

Individualist vs Collectivist Cultures and First Century Israel

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In chapter 5 of their book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible*, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien illustrate a difference between individualist cultures (which tend to focus on innocence and guilt) and collectivist cultures (which focus on honor and shame).¹ Allegedly, Westerners believe "we should be internally motivated to do the right thing," and accordingly would suffer internal punishment if we do wrong.² This stands in contrast to honor/shame cultures in which people choose behaviors based upon the expectations of their society. It is not an inner sense of guilt that drives people's actions, but rather the exterior pressure felt via the opinions of others.³ As Joshua Moon describes, in these cultures "status is a near-tangible commodity to be gained, lost, traded, amassed or squandered."⁴ Bruce J. Malina breaks it down even further, identifying two types of honor, "ascribed honor" which refers to the honor with which someone is born, and "acquired honor" which is more prone to have ups and downs based upon decisions made and actions taken in life.⁵

Richards and O'Brien contend that biblical culture was based in honor and shame. As one example, they cite Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. According to their argument,

¹ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 113.

² Ibid, 115.

³ Ibid, 116.

⁴ Joshua Moon, "Honor and Shame in Hosea's Marriages," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol. 39.3 (2015): 338.

⁵ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 30.

“It was only when he was confronted by another that he realized his sin.”⁶ Fitting this event into an honor/shame framework may be taking the evidence further than it warrants. Richard N.

Longenecker proposed what Paul may have been going through.

He could not escape the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, whose followers he had been persecuting, was alive, exalted, and in some manner to be associated with God the Father, whom Israel worshiped. Therefore, he had to revise his whole estimate of the life, teaching, and death of the Nazarene, because God had vindicated him.⁷

Longenecker describes an inner conviction. What Paul once had denied was now, in light of what he had just witnessed, undeniable. Furthermore, Richards and O’Brien’s statement that Paul was “confronted by another” only vaguely fits the encounter into an honor/shame framework. Paul was not confronted by a member of his family or community. He was confronted by Jesus Christ, who he believed to be dead, under startling circumstances. This meeting was a direct challenge, on a propositional level, to everything he had believed about Jesus. Even a Westerner would likely react in a similar fashion to Paul under the circumstances. Thus, the text does not appear to demand an honor/shame motivation behind Paul’s conversion.

Another example given by the authors involved the various questioners of Jesus. As they explained, “Public questions were never for information. If one wanted information, you asked privately.”⁸ They then cite the examples of Jesus’ disciples and Nicodemus all coming to him with sincere questions, all doing so privately.

⁶ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 117.

⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), in *The Christ Encounter on Damascus Road (9:1-9)*, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lutherrice.edu:2048/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE3ODExNTZfX0FO0?sid=8df7c21f-12e7-442d-85e3-124fe5471a93@pdc-v-sessmgr06&vid=0&format=EK&rid=3> (accessed January 29, 2019).

⁸ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 129.

In this regard the authors may somewhat overstate their case, but they also indicate an important cultural factor that will sometimes bear on our interpretation of scripture. There certainly are examples in which questions asked in public seem sincere. For example, in John chapter 6, a large crowd follows Jesus to the far side of the Sea of Galilee after he had performed the feeding of the 5,000. While Jesus appropriately identified that they were primarily looking for another free meal, several members of the crowd asked questions of Jesus that, for all appearances, were borne out of a sincere desire to learn from him. For example, nothing in the text indicates that, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” was intended as a trick, or in any way a public challenge to Jesus.⁹ Yet this and other questions were clearly asked in a highly public setting. Thus, it does not appear that all public questions were necessarily contests as the authors claim.

However, when Jesus was questioned by Jewish leaders in public, it does seem that their intention may have been to challenge him and publicly shame him. When the Pharisees asked Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar, Matthew explicitly tells us that their intentions were not sincere.¹⁰ Honor/shame principles can help shed light on why those in authority were so insistent on ending Jesus’ ministry. As Richards and O’Brien state, “They had been challenging Jesus publicly ..., and every time they ‘lost,’ they lost honor. They were tired of it, and they wanted their honor back.”¹¹

The drive for honor likely was an important factor in biblical societies, but it was not necessarily always the central concern. F. Gerald Downing argues that it “is *an* issue of which

⁹ John 6:28 (NIV).

¹⁰ Matthew 22:15 (NIV).

¹¹ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 130.

we need to be aware, but that it is only dominant, central (the ‘core’) when, and where, it is clearly shown to be.”¹² Thus, while some of the examples given in this chapter may not definitively support the authors’ conclusions, and while those conclusions may be somewhat overstated, there is important core consideration that should be taken into account when reading scripture.

¹² F. Gerald Downing, “‘Honor’ among Exegetes,” *CBQ*, vol. 61 (1999): 55.