

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF A
FIRST CENTURY JEWISH CHRISTIAN TEXT
BASED UPON AN HONOR-SHAME
ORIENTED SOCIETY¹

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How should ancient documents be read? What is the goal when reading an ancient text, especially if that text is a revered religious text? And since the cultural distance has become so pronounced between many modern Western secular urban societies and the ancient societies, what method can help best to bridge the cultural gap without collapsing the text into a foreign social setting, or without the modern setting being held hostage to a decontextualized text that makes little sense when applied to a modern culture? As

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part of the struggle to answer such concerns, increasing attention has been turned in biblical studies to the use of an anthropologically oriented sociological criticism for understanding the biblical texts.²

Flourishing from a behavioral sciences base rather than the more traditional historical-philosophical foundation of the historical-critical method, sociological or social-science criticism builds upon historical research, but unlike the historical-critical method, the research seeks to build a social history as a matrix for the analysis of the texts.³

The focus of the research may be solely to compile a social history of the period, or to go one step further by articulating the prevailing worldview of the ancient group under consideration, then analyzing how that worldview functioned with regard to the existing social, political, economic, and religious groups. Yet another stage in the research can include the use of an anthropological model (such as Mary Douglas's group-grid model) based on modern ethnological studies (based especially on ethnologies of the area under study) in order to evaluate the dynamics within the ancient social setting.

² The following works offer good descriptions of the history of the method and steps involved in employing the method: Carolyn Osiek, *What Are They Saying about the Social Setting of the New Testament?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984); and Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). Good examples of the method in practice include: Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Gerd Theissen, *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) as well as a host of other works by Theissen; and Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.).

³ See the four-fold development proposed by David Rhoads in the work edited by Anderson and Moore, 135-161.

The end results of such studies can then be used to understand the ancient texts in their proper social context.

In the present study, an anthropological understanding of honor and shame will be used to evaluate the first century Jewish-Christian text of Mark 2:1-12. The category of honor and shame will be helpful in understanding the Marcan text both at the event level (in the ministry of Jesus) and at the literary level (assumed to be during the late 60's), with the outcome of the pericope highlighting the honor-shame cultural values. The approach will be to first examine various anthropological understandings of the honor-shame model as part of a social system. Then, the honor and shame model will be refined in light of the eastern Mediterranean culture, focusing on first century Jewish-Christian culture as much as possible. This section will include consideration of several historical literary sources as well, with attention given to the social setting of the writers and their biases based upon their social location (in power or not, in group or out, economic class, social class, religious identification, other purposes in writing, etc.). The last section will include an application of the previous findings to an anthropological reading of the Jewish-Christian text, Mark 2:1-12.

I. HONOR AND SHAME IN SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Today honor and shame are generally assumed to be central features of the Mediterranean culture, as well as of many other cultures. But the work of Julian Pitt-Rivers was pivotal for the modern emphasis on honor and shame as cultural values (see Julian Pitt-Rivers, 1966, as well as the entire volume by Peristiany, 1966). Pitt-Rivers and others found that the honor and shame aspect was

pervasive in Mediterranean society, with some special characteristics discernible, some of which will be examined in the next section.

The honor and shame labels have become common in anthropological analyses, in spite of not always being easy to define or isolate. As Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin note, honor and shame are public labels which define social status (Matthews and Benjamin, 1994). Halvor Moxnes added that honor is "fundamentally the public recognition of one's social standing," with two means of coming to be considered honorable: **Ascribed honor** and **Acquired honor** (Moxnes, 1996. See **Appendix I** for a concise presentations of the key components of the descriptions of honor and shame given in this section). Ascribed honor is gained through family connections at birth without personal merit or effort needed to secure one's social position. For example, some were born into the ruling class, and thereby were from infancy onward looked upon by others as worthy of all of the honor normally given to members of the ruling class, even though the infant had done nothing to earn respect as a leader.

Acquired honor, on the other hand, is gained through the performance of virtuous deeds. Such honor is fleeting, being in constant need of being reinforced by further valiant or virtuous acts. Also, the group is the giver of this type of honor, whereas ascribed honor is a matter of a combination of the group and the family, since no conscious group approval is needed other than implicit approval of the family's place in the social order. Since in honor and shame societies the number of social positions that can be sustained at a high honor level are usually limited, competition for acquired honor (and in a different way ascribed honor) occurs, with constant challenges to the social position or honor of others taking place and requiring defending and vigilance. If less than honorable behavior is found,

then a challenge can be made in the public forum by means of bringing the dishonorable behavior to the attention of others in the hope that they will "dishonor" the offender and honor the informant/challenger. As Pitt-Rivers notes, honesty, loyalty, sexual purity, discretion, and concern for one's reputation may all be consuming concerns for maintaining one's honor (Julian Pitt-Rivers, 1966).

