

# **Book Review: *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture***

DeSilva, David A. 2022. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. xv,388 pp. ISBN 978-1-5140-0386-2. Approx. 595.66 ZAR (31.49 USD). Paperback.

This work is the second edition of an earlier version published in 2000. After twelve years of circulation during which David A. deSilva used it to teach in various academic fora and institutions, he saw a need for the improvement and expansion of the content, and the addition of existing literature on the subject matter (pp. x–xi). The present work is composed of eight chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. DeSilva's core aim is exposing New Testament scholars to the cultural conundrum and nexus of the New Testament era. This is to help interpreters delineate the meaning of texts with a cultural emphasis and to avoid out-of-context interpretations. It provides an alternative and addition to the usual historical, social, and literary contexts that have been the dominant consideration in New Testament interpretation. The author defines culture as,

[That which] includes those values, ways of relating, and ways of looking at the world that its members share that provide all framework for

all communication. The readers of the New Testament shared certain values, such as honor; ethical codes that shaped and maintained typical social forms of relationship, such as patronage and kingship; and ways of ordering the world, expressed frequently in terms of purity and pollution. If we are to hear the texts correctly, we must apply ourselves to the culture out of which, and to which they spoke. We need to recognize the cultural cues the authors have hoven into their strategies and instructions. (pp. 1–2)

This definition by deSilva observes that humans relate and communicate with others within their ethos/tenet of life, and that the New Testament was communicated to receptors that understand the authors' values and stratagems of communication. These have to be understood by interpreters of the New Testament documents for context-effective interpretations.

Chapter one concentrates on how personhood is determined by the connection to fundamental values of society and the honor and shame it could attract. DeSilva relies on the propositions of Seneca and Aristotle to argue that people in ancient Mediterranean society would often ask the question of what values would be attained and emphasized before taking a decision or action. Persons who prioritized pleasure were classed with animals that were governed by their passions and desires. Hence, the art of persuasion is focused on societal values against personal interests (pp. 10–13). Shame connotes being regarded as less valuable based on an act or decision that is contrary to the values of society. DeSilva states that

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.... '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. (pp. 14–15)

Avoiding shame requires the sacrifice of personal interests and desires. Consideration for the good of the other and the entire community/group brings communal benefit to all. Honor or shame starts with one's parents, place of birth, ethnicity, profession/occupation, gender, and religion, among other factors. Whether they are good or bad can be changed by the moral character of the individual. Honor and shame are the critical elements of group values and identity (p. 36).

In chapter two, deSilva applies his findings concerning honor and shame in ancient Mediterranean society to how the New Testament authors communicated the message to their readers with the objective of bringing persons considered to be deviant back to the norm of societal values. The authors of the New Testament engage the language and vocabulary associated with honor and shame to articulate the Christian value system. In doing this, they honor persons who demonstrate love, faith, hope, service, and humility. Conversely, those who do otherwise were left to shame (pp. 35–38). The honor of Jesus was derived from God by the various affirmations in the Gospels, where God is portrayed to be “well pleased” with Jesus (Matt 3:17, 17:5). It is to imply that God will be pleased with the followers of Jesus (p. 72).

DeSilva compares honor and shame in the ancient world and the contemporary church. He indicates that it was easier for the early church to whip up patronage for the Christian value system of honor and shame because it became a dominant culture which many would like to be identified with. A similar situation pertains to communities that share a common ethos with the first-century CE society. However, the case is

different in North America and Western Europe where the majority culture is increasingly defined by “materialism, individualism, and relativism (p. 84) ... that holds up position, wealth, and ownership of prestige items as measures for self-respect and that aggressively promotes individual ‘rights’ while marginalizing traditional values as ‘oppressive’” (p. 85). The situation places the Christian faith within a context of dominant and majority cultures that do not share the primary value of the New Testament.

Chapter three focuses on patronage and reciprocity in a social and grace context. The Greco-Roman world was restricted in terms of goods and services, and access to them was based on personal acquaintances and bureaucratic networks. It necessitates a relationship of reciprocated exchange. The patron is available to provide, and the client does everything to enhance the relationship by demonstrating respect and loyalty, and providing services as may be required. This occurs among persons of unequal social status (pp. 98–99). There is also a friendship relationship between patrons of equal social standing. Some befriend public officers such as judges so that they may give favorable outcomes to their clients. The concept of reciprocity was also present among the poor agrarian rural communities in that they helped each other during harvest. Patronage and friendship among the elite and the poor is well documented, but this is not the case among poor rural folks. Besides personal patronage, there is also public benefaction where the wealthy elite builds theatres for the common good of the public (p. 103).

