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Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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This Emory doctoral dissertation under the direction of Luke Timothy Johnson claims to provide "a thorough description of the socio-rhetorical strategy of the letter [to the Hebrews] as a whole and a clearer picture of the social situation envisioned and promoted in the letter through its counter definitions of honor and disgrace" (p. 27). The first chapter seeks "to determine exactly what is relevant to discussions of honor" (p. 23). Chapter two goes on to "explore rhetorical handbooks in detail as a means of gaining insight into the strategic use of honor and shame language" (p. 24), while chapter 3 examines "the use of honor and shame language among groups which have set themselves apart from the surrounding society . . . self-avowed minority cultures," such as Stoics, Cynics, and Jews (p. 25). In the second half of the investigation (chapters 4-6) the author turns to Hebrews, following the suggestion of rhetorical handbooks: chapter 4 looks to "how the author seeks to detach the community from the outside world's evaluation of their honor" (p. 26); chapter 5 "explores the author's appeal to the addressees sensitivity to the honor of others, specifically the honor of God," notably in terms of patronage (p. 26); and chapter 6 describes how the author constructs "an alternate court of reputation, building on the Jewish conviction that God is the ultimate significant Other" (p. 27).

The body of the work, chapters 2-6, presents its "rhetorical" component in the form of a literary-critical reading of pertinent passages of Hebrews through lenses provided by presumably illustrative citations from ancient rhetoricians. As a result, the work reads like a TLG (Thesaurus Linguae Graecae) tour of parallels to Hebrews in narrative form, with a focus on the categories of honor and shame, and to a lesser extent, of patron and client. The rationale for compiling these parallels is "to guard against the pitfalls of applying modern social scientific constructs to an ancient text" by having "the rhetorical handbooks provide a window into the Greek culture out of which Hebrews is fashioned" (p. 24).

The author seems to have been taught that a bigger or deeper pile of intuitively chosen parallels is the key to interpreting ancient documents. The naive belief that a collection of passages intuitively chosen as parallel to some NT passage thereby explains and clarifies that passage remains what it is -- a naive belief. The fact is that meanings come from social systems, including meanings in the past. And without some insight into the social systems of antiquity, the meanings are more those of the interpreter than of past authors. Moreover, the belief that a citation of a passage from the ancient world is self-explanatory is a delusion as long as the social system within which the passage makes sense is not available to the modern scholar (reader).

Further, all those documents are high-context documents, that is documents that are sketchy and impressionistic, leaving much to the reader's or hearer's imagination. The reason for this is that they come from high context social systems in which people have been socialized within a narrow range of widely shared and rather unchanging social institutions and cultural cues. Thus high-context parallels chosen to illustrate high-context documents are as opaque as the document to be interpreted. It is rather ethnocentric to think that alien and ancient documents can be understood simply by reading them. While the author is concerned about imposing "modern social scientific constructs," he has no problem at all with the implicit constructs he himself employs to choose and then to assess his evidence in accordance with the nineteenth-century historical-critical ideology that marks this type of social history.

To put it mildly, the author is singularly uninformed when it comes to the social sciences, an area he claims to critique. He dabbles in honor and shame sanctions and structures of patronage, but offers no indication of a general understanding of social systems, institutions, and values, much less of the specifics of social sanctions and patronage that form the burden of his contribution. Terms such as "value," "individualism," "sanction," "minority," "marginal," "community," and the like are left undefined and, more often than not, used anachronistically.

For example, take the term "minority." According to A. M. Rose in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, ad verbum*, "minorities" are groups that lack power, are regarded with contempt by the majority, and are insulated or placed on a socially or culturally inferior level. I do not believe any of these characteristics of modern minorities apply to the group addressed in Hebrews. And I am not alone in this view; see, e.g., Lars Hartman, "Humble and Confident: On the So-called Philosophers in Colossians," in David Hellholm, Halvor Moxnes, and Turid Karlsen Seim (eds.) *Mighty Minorities? Minorities in Early Christianity -- Positions and Strategies* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995) pp. 25-39, and a number of other authors in that volume; similarly, Ted Robert Gurr (*Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* [Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1993] pp. 3-33) does not think the term "minority" appropriate in cross-cultural comparison; he prefers to call such groups "communal

groups" rather than minorities, since the term "minority" seems to be a culturally specific, U.S. social perception.

"Socio-rhetorical criticism" in this dissertation has totally avoided any informed and serious involvement with the social sciences in general, or with the social-scientific interpretation of the Bible. One looks in vain for a reasoned understanding of what social scientific criticism is about. In fact the author ignores the wide range of studies now available in social scientific criticism that bear directly on his work (e.g., cumulatively better modern studies on honor and shame; Roninger and Eisenstadt on patronage; Cunningham on *wasta*). Even a cursory reading of John H. Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) would have provided useful insight into what the persons mentioned in his first chapter (and many, many others) are concerned about. (10/96)