Shame can be defined as the loss of honor or the diminishing of honor. Such a loss of honor could be due to either loss of ascribed honor or loss of acquired honor. For ascribed honor to be loss, the honor base would have to be tainted. This would occur with dishonorable behavior by one of the honor base leaders or representatives. Women, as an honor base representative, could bring dishonor to the household through illicit relationships as well as other types of unacceptable behavior.

Shame in the sense of loss of acquired honor could come due to lack of moral uprightness or virtue, loss of a public debate or challenge, or the failure to fulfill one's social, hospitality, or religious obligations. Shame is also incurred when one's self-perception of social status is not publicly accepted, resulting in either a public demonstration of shame due to seeking to usurp a higher role than the group will allow or a private sense of shame due to feeling unaccepted by the group at the proper level. Shame becomes an isolating experience, with the publicly shamed person often withdrawing from the group, being stigmatized by the group, and/or becoming antagonistic to the group, thus creating the risk of social division.

The group nature of honor-shame societies causes the individual to be considered not simply as one person, but as an embedded member of the family or clan. The result is that the honor gained by a member

of the group becomes attached to the entire group, and likewise with the shame. Due to this group dimension, the answering of a challenge to the honor of a member of the group may be done by another member of the group, who seeks to defend not so much the individual, but the group. A related difficulty to this system is the continual social ferment that potentially exists if a proper balance of honor and shame is not maintained in the community. Therefore, acceptable rules for honor-shame challenges and responses is required and must be followed for social cohesion purposes.

While most members of an honor and shame based society play by the related social rules, some may choose to disregard the public honor code by engaging in dishonorable behavior or activities. Such persons are labeled "shameless" since they have no concern for their social honor; that is, they are not concerned with their public reputation or their family's reputation (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992). The shameless people in a society may be regarded as either fools or arrogant persons, perhaps having chosen occupations that are socially stigmatized.

In seeking to summarize the common characteristics of honor and shame societies, the following elements from numerous studies have been compiled by Moxnes (1996). 1) The family is the primary social unit, with the kinship group (lineage or clan) also playing a dominant role. Honor is inherited from this group by its members, and is accrued by this group based upon the behavior of its members. 2) Loyalty is a dominant value, with loyalty to the family being central. The individual member is expected to defend the family's honor even at personal risk, and is defined based more upon family lines than personal identity. Group cohesion is extremely important, even at the cost of

excluding others from the group or pitting one group against the other. 3) The family is the locus of the challenges to honor status and responses (riposte) to those challenges. Therefore, all aspects of the behavior of individual family members are the concern of the group, being both censured by the group as an in-group matter, and defended by the group against other groups. 4) The unity of the family or group before outside threats or challenges is maintained at all costs, even though in-group divisions may exist. The competition within the family or group for in-group positions of honor may be intense, but do not normally diminish the unity of the group against out-group contact. Such in-group honor competition often revolves around ascribed honor positions that can be inherited within the group.

II. HONOR AND SHAME IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN FIRST CENTURY SOCIETY

In seeking to apply the honor and shame construct in the analysis of a first-century Jewish-Christian religious text, a more specific understanding of honor and shame for that cultural setting is needed. Aids for the development of such an understanding are found in both modern ethnographies of the Mediterranean region (especially the eastern portion) and in ancient texts. Numerous modern ethnographic studies have been compiled in the volume edited by Peristiany (1966), with further studies undertaken by many others (i.e., Pitt-Rivers, 1971). These studies have helped to isolate features of the honor-shame focus in the Mediterranean world. A limitation of these studies is that most were done within small

communities or with migrating tribal groups rather than with large scale societies, and so the applicability of such studies would be most appropriate to like settings of small villages and nomadic groups. Fortunately, such small villages are exactly the settings most prominent in the Gospel texts, with the Jerusalem setting excepted. While local differences would exist, the larger role of honor and shame in the society should be similar, especially since most of the ethnographic studies have been done in settings somewhat removed from the changes brought about by the modern Western world (especially since the industrial revolution).