Grace (*charis*) is at home in the social context of patron-client relationships, friendship, and public benefactor in the first century CE. Grace was not primarily a religious concept but a social discourse. It is the willingness of a patron to grant some benefit or relief to another person or persons. In rhetorical terms, it is defined as offering help to the needy

without expecting any reciprocal benefit. It refers to a gift from a public benefactor. Grace also denotes the gift, and the gratitude expressed to the giver of the gift (pp. 107–108). Jesus was presented as God’s gift of grace, and benefactors need to accept him in order to benefit from the grace (pp. 123–124).

Chapter four applies patronage and grace discussed in the previous chapter to the New Testament. DeSilva argues that Jesus and his earliest disciples ministered within the first-century context of patronage and friendship. A network of grace relationships was a reality in the time of Jesus and the disciples, as demonstrated in the beneficent character of the centurion who built a synagogue for the Jews (Luke 7:1–10) (p. 128). God was presented as a benefactor and patron to the recipients of the epistles. It reflects the “broad tendency shared by Greeks, Romans, and Jews to conceptualize God or the gods as the greatest benefactors and worship as a medium by which to honor and gratefully acknowledge divine beneficence” (p. 129). In this worship, Jesus is the mediator of God’s favor through his death. Clients who accept and worship have a new identity and kinship which determine how they behave and relate to various issues in society. This requires a new way of ordering and language of purity devoid of elements and thoughts that pollute as indicated in chapters five to eight.

The exploration of four critical cultures—honor, patronage, kinship, and purity—is essential for a contextual interpretation of the New Testament documents. It equips readers with the necessary skills for the interpretation of the New Testament because they give reasons why the authors communicated in the manner they did and the responses that ensued from the audiences and recipients.

The strength of this work remains in the fact that deSilva embarked on an exploration of cultural values and applied the findings to the New Testament to deduce points of agreement and divergence. Before exploring

the important issues of honor, patronage, kinship, and purity, he first lays a foundation of honor and shame in the first-century CE context (ch. 1) and then in the New Testament from the Gospels to The Book of Revelation (ch. 2). This provides essential insight. It makes the New Testament come alive in its historical and cultural context. This work gives further credence and a practical approach to cultural textures of socio-rhetorical criticism propounded by Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Textures of Text: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (1996a); *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (1996b); *Beginnings and Developments in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (2004). It emphasizes the Jewish culture of honor, patronage, kinship, and purity as a dominant culture in ancient Mediterranean society, and subsequently used as a means of discourse composition in the New Testament. This makes the New Testament document resonate well with persons who are conversant with the Jewish culture. The work of deSilva goes beyond New Testament cultural interpretation because the culture of honor, patronage, kinship, and purity can be traced to the patriarchal period. Hence, it is also useful for the cultural interpretation of some genres in the Hebrew Bible.

The weakness of the work is the lack of rhetorical reasoning underpinning honor, patronage, kinship, and purity because they are critical inputs in rhetorical criticism of the New Testament which deSilva is aware of (deSilva 1998). Does honor, patronage, kinship, and purity in the New Testament present a rhetography or rhetology? DeSilva indicates that the reasons for a second edition of the book were based on comments received when the first edition was used to teach at various academic fora and the discovery of additional literature on the topic (pp. x–xi). It would be more insightful for deSilva to give the first edition to some scholars in the field for review. These reviews would add up to the factors that influenced the second edition and be referred to in the second edition on the same tenets

of the academic fora. It will draw more attention to the second edition.

David A. deSilva considers the ancient Mediterranean world as one cultural group. This is problematic for the Gospels and the book of Acts because these books engaged audiences with varied backgrounds. The interpretation of the Gospels has shifted from a high-level consideration of principles and cultures and now focusses on the specifics. For example, the ancient Mediterranean world is composed of Jewish culture, Greek culture, and Roman culture. Although there are similarities, no doubt, there are stark differences that serve as a unique feature of each culture. DeSilva did not take note of this uniqueness of the cultures, else his subtitle would read “Unlocking the New Testament Cultures,” and not *Culture*. The approach used by deSilva creates the potential for minority cultures to be ignored or neglected. A third edition of the book must critically consider this or give a cogent justification for his approach. That notwithstanding, this second edition of *Honor, Patronage, Kingship, and Purity* is recommended for scholars and students of the New Testament who are interested in exegesis and interpretation in the cultural context of the ancient Mediterranean society.

## Works Cited

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