent of Elijah, also defined his status as someone who stood "outside" the social hierarchy of civilization (see also Heb 11:37-38). When the soldiers mock Jesus, part of their sport includes "dressing him up" as the king that, in their eyes, he falsely claimed to be (Mk 15:16-20); their mock coronation is their way of challenging (and negating) his alleged claim to this honor.

<sup>18</sup>*Blasphēmēō* means, essentially, to hurt the reputation of someone.

<sup>19</sup>There are many instances, of course, where the New Testament authors merely mention that someone's name is so-and-so. In these places a name is just a name. Where a name represents a person, or the estimation of a person in the eyes of others, it is a cipher for the honor and worth of that person. The symbolizing of honor in "name" is ancient, as attested by the very frequent (and almost exclusive) use of "name" in this manner in the Psalms. The psalmists give God honor as they "bless his name," pray that the "name" of Israel or the "name" of the

## HONOR AND GENDER

Finally, we should mention the ways in which gender roles impinge on conceptions of honorable behavior. In the ancient world, as in many traditional cultures today, women and men generally have different arenas for the preservation and acquisition of honor and different standards for honorable activity. Men occupy the public spaces, while women are generally directed toward the private spaces of home and hearth. When they leave the home, they are careful to avoid conversation with other men. The places they go are frequented mainly by women (the village well, the market for food) and so become something of an extension of “private” space. In the fifth century BC, Thucydides wrote that the most honorable woman is the one least talked about by men (*Hist.* 2.45.2).<sup>20</sup> Six hundred years later Plutarch will say much the same thing: a woman should be seen when she is with her husband but stay hidden at home when he is away (“Advice on Marriage” 9). Both her body and her words should not be “public property” but instead guarded from strangers. She should speak to her husband and through her husband (“Advice on Marriage” 31-32). In second-century BC Jerusalem, Ben Sira similarly delineates a woman’s sphere and honor (Sir 26:13-18).

The reason for this relegation of women to private or, more precisely, *nonmale* spaces is rooted in the ancient (male) conception of a woman’s place in the world. She is not seen as an independent entity or agent but as someone embedded in the identity and honor of some male (her father, if she is unmarried, and generally her husband after she marries). If she fails to protect her honor, for example by engaging in extramarital intercourse or by displaying “looseness” by providing males outside her family with her company or her words, it is her father or her husband who is shamed. A daughter or a wife was thus regarded as a point of vulnerability in the man’s rearguard against disgrace. It is for this reason that Ben Sira considers the birth of a daughter a liability (Sir 42:9-14) and offers such

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individual petitioner not “perish forever” (that is, pray that God will preserve the honor and the honorable memory of Israel or the individual), and ask God to obliterate the “name” of their enemies (see, e.g., Ps 8:1; 9:2, 5; 22:22; 23:3; 29:2; 31:3; 41:5; 48:10; 72:17; 74:10, 18; 83:4; etc.).

<sup>20</sup>Contrast, however, the ideal of the honorable wife in Proverbs 31, whose fame may begin in her household but extends to the city gates (Prov 31:18-21). The overall picture is not one of a woman who remains strictly in the private spaces (Prov 31:10-31).



strong cautions against the potential loss incurred through women (Sir 26:10-12).<sup>21</sup>

There are some notable exceptions to this general rule, however. Judith, the heroine of the apocryphal book bearing her name, wins honor by lulling the general of the enemy troops besieging Israel into a drunken stupor in the expectation of sexual gratification and then beheading him as he slept on his bed. The author of 4 Maccabees depicts a mother urging her seven sons on to accept martyrdom for the sake of God and fidelity to God's Torah, praising her for being more "courageous" (the Greek word is more akin to "manly," being derived from the word for a male person) than men.<sup>22</sup> Plutarch dedicates a lengthy essay, "On the Bravery of Women," to stories in which a woman's courage ("manliness") exceeded that of the men around her, holding up these heroines as exemplary figures to men and women alike. Women are therefore certainly not excluded from seeking to embody courage, generosity, or justice.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, they are encouraged to be virtuous in these ways as well. A number of papyri—artifacts documenting "real life" rather than offering literary reflections of the same—show some women, at least, "being aggressive in public, and in some cases competing with men for public approval."<sup>24</sup> Women of means could gain significant honor in their cities through personal patronage and public benefaction, for example erecting public buildings, as well as through occupying priestly and other leadership roles in certain religious groups.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the question has been

