One

HONOR & SHAME
Connecting Personhood to Group Values

The culture of the first-century world was built on the foundational social values of honor and dishonor. 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. 4.162). Seneca claims that his peers regard honor as desirable in and of itself, and dishonor as undesirable in and of itself. Moreover, he understands that the concept of “honor” is fundamental and foundational to his contemporaries’ thinking. That is, he expects them 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, all 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.¹

In his book on ethics Aristotle lists two motives that people might have

¹For a close investigation of honor language at work in several major Greek, Latin and Jewish authors, see David A. deSilva, Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews, SBLDS 152 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), chaps. 2 and 3; for discussion of honor in the world of Homeric and Classical Greece, see Arthur W. Adkins, Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) and the
for choosing some course of action: honor and pleasure (Nic. Eth. 3.1.11 [1110b11-12]). Honor, however, is viewed as the first and foremost consideration. Isocrates, an Athenian orator who was Aristotle’s senior, advised his young pupil 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 centuries. In the first century B.C., a teacher of public speakers held up honor and security as the two primary considerations when trying to win an audience over to support the course of action the speaker promoted. He recognized, however, that one could never admit a course to be safe but dishonorable and still expect to win (Rhetorica ad Herennium 3.5.8-9). Quintilian, a teacher of rhetoric from the late first century A.D., holds up the “honorable” as the fundamental factor in persuading people to adopt or avoid a course of action (Institutes 3.8.1); from Aristotle to Quintilian, successful orators were the ones who could demonstrate that the course of action they advocated led to the greatest honor.

Honor and dishonor played a dominant part in moral instruction as well. In his collection of advice To Demonicus [Ad Dem.], Isocrates repeatedly uses the phrases “it is disgraceful” and “it is noble” (rather than “it is right” or “wrong,” “profitable” or “unprofitable”) as sanctions for behavior. Aversion to disgrace and defense of honor is to guide his 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 a certain kind of life and to avoid many alternatives. Thus the students

---

correction and refinement of his study in Bernard Williams, Shame and Necessity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). The persistence of these values in Mediterranean culture is demonstrated by Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society, ed. John G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), pp. 21-77. An excellent overview of the work done in applying these insights to New Testament study between 1981 and 1993 can be found in Halvor Moxnes, “Honor and Shame: A Reader’s Guide,” BTB 23 (1993): 167-76. See also Aristotle Rhetoric 2.6.26 on the general power of shame for social control: “There are many things which they either do or do not do owing to the feeling of shame which these men [i.e., the public whose opinion matters to the doers] inspire.”
of the Jewish sages are led to value giving alms and pursuing justice in one’s 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).

Honor is a dynamic and relational concept. On the one hand, an individual can think of himself or herself as honorable based on his or her conviction that he or she has embodied those actions and qualities that the group values as “honorable,” as the marks of a valuable person. This aspect of honor is really “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 matched by corresponding respect from 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 set of beliefs and values, and would evaluate people both inside and outside that group accordingly.

The meaning of shame is somewhat more complicated. If honor signifies respect for being the kind of person and doing the kinds of things the group values, shame signifies, in the first instance, being seen 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 society. His worth is impugned; he “loses face”; he is disgraced and viewed as a disgrace. In a second sense, however, shame can signify a positive character trait, namely a sensitivity to the opinion of the group such that one avoids those actions that bring disgrace. Out of shame of this kind, a woman refuses an adulterous invitation; 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. Readers living in the United States or Western Europe may recognize immediately that we live at some dis-
tance from the honor culture of the first-century Greco-Roman world (including the Semitic peoples in the East). In our culture the bottom line for decision-making is not always (indeed, perhaps rarely) identifying the honorable thing to do. In the corporate world, for example, the “profitable” frequently acts as the central value. Considerations of right and wrong are also prominent, but these are based on internalized values or norms rather than values enforced by overt approval or disapproval by the larger society. Typically we do not talk about honor and shame much (the one place where I’ve recently observed honor as an openly discussed, coordinating value was at a service honoring a newly inducted Eagle Scout), but we do wrestle with “worth,” with “self-esteem,” with the push and pull of “what other people will think.” The vocabulary has greatly receded, but the dynamics are very much still present. We want to know that we are valuable, worthwhile people, and we want to give the impression of being such.³

Our move toward individualism (and the accompanying reluctance to communicate openly with others, especially those beyond our circle of acquaintances, friends and kin) has contributed greatly to tempering 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 intellec-