Another resource for understanding the honor and shame concept in a first-century Jewish setting is the literature from that time period. Primary sources include the writings of Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls), Philo, Josephus, the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, non-Jewish literature from the Mediterranean setting (especially extant is literature from the Greco-Roman cultural setting), and the New Testament writings. Selections from some of these sources related to the topic of honor and shame are given in Appendix III. When using any written source, and especially one in which awareness of bias has not been considered by the writer, the problem of the social location of the writer must be taken into account. Most ancient writers came from the upper social classes, and thereby don't necessarily reflect the common views of the peasantry, but rather the views of the ruling elite. Others have personal motivations behind their writings, and many are seeking to gain honor for themselves through their writings. For example, Josephus seeks to elevate both himself and his people, which in and of itself could be taken as a defense of the honor of his clan. On the other hand, many of the New Testament writings seem to originate among the lower classes or

at least the movement itself is anchored in the lower classes. As such, one phenomena seen in it is the revolt against the imposed honor system of the cultural and religious elite, a system that confirms the elite in their roles of privilege and the poor in their role of subservience. And yet the honor system of the larger culture is reflected many times in the New Testament writings as well. For example, at least part of the purpose of the mention of Jesus' genealogy is to secure him a social position of honor, showing him worthy of ascribed honor due to his lineage.

Some of the honor-shame focuses of ancient writers include a denunciation of shamelessness by Pliny, with arrogance and ignorance noted as prime characteristics of shamelessness (see Appendix III for these texts). Pliny extols virtue, modesty, education, and benevolence. Arrian, writing in support of the Cynic lifestyle, calls for an ascetic approach to life, one that upholds a strict social order and thereby gains honor. The Dead Sea Scrolls highlight in *The Rule of the Community* the need for social cohesion, with shame falling on those who disrupt or threaten the life of the group. Josephus includes a wealth of information on honor and shame, noting the value of being honored in his own gaining of Roman citizenship and a pension from the Emperor as well as the challenges by others (he says due to envy, which may have some truth to it) to his new found social status. In commenting on texts from the Hebrew Bible, Josephus highlights Aaron's righteousness as the basis of being honored by God and the people. Saul's intense desire to regain honor before the people is pictured in the passage where Saul physically detains Samuel so that Saul might gain honor by being seen with the revered Samuel. These and other passages confirm both the prevalence of the honor system in the Eastern

Mediterranean (and Judaism in particular) as well as delineate certain characteristics.

In summarizing some of the characteristics of the honor system in the Mediterranean culture, besides the common elements mentioned in the previous section, several distinctive aspects are noteworthy. Neyrey and Hanson's (1994) delineation serves as a good general guide, with input from other studies and personal insights complementing it in the following listing (see **Appendix II** for a concise presentation of this material). 1) Honor and shame show a distinctively gender oriented nature in the Mediterranean culture. Male honor is contingent on defending itself and the family/group against possible shame incurred by the women of the family or lineage losing their modesty, virginity, or privacy. Since in the patrilinear society of the eastern Mediterranean the ascribed honor is passed on almost exclusively through the male family leader, the defense of the male honor is essential, with women being seen as a threat to diminish male honor, resulting in the moral codes for women reflecting actions designed to prevent a diminishing of the male honor. An example is found in John 7:53-8:11, where the woman is brought by a crowd to Jesus, she having been caught in the act of adultery. The bringing of the woman without the man may reflect the desire to not shame the man, and the intense charges against the woman highlight the danger of women to the honor system. Jesus answers the challenge posed to him by pointing out the hypocrisy of the honor system, one that dishonors the woman while not recognizing just causes for like dishonoring among the men. 2) Honor for males is linked to both claimed social status and the public recognition of social status, with shame

coming when one's claimed status suffers public rebuke (as noted in the previous section). The Lucan passage (Luke 14:7-11) in which Jesus warns against presuming too great a position in public, and then being demoted by the host when another esteemed more worthy is given the seat of honor is a prime example (James 2 is another example of the honor of certain seating). 3) Mediterranean societies are competitive in the realm of honor, and so challenges to one's honor will be frequent and must be answered appropriately in public, since public opinion of the outcome is determinative for the conferring of honor or withholding of honor (thereby causing shame). Many of the attacks in the New Testament both by the religious leaders against Jesus and by Jesus against the religious leaders are of this type.