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<sup>21</sup>See, further, David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Content, and Significance*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 192-96, and the literature therein discussed.

<sup>22</sup>See, further, deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 99-107 (on Judith); "The Perfection of 'Love for Offspring': Greek Representations of Maternal Affection and the Achievement of the Heroine of 4 Maccabees," *NTS* 52 (2006): 251-68.

<sup>23</sup>Zeba Crook ("Honor Revisited," 604-5) observes that "What is revealing about Plutarch's work . . . is that honor was being distributed to women because they were witty, brave, aggressive, and loyal to the state. These are women who fought side by side with men on the field, who feigned loyalty to a conquering king but orchestrated attacks from without, and who offered sage advice to kings and despots and were heard. It is enough to make Plutarch claim that 'man's and woman's virtues are one and the same' (*Mulier. virt.* 243A)."

<sup>24</sup>Crook, "Honor Revisited," 606; a full study can be found in Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC-AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup>On the former, see Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 194-219. On the latter, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religion Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Wendy Cotter,

rightly raised whether the stereotype of the silent, submissive, secluded woman is not a reflection of “male fantasy” by the first century AD.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, even the courageous heroines mentioned above know that their honor is inseparably linked to the virtue of sexual exclusivity and that damage there will undermine any achievement of honor in another arena. Judith therefore quickly points out that, although she used her charms on General Holofernes, he never actually had her (Jdt 13:6). The mother of the seven martyrs also acts to preserve her body from the defiling touch of the soldiers by throwing herself into a fire (4 Macc 17:1), and the author of 4 Maccabees closes his book with a speech by the mother in which she testifies to her chastity throughout life (4 Macc 18:6-9).<sup>27</sup>

Despite the progressiveness of the New Testament authors with regard to questioning the distinction between Jew and Gentile that was central to Jewish identity, and despite Paul’s conviction that even the distinctions between male and female, slave and free, are valueless in Christ (Gal 3:28), we do find a good deal of space given over to promoting (or simply reflecting) the larger society’s view of the honorable female within the pages of the New Testament. Thus 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, in which Paul attempts to convince the Corinthian Christians that women must pray in the assembly with their heads covered, also reflects the view that female honor is embedded in male honor when it names the husband as the “head” of the wife, who is incorporated conceptually into his “body.” Two passages from the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 5:8-12; Titus 2:4-5) attempt to reinforce within Christian culture the values of sexual exclusivity (even for the widow after a first husband has died) and the delineation of the appropriate female sphere as the home. Two other passages are in the forefront of perpetual debate because they appear strongly to forbid female speech in public worship, which has obvious bearing on the issue of ordaining women: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their

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“Women’s Authority Roles in Paul’s Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?,” *NovT* 36 (1994): 350-72.

<sup>26</sup>Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman’s Place*, 8.

