DeSilva, David A.

*Bearing Christ's Reproach: The Challenge of Hebrews in an Honor Culture*


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DeSilva’s book is a digest of his doctoral dissertation which was published with the title: *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 152, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995. The author applies a type of analysis that combines the methods of social-scientific approach and rhetorical criticism. The book focuses on the social status of the recipients of the epistle and on the values of honor and shame (τιμή καὶ αἰοχύνη) that according to DeSilva direct the language of the text. This study proposes the cultural background of honor and shame, that according to cultural anthropology they were principal values of first century Mediterranean world.

DeSilva, in the whole book, examines the rhetorical techniques of the author of Hebrews in comparison with the principles and methods of the rhetorical handbooks of the ancient world. Therefore he turns to Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, Stoics and Quintillian. Honor and shame are examined also in the books of the Old Testament (Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira, 4 Maccabees and Proverbs). In the first chapter, the author concentrates on the meaning of terms like honor, dishonor, shame, fear, outrage etc., and their position in the argumentation of Hebrews. Honor/shame analysis is required for a fuller understanding of the epistle’s challenge to its original hearers. Cultural anthropological models and the conclusions that derive from their application can help to this specific way of understanding Hebrews. DeSilva believes that the epistle belongs to epideictic rhetoric kind of speech as this kind is the most appropriate category which is connected with honor/shame language. During that period, Christians had a very specific social status. Christians were a minority culture with particular characteristics and ideas that marginalized them from the world they lived. I agree with author’s view that the Mediterranean person is a group-oriented person. This model is sovereign in New Testament’s writings.
Chapter two deals with the situation of the addressees. We learn from the text of Hebrews that the recipient community was in front of the danger some of its members to abandon their faith because of the difficulties they had already passed. The author of the epistle is trying to persuade them to endure all these difficulties by stressing the example of Christ’s Passion (Heb 12:2). The main difficulties of the scholarly research to identify the recipient community and the persecution that is implied still remained. Social descriptions of these conditions are untrustworthy. It seems to me very important that the relationship between believers and Christ is placed on another level, that of honor and shame, or the model of patron and clients. These models as practiced in New Testament interpretation, help us to understand the behavior and life of the ancient people. This way the conflict between the Christian minority culture and the larger society is better understood. In the eyes of the pagan community the Christian community have been considered antisocial and its Christian members deviants. Their faith means loss of their status, property and honor.

The basic aim of chapter three is to analyze the author’s strategic of presenting to the addressees the true way of despising the shame that had already been experienced. One characteristic example of DeSilva’s approach is the history of martyrs of chapter eleven. The most rhetorical point of Hebrews, is viewed under the light of anthropological methods of analysis. The author of the book employs sociological models which have been used in New Testament interpretation by J. Elliott, B. Malina and J. Neyrey. Apart from the persons and events to which the author of Hebrews is referred, Christ’s Incarnation and Passion (Heb. 12:2) compose the most characteristic example of honor for the believers according to honor and shame language. It’s true that faith remains the way of honor (p. 46). It sounds very useful the social description of sin as the renunciation of the fellowship with the people of God for a sake of a return to peace and favor in the unbelieving world.

The sociological model of Patron and client is also very interesting in chapter four. This relationship was very common in ancient Greco-Roman culture. Anthropologists speak of a patronal society that was supported by an infrastructure of networks between equals or unequals. According to DeSilva’s analysis God is presented as Patron, the addressees as clients and Jesus as Broker (Μεσιτής). This is an alternative way of interpreting his ministry in the world. The above model here focuses on Broker’s personality and role. The honor of God is described in terms of patronage. A second model (exchanging gifts) is used to describe the exchanging of grace to wrath. The recipient community has two opportunities, either to glorify God, which is the proper response to its Benefactor, or to cause His wrath with its improper stance. Here are presented positive or negative examples from Israel’s history because of the visible danger of some members to dishonor God’s grace.
The last chapter examines the true way of honoring God. The central idea is that God is the last Judge of all human deeds. The author of Hebrews uses admonitions to show that all human inquiries will be evaluated by God and not by the present world. This is the basic principle for the alternate court of reputation. For the author of the epistle, the believers’ honor is grounded in their relationship to Christ. DeSilva presents the conditions that addressees had experienced with the application of the language of honor and shame based in the prominent eschatology of Hebrews. This bipolar evaluation of time between the already and not yet, the present court and the future is viewed using a socio-rhetorical approach. An interpretation of this kind enables the interpreter to take full advantage of all the positives aspects of methods of interpretation of the texts and to apply conversation among them. Analysis of the social context of the text enables the scholar to move from his world to the world of the author and the first recipients of Hebrews or, in other words, to shed more light to the much different and complex original framework of the text and to the community that created it. DeSilva inaugurates a new direction in the hermeneutics of Hebrews. His method brings into foreground aspects that had never been appeared.