In a related field, concepts of social taboo can be seen as "shame" incurring actions or states of being. Concepts of taboo can provide windows into the inner belief structure of a society (Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*). Sin beliefs, in essence taboos, allow for the same type of societal understanding as taboos in other cultures. In relation to honor and shame, the ultimate shame is that of being rejected by the group, thus becoming an outcast. As Malina and Rohrbaugh note, for honor-shame societies, "sin is a breach of interpersonal relations" (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992). Thus, the reintegration rites for social outcasts (due to sin pronouncements) center around being reunited with the community. In Judaism, such actions revolved around reincorporation into the fellowship of God's people, with acceptable public repentance, healing, or priestly rites showing acceptability serving as symbols of divine removal of the shame. For first-century Palestinian Judaism, forgiveness practices,

normally performed by a priest or religious leader, were "reintegration" rites for restoration to the community.

The linkage of honor with public recognition and acceptance into the community leads to another corollary. Honor systems operate on several levels, with the strongest impact in individuals, families, and small communities (Chance, 1994). Some have sought to apply the honor system to larger settings, but with limited acceptance by the scholarly community (an example of "dishonor"?). The difficulty with application to the larger social settings has to do with the role of public opinion, which might find a suitable setting for expression in certain political arenas, but generally begs in the ancient world for a local setting.

III. AN APPLICATION TO THE INTERPRETATION OF A FIRST CENTURY TEXT: MARK 2:1-12

Several elements found in Mark 2:1-12 support an interpretation of the passage based on the cultural concept of honor and shame. The passage begins with a public setting that would be natural for gaining honor or losing it; a situation unfolds that has the potential, if met successfully, to accrue honor; a challenge to the public action is presented; a riposte to the challenge is given, with action taken to sustain the riposte; and the end result is acclaim by the crowds. The category of honor-shame seems to be a natural fit for understanding Mark 2:1-12. The following table outlines the text according to the characteristics mentioned above (writer's own translation based on the *Novum Testamentum Graece*).

REF.	CHARACTERISTIC	TEXT
2:1-2	Public Setting	And when he entered Capernaum again after a few days, it was heard, "He's home." And a great number gathered together so that no one else could fit, not even at the doorway. And he was speaking the word to them.
2:3-4	A Possible Honor Accruing Situation	And they came to him bearing a paralytic being carried by four people. And since they were not able to take him to him [Jesus] because of the crowd, they dug open the roof where he was and after opening the hole lowered the pallet on which the paralytic was lying.
2:5	Forgiveness pronouncement restoring fellowship	And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven you."
2:6-7	Challenge by the religious leaders	And certain ones of the scribes were seated there and were discussing in their hearts, "Why is this person speaking in this way? He's blaspheming. Who is able to forgive sins except one, namely God?"
2:8-11	Riposte by Jesus	And then Jesus, knowing in his spirit that they were discussing among themselves in this way, said to them, "Why are you discussing these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'you sins are forgiven you' or to say, 'get up, take up your pallet, and walk?'" But in order that you might know that the son of man has authority ["jurisdiction" perhaps in this context] to forgive sins, he says to the paralytic, I say to you, "get up, take up your pallet, and go to your own home."
2:12	The Public Outcome of Honor Recognition	And he got up and immediately taking his pallet he went out before all of them, with the result that all of them were amazed and glorified [honored] God, saying, "We've never seen anything like this!"

Based upon the flow of the passage noted in the table, the text will now be examined more closely to see where the honor-shame

concept is helpful for interpretation.

The initial setting of the passage as a crowded home with public speaking occurring, while not demanding an honor–shame scenario, is clearly conducive to such. Since honor is a public recognition of status, some sort of group setting would be needed, which is exactly what these initial verses indicate. An ancient reader or participant in the event would understand that an honor issue might arise in such a crowded gathering. The setting in a home as the place of gathering would be "home turf" for Jesus, with the honor of the group perhaps also at stake, although such an emphasis does not occur in the text.

The bringing of the paralytic to Jesus is surrounded by culturally nuanced ideas. The plight of paralysis, in whatever form might have been present for this person, was one accompanied by social stigma. In Judaism, the cause of "unnatural" states of being for persons was often ascribed to either sinful actions or demonic activity. The sinful actions would provide the cause for God's cursing with deformity, regardless of whether the action was done by the afflicted person or another family/group member. A clear example of this belief is seen in John chapter 9 in the account of the man born blind, where the question is asked regarding the cause of the man's blindness, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" In the Mark 2 pericope, the setting is one of sin being understood as the cause of the paralytic's condition and justification for his being a social outcast: "if God says this man is not acceptable (through afflicting him with paralysis), then so do we" is the social thought.