<sup>27</sup>“Even apart from a different set of religious expectations, the standards for female chastity and passive virtue were undoubtedly higher than those for male sexual containment” (Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman’s Place*, 9).

husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor 14:34-35; see also 1 Tim 2:11-12). Relevant for our concern here is the fact that they reflect the same conviction articulated by Plutarch—namely, that a woman’s words are for her husband’s ears, not for the public ear.<sup>28</sup>

## HONOR AND GROUP VALUES

The focus of ancient people on honor and dishonor or shame means that they were particularly oriented toward the approval and disapproval of others. This orientation meant that individuals were likely to strive to embody the qualities and to perform the behaviors that the group held to be honorable and to avoid those acts that brought reproach and caused a person’s estimation in the eyes of others to drop. As Aristotle observed, “There are many things which they either do or do not do owing to the feeling of shame which these people [i.e., the public who will witness and evaluate] inspire” (*Rhet* 2.6.26). Indeed, one of the primary goals of training the young was to develop this deeply internalized sense of shame in regard to the values embraced by the society in which the young would live.<sup>29</sup> Musonius Rufus, a Stoic

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<sup>28</sup>There is a tension here between the conception of the congregation as public, as non-kin or outsiders before whom women are to be silent and withdrawn, and the conception of the church as family—related by the blood of Jesus, as it were—throughout the greater part of the New Testament (see chapter six). In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul’s chief concern appears to be the impression that will be made on the visitor to the congregation—the “outsider.” I would consider it likely that the passages limiting women’s public voice and presence are introduced as part of the early church leaders’ attempts to show outsiders that the Christian movement is not subversive but inculcates the same “family values” (with regard to women, children, and slaves in the household) as the dominant, non-Christian culture. The purpose behind this was first to diminish the slander against the Christian group, namely that it “turned the world upside down” (cf. Acts 17:6) and was a source of instability and trouble for “good” people (see 1 Tim 5:14; 6:1; Titus 2:3-10, esp. vv. 5, 8, 10), and thereby also to make the group more attractive to outsiders. Making what was a concession to ancient cultural values normative for the church in every age seems to me to be erroneous, particularly since it is done at the expense of so many passages that speak of the gifting of all believers—including the gift of prophesy being poured out on “sons and daughters,” both slave and free men and women (Acts 2:17-18)—for the building up of the church. See, further, David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 673-81 (and the bibliography on 681).

<sup>29</sup>See, e.g., Plato, *Protagoras* 325D; *Republic* 378C, 388D, 401E, 403C. See discussion in Cairns, *Aidōs*, 363-70; Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 33-54. The internalization of these values and the development of this “inner eye” watching over one’s actions is what the ancients named “conscience.” The moral person was one who felt shame on the basis of what his or her conscience disapproved—hence the dictum of Democritus, “Learn to feel shame in your own eyes much more than before others”—but that conscience was itself the product of the individual’s internalization of the norms and values of the group within

philosopher active in the second half of the first century AD, recommended that sons and daughters receive the same education and that each should be taught “straight from infancy . . . that this is right and that is wrong, and that it is the same for both alike; that this is helpful, that is harmful, that one must do this, one must not do that. . . . Then they must be inspired with a feeling of shame [*aidōs*] toward all that is base [*aischros*].”<sup>30</sup> Or as Euripides states more succinctly, “To be well brought up develops self-respect (*aidōs*),” that is, it develops a sense of shame (*Suppliants* 91). As a group discovered and defined those qualities that it needed its members to display in order for the group to survive, the desire to be honored would ensure that the members would typically do their part to promote the health and survival of the group.<sup>31</sup>

For this reason courage, for example, was held in extremely high regard. In the classical period the safety of a whole city depended on the willingness of its (male) citizens to embrace the dangers of armed conflict, to risk life and limb (quite literally). Both the fallen soldier and the living veteran were therefore honored by the group, while the deserter became a reproach. *Aidōs*—the desire to be honored and to avoid being disgraced—kept citizen soldiers in the thick of the battle, preferring death with honor to safety with disgrace.<sup>32</sup> Because most public works and civic improvements depended

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which and by whose members he or she had been formed (quotation from Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948], 113).

<sup>30</sup>Musonius Rufus, “Lecture 13A: What Is the Chief End of Marriage,” in *Musonius Rufus*, “*The Roman Socrates*,” trans. Cora Lutz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 47, 49.