³It has been popular in recent literature 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. (America has also been described as a “rights” culture.) Such lines cannot, however, be drawn in a hard and fast way. The ancient world knew both the experience of shame and feelings of guilt as deterrents to behavior (see Eric R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational [Berkeley: University of California, 1966]), just as the modern person can wrestle both with guilt and shame (see Robert Karan, “Shame,” The Atlantic Monthly, February 1992, pp. 40–70).
tuals ("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 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 (a greater value than even 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 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,*

---

reputation (doxa), honor (timē) and praise (epainos), together with verb and adjectival forms, are frequent. Their antonyms, dishonor (aiσχονε), reproach (ονείδος), scorn (καταφρονēσις), slander (blasphē mia), 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 starting places only. 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 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), a fact 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. 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," and thus insults (or assaults on a person’s honor) often involve one’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 Egypt, native Egyptians were regarded as less honorable than the Greeks who comprised the ruling class. Honor can also be ascribed later in life, whether 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), through grants of special citizenship status or through 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 and 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 as well as ascribed. 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 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. 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” (agon).

The challenge-riposte is essentially an attempt to gain honor at someone else’s expense by publicly posing a challenge that cannot be answered. When a challenge has been posed, the challenged must make some sort of response (and no response is also considered a response). It falls to the bystanders to decide whether or not the challenged person successfully defended his (and, indeed, usually “his”) own honor. 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. 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’ 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 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 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 with hygiene but with purity laws), so the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ honor—what kind of teacher can he be if his disciples transgress the revered “tradition of the elders” (that was attaining a status equal to the written Torah)? Jesus responds, this time with a counterchallenge. He challenges the Pharisees’ honor as followers of 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 the 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 appraisingly.

Such exchanges basically characterize Jesus’ relationship with the religious leaders and groups with which he is, in essence, in competition.7

7 In Luke’s Gospel alone, see 4:11-13; 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
Even those scribes who appear to ask a polite and "innocent" question are seen actually 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. An individual’s honor can also be 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. Hence 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. Enemies once subjected 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 is an important signal of 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’"—fixes...
Jesus in the position of highest honor in the Jewish and Christian cosmos (Mk 12:35-36; Heb 1:13; 12:2). Clothing also is 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’ 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). 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” 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).

8 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 claim to this honor.

9 Blaspheme means, essentially, to hurt the reputation of someone.

10 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.
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 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 B.C., Thucydides wrote that the most honorable woman is the one least talked about by men (Hist. 2.45.2). 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 B.C. Jerusalem, Ben Sira is expressing the same delineation of a woman’s sphere and honor (Sir 26:13-18).11

The psalmists give God honor as they “bless his name,” pray that the “name” of Israel or the “name” of the 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.

11 There are some notable exceptions to this general rule. 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 like “manly,” being based on the word for a male person) than men. Plutarch dedicates a lengthy essay, “On the Bravery of Women,” to stories in which women’s courage (“manliness”) exceeded that of the men around them and is held up as exemplary to men and women alike. Women are therefore certainly not excluded from seeking to embody courage, generosity or justice. Indeed, they are encouraged to be virtuous in these ways as well. 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 18:63).
The reason for this relegation of women to private or nonmale areas is rooted in the ancient conception of a woman’s place in the world. She is not seen as an independent entity or agent but as embedded in the identity and honor of some male (her father, if she is unmarried, 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, she actually brings shame upon her husband or father. A daughter or a wife was 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 strong words about the potential loss incurred through women (Sir 26:10-12).

Despite the progressiveness of the New Testament authors with regard to attacking 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 female honor within the pages of the New Testament. Thus 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, where Paul attempts to convince the Corinthian Christians that women must pray with their heads covered, also reflects the view that female honor is embedded in male honor in naming 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; Tit 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 passages are repeatedly in the forefront of 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 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)

These passages continue to be the topic of endless debate, but relevant for our concern here is the fact that they reflect the same conviction artic-
ulated by Plutarch, namely that a woman’s words are for her husband’s ears, not for the public ear.\textsuperscript{12}

**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 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 all do their part to promote the health and survival of the group.

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. The desire to be honored and to avoid being disgraced kept most citizen soldiers in the thick of the battle, preferring death with honor to safety with disgrace. Because most public works and civic improvements depended on the initiative of wealthy citizens, generosity (benefaction) was also highly and visibly honored. The desire for honor made the

\textsuperscript{12}There is a notable discrepancy 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. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul’s chief concern appears to be the impression that will be made on the visitor to the congregation—the one “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 reason for this is first to diminish the slander against the Christian group (namely that it “turned the world upside down” and was a source of instability and trouble for “good” people), and second, to make the group more attractive to the people around it. Making 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 prophecy 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.
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 made for 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), 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 through insult, reproach, physical abuse, confiscation of property—at worst, 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. Honoring and shaming became the dominant means of enforcing all those values that were not actually legislated and of reinforcing those values that were covered 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 a given 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 absorb the group values without question.