The word for pallet, *krabatton*, refers to the sleeping mat used by the poor and which could be rolled up during the day in order to

make room in the single room dwelling for daytime activities (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992). Thus, the social status of the paralytic was probably low, adding a further stigma to his inclusion in society.

By bringing the paralytic to Jesus, the friends are hoping that Jesus, presumably through a physical healing, will make the man whole through removal of the social/religious stigma of paralysis, and thus socially acceptable. That Jesus would do so remained in doubt, but the honorable thing to do would be to help another when possible and when the other was deemed worthy of help. The extraordinary effort on the part of the friends to gain access to Jesus is deemed an act worthy of a response by Jesus, as seen in the remark about Jesus noticing the faith of the friends (and paralytic?).

Jesus' action of pronouncing forgiveness for the paralytic not only restored the social and religious standing of the paralytic, but also elevated Jesus both as one acting honorably (while others who could perhaps have done so did nothing) and as one presuming to have the social/religious status needed to make such a pronouncement. In both cases, the honor or social prestige of Jesus is at center stage.

The reaction of the scribes, who were well-recognized religious authorities by Jewish society, is one of questioning whether Jesus has the right to make such a pronouncement. In practice, they would have been responsible to make the pronouncement of forgiveness or social/religious acceptability, but would have done so after seeing the paralysis removed. Jesus has taken their social role from them, and done so by granting the paralytic social acceptability in the community, or at least in the community surrounding Jesus. The murmuring of the scribes, then, is a challenge to Jesus' right to

such a high place of honor as well as a recognition that their own honor was being diminished in the process.

Jesus takes up the challenge by making the challenge itself public knowledge, assuring that an honor-shame issue will be decided. If Jesus is able to heal the man in light of the public challenge and riposte, then Jesus will gain honor and the scribes lose prestige. But if the healing cannot be realized, then Jesus will be publicly shamed and the scribes will gain honor.

When the healing does take place, the reaction of the crowd is one of amazement at the power of Jesus to do such wonders. Their exclamation at the end of the pericope leaves no doubt about who won the challenge, with honor being ascribed to God, but on the basis of an unparalleled act by Jesus, who is honored indirectly as the agent of God's wonder in the pericope.

In the historical context of the event, the above explanation gives most of the impact of the honor-shame confrontation. A substantially similar impact would take place at the level of the readers of the Gospel, with the result of the passage being the exaltation of the position of Jesus. The readers would be invited to respond with like amazement, with the expectation of discipleship being enhanced due to the worthiness of Jesus to be followed.

CONCLUSION

How should ancient documents be read? The answer depends on the goal of the reading. But the present work shows that an anthropological reading of the documents can enhance significantly the understanding of both the background of the text events as well

as of the dynamics operating in the text. The honor–shame context of the Eastern Mediterranean is a prime example, having expanded the understanding of the events depicted in Mark 2:1–12 beyond the scope of a simple story about a healing and pronouncement to that of an encounter ripe with social significance.

APPENDIX I:
WHAT ARE HONOR AND SHAME

HONOR = Public recognition of one’s social standing

ASCRIBED HONOR = inherited from family at birth

**ACQUIRED HONOR = based on virtuous deeds,
keep only by a constant struggle in the social arena,
validated by the group as a public matter,
constantly challenged and needing to be defended
and demands honorable behavior**

SHAME = Diminished honor due to:

**A TAINTED HONOR BASE = women were especially
prone to bring dishonor on the ascribed honor base,
lack of social responsibility or acceptance could
damage the honor base**

**A FAILURE TO MAINTAIN ACQUIRED HONOR =
lack of moral uprightness or virtue
loss of a challenge to one’s honor
failure to fulfill one’s social obligations, hospitality
obligations, and/or religious obligations**

APPENDIX II:

A MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING HONOR AND SHAME

Based largely on Neyrey and Hanson, *Semeia*, 68, 1994

1. Honor and shame form a value system rooted in gender distinctions in Mediterranean culture, with male honor contingent on defending against the possible shame of women of the family or lineage due to loss of modesty, virginity, or privacy.

2. Honor for males is linked to both the claimed social status and the public recognition of social status, with shame coming from the distance between the two: when one's claimed status suffers public rebuke and must therefore be lowered.

3. Mediterranean societies are competitive in the realm of honor, and so challenges to one's honor will be frequent and must be answered appropriately and in public, since the public opinion of the outcome is determinative for the conferring of honor or withholding of honor (thereby causing shame).

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