<sup>31</sup>It has been popular to characterize the ancient Mediterranean world as an “honor culture” or a “shame culture” in contrast to a “guilt culture,” a label often attached to the modern world (though America has also been described as a “rights” culture). The lines between shame and guilt, however, cannot be drawn in so hard and fast a way, either in the ancient or modern context. The ancient world knew the experiences both of externally driven feelings of shame and of internally driven feelings that we would identify as “guilt” as deterrents to behavior (see Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966]). Maintaining a hard and fast distinction between shame and guilt will always be difficult since “self-image [the traditional province of shame] will constantly be called into question by specific acts [the traditional province of guilt]” (Cairns, *Aidōs*, 24). It has been helpfully suggested that “guilt” refers not to a particular, discrete emotion but rather to a moral or legal condition that can evoke a variety of emotions, one of which is shame (for having fallen short of internalized moral standards), though it can also elicit feelings such as fear and anxiety (often concerning the consequences of the moral or legal misstep; Lau, *Defending Shame*, 23). All this suggests that, in the end, “the difference between a shame culture and a guilt culture must be one of degree and emphasis rather than of kind” (Lau, *Defending Shame*, 21; Cairns, *Aidōs*, 27-47).

<sup>32</sup>Euripides illustrates the importance of honoring the courageous, especially the courageous who have *fallen* in battle, in Odysseus’s speeches in *Hecuba*. Odysseus argues that the reward

on the initiative of wealthy citizens, generosity (benefaction) was also highly and visibly honored. The desire for honor made the wealthy willing to part with vast sums of money for the good of the city.

The list could go on endlessly: the virtues and behaviors that preserved the order and stability of a culture, and promoted its growth and improvement, were rewarded with honor. Those who did their part in both the private and public spheres were affirmed as valuable persons of worth. Those who violated those values, whether through adultery (attacking the stability of the family), through cowardice (undermining the security and the honor of the group), through failing to honor the gods or the rulers (risking the loss of their favors), or through ingratitude (being unjust toward the generous and threatening to diminish their willingness to be generous) were held up to contempt. The group would exercise measures designed to shame the transgressor (whether insult, reproach, physical abuse, social marginalization—at its most extreme, lynching or execution) so that the transgressor would be pressured into returning to the conduct the group approved (if correction were possible) and so that other group members would have their aversion to committing such transgressions themselves strongly reinforced.<sup>33</sup> Honoring and shaming became the dominant means of enforcing all those values that were not actually legislated and of reinforcing those values that were also enforced by written laws.

When a particular group lives in relative isolation from other groups—that is, when all the people one is likely to meet in one’s lifetime share the same values and bestow honor and dishonor accordingly—the process of keeping group members committed to the group values is relatively simple and consistent. Retaining the commitment of the next generation is also not a great challenge. They are nurtured in an environment in which there is little, if any, disagreement concerning what behaviors are honorable and what behaviors are disgraceful. They see the social sanctions of praise and shaming applied consistently, and they typically absorb the group values without question.

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promised to Achilles in life must still be given to him in death, for if the fallen Achilles were to be *dishonored* in death rather than *honored* with his prize, commitment to fight for one’s city or land would evaporate throughout Greece (see *Hecuba* 134-40, 307-17).

<sup>33</sup>The goal of reclaiming the deviant is an aspect missing from a great deal of the “toxic” shaming excoriated by modern authors.