This, however, is not the situation of the first-century Mediterranean world, particularly in its cities where there is a wide representation of the various cultures available in that world concentrated 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

---

13Nor is it the situation of much of the modern world, in which the complexity of maintaining a particular group culture is made all the more challenging by strong emphases on multiculturalism and pluralism.
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 Herod Agrippa 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. In Palestine and especially among communities of Jews living in the Diaspora, negotiating commitment to Jewish values and making a life in the midst of a Gentile world were challenging tasks. There were also voluntary groups promoting their own set of values and their own distinctive culture. Among this category one would find the Greco-Roman philosophical schools like Stoicism, Epicureanism and Cynicism as well as 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 set of values and beliefs. Sometimes these values would overlap (and the strategy of both Jewish and Christian apologists was often to stress the areas of overlap and commonality). Frequently, however, the values 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 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 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. This made for keen social tension and pressure on the

---

14The century of “independence” under the Hasmonean house (the family of Judas Macabaeus; see 1 Macc for the establishment of the dynasty) could be considered an exception, save for the fact that by that point already more Jews were living outside of Palestine than within. They were thus still, by and large, living as an ethnic subculture within a larger empire.
individual member of a particular group.

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.

Even while Ben Sira teaches this saying to his students, however, those students will experience the ridicule and censure of non-Jews 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 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 barbaric suspicions of (or even hatred of) other races. This became another source of ridicule and insult directed against Jews, whose very way of life (the Torah) came to be despised as a body of xenophobic and retrogressive laws.\textsuperscript{15}

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 his Jewish peers, 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 by many Jews during the Hellenistic period.\textsuperscript{16} 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.

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

\textsuperscript{15}Prominent examples of ancient anti-Jewish sentiments can be found in Josephus Ag. Ap. 211-212; Tacitus Hist. 5.1-5; Juvenal Sat. 14.100-104; and Diodorus of Sicily Bib. Hist. 34.1-4; 40.3.4.

\textsuperscript{16}See, for example, the eagerness even of priestly families in Jerusalem itself to remove the mark of circumcision, to throw off the Mosaic restrictions on their dealings with a Gentile world, and to achieve status as a Greek city in the eyes of the Greek elite in Antioch (1 Macc 1:11-15; 2 Macc 4:7-15 especially noteworthy is 2 Macc 4:15, "disdaining the honors prized by their ancestors and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige"). There are several stories of individuals who apostatized from their Jewish roots and became highly honored and influential in the "larger" arena of politics, for example, Tiberius Julius Alexander, the nephew of the devout Old Testament scholar Philo of Alexandria. Tiberius Alexander, having left behind Torah observance, went on to become prefect of Alexandria and, in A.D. 46-48, governor of the province of Judea.
the New Testament. 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. 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 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 threatens to erode individual commitment. 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 to a minority group (such as the church or 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 these relationships must outweigh any advantages that might be perceived in exchanging this network of support and affirmation for the "friendship of the world."

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 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

---

17A detailed analysis of these techniques at work in Plato, Seneca, Epictetus (three Greco-Roman philosophers), Jeshua Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and 4 Maccabees (three Jewish works produced between 210 b.c. and a.d. 70) can be found in chapter three of my Despising Shame.

18The 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 and extending affirmation to himself or herself on the basis of living up to those internalized norms.
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 can carry no weight (if the despicable despise you, what does that matter?).

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 culture (which is one of the aims of the shaming techniques).

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 based on the affirmation or demonstration that such a course would result either in 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 that figure 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.19

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 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.

19 Analysis of these strategies takes us into the study of classical rhetoric. The handbooks on rhetoric written between the fourth century B.C. (Aristotle) and first century A.D. (Quintilian) give modern readers a great tool for understanding how an ancient argument was constructed and how it would affect its hearers—how it would appeal to their minds and their emotions as it sought to lead them to take a certain course of action. These handbooks were written to teach orators how to persuade their hearers to do what the orator wanted them to do. This is helpful because the New Testament texts are in fact all seeking to persuade the hearers to do something: Gospels seek to shape community life and individual behavior, just as epistles and visionary works like Revelation try to move the hearers toward or away from certain actions (or to reinforce certain values). While few New Testament authors are likely candidates for formal rhetorical training, all of them would have had the benefit of the informal training of hearing orators at work, of learning inductively the art of persuasion. Looking at how persuasion happened, and specifically at how orators would appeal to honor in the course of their attempts at persuasion, throws much light on how the New Testament texts would have been heard by, and would have made an impact on, their first-century hearers. For a starting point, please see David A. deSilva, The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 14-26.