This, however, is not the situation of the first-century Mediterranean world,<sup>34</sup> particularly in its urban centers that concentrated a wide sampling of the various available cultures in a small space. In taking just a cross section of the situation at the time of Jesus or Paul, we find first a dominant culture, that of Hellenism, with its distinctively Greek set of values. This is the *dominant* culture because all those in power share it, from the emperor in Rome to the local elites in Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt, even to kings Herod Agrippa I and II in Palestine. It is also the majority culture, since Hellenism had by this time been penetrating local cultures in the eastern Mediterranean from Macedonia through Egypt (including Palestine) for three centuries. There were, however, many other groups living within this world, trying to preserve their distinctive values while adapting to the necessities of living in a world empire. Prominent among these minority cultures is the Jewish culture. Formerly a dominant culture in its own right, the Judean people had become a subcultural group within empires dominated by other people for six centuries.<sup>35</sup> In Palestine and especially among communities of Jews living in the Diaspora, negotiating commitment to Jewish values alongside making a life in the midst of a Gentile world was a challenging task. There were also voluntary groups promoting their own set of values and their own distinctive cultures. Among this category one would find the Greco-Roman philosophical schools (like Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism) as well as the various streams of the early Christian movement.

What made this multicultural environment challenging is the fact that each group defined honorable and dishonorable conduct according to its own distinctive constellations of values and beliefs. Often some values would overlap (and Jewish and Christian apologists would stress areas of

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<sup>34</sup>Nor is it the situation of much of the modern world, in which maintaining a particular group culture is made all the more challenging by strong emphases on nurturing multicultural and pluralistic environments alongside an individual's right to self-determination.

<sup>35</sup>The near-century of "independence" under the Hasmonean house (the family of Judas Maccabaeus: see 1 Macc for the establishment of the dynasty) could be considered an exception, save for the fact that already by that point more Jews were living outside of Palestine than within and Hasmonean "independence" had to be ongoingly negotiated with the neighboring Hellenistic empires. They were thus still, by and large, living as an ethnic subculture within the larger, dominant Hellenistic culture. Of course, there were also varieties of Jewish groups positioned in different relationships with one another, such as the sect at Qumran—a minority group *within* an ethnic subculture.

overlap and commonality). Frequently, however, core values—or, at least, their specific embodiment—would clash. The same behavior that one group would hold up and reward as honorable, another group could censure and insult as disgraceful, and vice versa. It was more difficult to remain committed to the law of Moses when doing so brought ridicule and barred one from being affirmed as honorable by the majority or dominant culture. It was more difficult to keep the ideals of Stoicism foremost in one's mind when the majority of people paid little heed to those ideals, scoffed at philosophy, and acclaimed those who were rich in external goods (like wealth or crowds of followers or positions of power) rather than in virtue.

In order to make this scenario clearer, let us consider the specific example of the plight of Jews in the ancient world and the ways in which they might negotiate this tension. Within the Jewish culture, observance of God's law, the Torah, was a primary mark of the honorable man or woman. Ben Sira, for example, reaffirms this as the group's core value—the fundamental and foundational source of a person's worth:

What race is worthy of honor? The human race. What race is worthy of honor? Those who fear the Lord. What race is unworthy of honor? The human race. What race is unworthy of honor? Those who transgress the commandments. Among brothers their leader is worthy of honor, and those who fear the Lord are worthy of honor in his eyes. The rich, and the eminent, and the poor—their glory is the fear of the Lord. It is not right to despise an intelligent poor man, nor is it proper to honor a sinful man. The nobleman, and the judge, and the ruler will be honored, but none of them is greater than the man who fears the Lord. (Sir 10:19-24)

For Ben Sira, keeping God's covenant is the essential ingredient to establishing a person as honorable, while transgression of Torah leaves even the powerful and mighty without true honor.<sup>36</sup>

Even while Ben Sira teaches this saying to his students, however, Torah-observant Jews are experiencing the ridicule and censure of non-Jews (and more progressive Jews among the Hellenizing elite) precisely *because* they keep Torah. The law of Moses forbids any kind of dealings with idolatrous worship, and so the honorable Jew never frequents a Gentile temple. The rest

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<sup>36</sup>See also Sir 1:26; 19:20; and discussion in deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 186-89.

of the world, however, regards the paying of proper respect to the gods (namely, the deities depicted by the idols loathed by Jews) as an essential characteristic of the honorable person—the pious and just person who gives the gods their due. Jews are, in the eyes of the majority, as good as atheists and every bit as dishonorable. Circumcision, the mark revered among Jews as a sign of being included in the covenant of Abraham and the covenant of Moses, was viewed as a barbaric mutilation of the human body by the Greek culture. Moreover, strict observance of Torah means keeping watch over what one eats and, as it came to be applied, with whom one eats. Between the prohibition of idols (which would be present and honored even at a private dinner party given by a Greek or Roman) and the dietary and purity laws of Torah, Jews were severely restricted in their interactions with non-Jews. The majority culture, however, placed a high value on civic unity and on participation in the life of the city in all its aspects (e.g., religious festivals, business guilds, and the like), with the result that Jews appeared to them to keep strictly to themselves and to harbor a barbaric aversion toward (or even hatred of) people of other races. This became another source of ridicule and insult directed against Jews, whose law, which prescribed such a way of life, came to be despised as a body of xenophobic and retrogressive restrictions.<sup>37</sup>

The Jew is thus faced with a disturbing contradiction. If he lives by Torah, he will be honored and affirmed as a valuable member of the community by the more traditional Jews, but he will also be regarded with contempt and even find his honor openly assaulted by the majority of the Greco-Roman population. In such a situation it cannot be taken for granted that a Jew will remain such. If he desires the approval and affirmation of the members of the Greco-Roman culture (and the opportunities for advancement, influence, and wealth that networking in that direction can bring), he may well abandon his strict allegiance to Jewish values. This was the course chosen

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<sup>37</sup>Prominent reports or examples of ancient anti-Jewish sentiments can be found in 3 Macc 3:3–7; LXX Esth 13:4–5; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.100–104; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.121, 258; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.1–5; and Diodorus of Sicily, *Bib. Hist.* 34.1–4; 40.3.4. See also the discussions in John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 35–112; Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 87–176. There were, however, also several voices from the Greco-Roman world that spoke admiringly of Jews and their disciplined practice. See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 201–415.



by many Jews during the Hellenistic period. In the period leading up to the Maccabean Revolt, for example, priestly families in Jerusalem itself exhibited eagerness even to remove the mark of circumcision, to throw off the Mosaic restrictions on their dealings with a Gentile world, and to achieve for Jerusalem the status of a Greek city for the sake of the respect this would bring in the eyes of the Greek elites in Antioch (1 Macc 1:11-15; 2 Macc 4:7-15).<sup>38</sup> In the Roman period, Tiberius Julius Alexander, the nephew of the devout Old Testament scholar Philo of Alexandria, stands out as an exceptional example of a Jew who apostatized and achieved significant honor and influence in the “larger” arena of Roman administration: he became the governor of the province of Judea from 46-48 AD and later the prefect of Alexandria. Most Jews, however, chose to remain faithful to their ancestral law and customs, and to preserve their culture and its values. To do so, they had to develop strategies for keeping themselves and their fellow Jews sensitive to *Jewish* definitions of the honorable and, at the same time, insulated from non-Jewish verdicts concerning honor and dishonor—and to the ways in which these verdicts were brought to bear on them personally.

These strategies would be common to many minority cultures attempting to secure the allegiance of their members and to defuse the pressures those members might feel from people outside the group. They can be found at work in Jewish writings, in the writings of Gentile philosophers promoting their way of life, as well as in the early Christian texts called the New Testament.<sup>39</sup> First, group members need to be very clear about who constitutes their “court of reputation,” that body of significant others whose “opinion” about what is honorable and shameful, and whose evaluation of the individual, really matters.<sup>40</sup> Their eyes need to be directed toward one another, toward their leaders, and, very frequently, toward beings beyond the visible sphere (for example, God or the honored members of the group who have

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<sup>38</sup>Especially noteworthy is 2 Macc 4:15, “disdaining the honors prized by their ancestors and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige.”

<sup>39</sup>A detailed analysis of these techniques at work in Plato, Seneca, Epictetus (three Greco-Roman philosophers); and the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and 4 Maccabees (three Jewish works produced between 200 BC and AD 70) can be found in deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 87-155.

<sup>40</sup>On the importance of the delineation and the verdict of the court of reputation, see further deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 299-313; Crook, “Honor Revisited,” 609-11.

moved to another realm after death) as they look for approval—and thus directed away from those people who do not share the group’s values and whose negative estimation of the group might threaten to erode individual commitment.<sup>41</sup> Connecting the opinion or approval of this potentially small body of visible “significant others” to the opinion and approval of a larger or more powerful body of significant others (God, the heavenly hosts, the saints throughout the ages, the church of God in every place) also helps to offset the “minority” status of its values. Adherents of a minority group (such as the church or a Diaspora synagogue) must believe that, even though the majority of people around them have a different and contrary set of values, the majority is really the deviant body since it doesn’t live in line with the cosmic order. The group will then award honor to its members that adhere to the way of life promoted by that group and use shame and censure to try to bring the wayward members back into line with group values. Members will be encouraged to interact more with, and invest themselves more in, other members of the group. The importance of preserving these relationships must outweigh any advantages that might be perceived in exchanging this network of support and affirmation for the “friendship of the world.”<sup>42</sup>

A second critical strategy is, more or less, the mirror image of the first. Group members need to understand (and to articulate for one another) why

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<sup>41</sup>The eyes are not always directed “outside” the individual. Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, is often concerned with empowering moral autonomy—that is, stressing the importance of “self-respect” as the philosopher examines his or her own life, finds that he or she is indeed walking in the ideals of the philosophy that he or she has intentionally embraced and internalized, and extends affirmation to himself or herself on the basis of living up to those internalized norms, which are no longer the norms embraced by the majority culture. Illustrative of the difference—and of the importance of conscience for the Stoic—is Seneca’s saying: “No one . . . is more consecrated to virtue than he who has lost his reputation for being a good man in order to keep from losing the approval of his conscience” (Seneca, *Ep.* 81.20). The Stoic’s experience of being “shamed” by his or her former circle of significant others changes as well—it occurs now without the internal agreement of his or her conscience (though the danger always exists that aversion toward the experience of shame will cause the person to act against his or her conscience and even relinquish the new values he or she has embraced).

<sup>42</sup>As Te-Li Lau observes, “Shame is the emotion of interconnectedness. We have shame before those with whom we wish to be associated or identified” (*Defending Shame*, 137). Since shame is experienced as a “feeling of a threat to the social bond,” the more important the social bond is to the individual, the more potent the threat of alienation through misdeed, and thus the greater the power of prospective shame (quotation from Thomas J. Scheff, “Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory,” *Sociological Theory* 18 [2000]: 84-99, esp. 97).

the approval or disapproval of outsiders does not matter to the members of the group and why it is no reflection of the group members' true honor and worth. This often takes the form of stressing the ignorance of outsiders who, because they do not know what the group members know about God and God's values, do not have all the facts necessary to make an informed evaluation about anyone's honor or lack thereof. It also involves reminding group members of the shameful conduct of outsiders whose persistence in sin against God and refusal to do what is right in God's eyes marks them as dishonorable people whose opinion therefore carries no weight (if the despicable despise you, what does that matter?).<sup>43</sup> The group may look to future events, such as a final judgment, with the expectation that the error of the majority and the nobility with which the members of the group have conducted themselves all along will be revealed for all to see. The latter will be vindicated and enter into eternal honor, while their neighbors will come to perpetual disgrace.<sup>44</sup>

When group members do experience insult, scorn, and hostility at the hands of the members of the majority culture, they need to have ways of interpreting this experience positively from within the worldview of the group. For example, perseverance in the face of the shaming tactics of the larger society can become a "noble contest" (akin to an athletic competition) in which giving in is the greatest disgrace and remaining firm is an honorable victory. Rather than being felt as a demeaning, degrading experience, society's assaults on the group can become an opportunity to show courage or to demonstrate a person's loyalty to God or to have his or her moral faculty exercised and strengthened. In this way, group members will be insulated against the strong pull the experience of disgrace will have on them and will be protected from being pulled into the values of the majority

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<sup>43</sup>The author of *Wisdom of Solomon*, for example, presents his audience's Gentile neighbors as utterly ignorant of God, virtue, and genuine piety (13:1-9; 14:22-31), explaining the errors that led them to their religious practices (13:10-14:21). The Gentiles' criticism of Jews as "atheists" betrays their ignorance of the very human origins of their own pseudo-religious practices. Greco-Roman philosophers similarly contrast the unworthy opinion of the many, who are not guided by a commitment to philosophical inquiry, with the opinion of those few who do examine reality in the light of philosophical truth (Plato, *Cri.* 44C; 46C-47A; Seneca, *Constant.* 11.2-12.1; 13.2, 5; Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.29.50-54).

<sup>44</sup>For two especially well-developed examples, see Wis 3:1-13; 4:16-5:23; Plato, *Gorg.* 526D-527D.

culture (which is one of the aims of the shaming techniques).<sup>45</sup> Or the deprivations they encounter as a consequence of their loyalty to the minority culture might be interpreted as formative discipline, since education (*paideia*) and pain often went hand in hand in the ancient world. Or these might be interpreted as a kind of trial or proving ground, whereby the genuineness of one's loyalty and virtue would be tested and, once proven, redound to the group members' honor.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the group will use considerations of honor and shame to reinforce for its members what behaviors and goals they ought to pursue, and to dissuade them from any activities or attitudes that will hinder the group's survival (or the solidarity of its members). In the literary remains of these groups (e.g., the works of Seneca, Ben Sira, or Paul), we find the guiding voices of minority cultures motivating their audiences to pursue or leave off particular courses of action by affirming or demonstrating that such a course would result in either honor or disgrace. If the course of action promoted by the group leader does not seem to lead to honor as the broader culture defines it, that leader will frequently offer some defense or explanation for his claim that the course leads to honor where honor lasts forever or "really counts." In these texts we also find models for behavior being set forward. Some figures are held up as praiseworthy, with the expectation that hearers will be led to emulate those persons in the hope of being recognized themselves as praiseworthy; alternatively, some figures (whether living or past) will be singled out as disgraceful and censurable so that the hearers will be averted from imitating the kind of life he or she embodied or courses of action he or she chose.

Honor and dishonor, then, are not only about the individual's sense of worth but also about the coordination and promotion of a group's defining

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<sup>45</sup>On the use of athletic imagery, see, for example, 4 Macc 11:20; 16:16; 17:11-16; Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.18.21; 1.24.1-2; 3.22.56; Dio, *Or.* 8.15-16; and discussion in Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37-76.

<sup>46</sup>Wisdom of Solomon, a Hellenistic Jewish writing from Egypt in the early Roman period, combines these two strategies. Concerning those who maintain their "righteousness" (that is, their embodiment of the practices and values of the Torah) in the face of difficulty and hardship, he writes: "having been disciplined (*paideuthentes*) in regard to a few matters, great benefits will be bestowed upon them, because God tested them and found them to be worthy of himself. He tried them like gold in a furnace, and he accepted them as whole burnt offerings" (Wis 3:5-6, my translation).

and central values, about the strategies for the preservation of a group's culture in the midst of a complex web of competing cultures, and about the ways in which honor or dishonor are attained, displayed, and enacted. As we keep the dynamics of this rather complex model in mind, however, we can begin to approach the New Testament writings with a much greater sensitivity to how these texts speak to honor-sensitive hearers, develop a distinctively Christian definition of what gives a person worth and value (i.e., makes one honorable), and sustain commitment and obedience to Jesus and his teachings in a largely unsupportive world.

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