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THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Of all the books of the Old and New Testaments, the four Gospels are probably the most read and the best understood. With minimal instruction in first-century history, politics, and geography, one can be profoundly moved by reading the Evangelists' accounts of the ministry and teachings of the Savior. Because of our familiarity with the text and the relative ease of understanding it (as opposed to books like Isaiah or Revelation), we may assume that for the most part we understand it. However, most of us read with twenty-first century eyes and impose the values of a modern, postindustrial society. We assume universality based on common humanity. This is an erroneous assumption.

The first-century Mediterranean world differed vastly from our world today and the difference is not only one of technology. We have different core values, which means that to some degree we actually think differently and feel differently than a citizen of the ancient Mediterranean world. To fully understand the New Testament, we must bridge this sociocultural gap. To this end, this chapter examines the ancient Mediterranean world

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in terms of honor and shame, patronage, and a limited-goods society, particularly as these things influence the meaning of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. This chapter also touches on some physical features of the Holy Land and on how the people of Jesus' time would have viewed this extraordinary sermon.

Honor-Shame

We can determine the core values of a society by asking what concerns predominately influence its decision making, what words and issues dominate the value vocabulary, and what is most disruptive if lost.[1] In the ancient Mediterranean world, the value that pervaded all society and influenced all social interactions was honor. It was honor that gave social standing and clout. It was familial honor that determined whom one could marry, with whom one could do business, what functions one could attend, and what religious roles one could play. No one would freely associate with a person, particularly in a covenant relationship, unless that person's honor was good.[2] Consequently, a person's good name (his reputation or his honor rating) was his most important asset.

Honor can be defined as "the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) plus that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group."[3] This two-pronged dimension of honor means that honor is not simply self-esteem. It does not and cannot exist without a group to affirm it. This is a difficult concept for many who live in the United States, which is primarily an individualistic rather than a collectivist culture.[4] In the United States, we place great value on individuality, independence, and autonomy. The individualism that characterizes us "was perhaps totally absent from the societies represented in the New Testament."[5] Instead, these societies had a strong group orientation, deriving their identity from the group to which they belonged. The group—be it family, clan, or village—communicated what was expected and proper. In fact, the group served as a kind of external conscience. A meaningful existence depended upon being embedded in and respected by the group. Additionally, the needs of the group were primary to the needs of the individual. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman state, "This is not rooted in totalitarianism or Orwellian 'group-think,' but in survival; a peasant family and village cannot sustain itself if everyone 'does their

own thing.'"[6] Thus, it is no surprise that the core value of honor required a group to affirm it and even make its existence possible. "Honour is not honour unless publicly claimed, displayed and acknowledged."[7]

In an honor-shame society, it would appear that shame is the antithesis of honor. However, it is not that simple. There is both positive and negative shame. Honor is a male virtue. Positive shame is the corresponding female virtue. It is the concern for one's own reputation and sensitivity to the things that might bring disgrace.[8] "To have shame in this sense is an eminently positive value."[9] On the other hand, negative shame is not meritorious. It is the antithesis of honor. It is not *having* shame, but *being* shamed. When a person is shamed, that person loses honor. In an honor-shame society, being publicly humiliated is a devastating and injurious experience.

Ascribed and Acquired Honor

How does one obtain honor? It can be both ascribed and acquired. Ascribed honor is the honor one inherits at birth. A child inherits the combined honor of his father, which comes from his social eminence, and the positive shame of his mother, which comes from her ethical goodness, particularly her sexual purity.[10] In addition, a child inherits the acquired honor of his ancestors, which is passed from generation to generation. This inherited honor must be maintained and defended by the current generation at all costs. Honor can also be ascribed to a person latter in life by a notable person of power, such as an aristocrat, a king, an emperor, or God. This is done by public declaration. At Christ's baptism, God the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Malina and Rohrbaugh note that "designating Jesus as 'Son of God' is an honor declaration of the highest sort."[11] In addition to public declaration, a person of substantial honor could ascribe honor to another through such things as grants of citizenship, adoption, and the bestowal of an office. The Roman emperor Augustus was adopted posthumously at the age of eighteen by his great-uncle Julius Caesar, an action that not only made him Caesar's heir but also significantly increased his honor rating.[12] God the Father ascribed honor to the resurrected Christ by granting him an exalted office, a position of authority signified by sitting at the right hand of God. In terms of honor, this is significant. Christ

had been crucified. This was not only an excruciating death; it was an intentionally shaming one. Moreover, it was nearly inconceivable that one who had suffered the ignominy and shame of crucifixion could be the Messiah (see Deuteronomy 21:22–23). Thus Jewish leaders pushed for crucifixion (see John 18:31, 32) not only to get rid of Christ, but also to discredit him. However, by raising Christ from the dead and giving him a place at his right hand, God reversed the honor assessment of the world, affirmed his role as Messiah, and granted him transcendent honor.

In addition to ascription, honor can also be acquired. One way to acquire honor is through good works. Within the Jewish culture, a fundamental expression of good works was obedience to the law. An honorable man or woman was Torah observant. In the ancient Mediterranean world, good works also included financial contributions for constructing and maintaining public buildings and for sponsoring festivals, public games, and dramatic performances.[13] Wealthy individuals in the ancient Mediterranean world made lavish endowments to their cities because they viewed wealth as a means to honor. Honor was acquired through beneficence, not through possession.

In response to municipal endowments, cities would show their gratitude through public recognition: through proclamations of gratitude, seats of honor at a theater, public inscriptions, or in exceptional cases a statue of the giver. Even with smaller, personal gifts, public acknowledgment was an essential element of a grateful response. In this context, Christ's statement in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not your alms before men, to be seen of them . . . . Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret" (Matthew 6:1–4), would have been shocking. Christ negated the very reason for giving alms and challenged the conventional expression of a core value.

Acquiring Honor through Challenges

Acquired honor is also obtained through a social contest of challenge and riposte. "Challenge and response is a sort of constant social tug of war, a game of social push and shove."[14] Because this contest existed in all social interactions outside of one's family, anthropologists call the Mediterranean culture an agonistic culture. (The word *agon* is the Greek word for "contest.") The challenge-riposte contest begins with a

challenge—any word, question, gesture, or action that seeks to undermine another person's honor. The challenged person *must* make some sort of response.[15] If the challenged person cannot or does not respond, he faces a devastating loss of honor. It is the role of the bystanders to determine if the challenged person has successfully defended his honor.

There are specific rules that govern challenge-riposte.[16] First, challenge-riposte takes place outside of one's family or kin group. Honor is always presumed to exist within one's family, among all those who are blood relatives. All others are presumed dishonorable unless proved otherwise. It is with these that one must engage in challenge-riposte. In addition, challenges must be public. The challengers must both be males and social equals. Someone who has a lower position on the ladder of social status does not have enough honor to resent the affront of a superior. Conversely, the honor of someone who has a higher status is not challenged by the affront of an inferior. The lower-status person's affront is merely impudence.

Honor challenges may be positive or negative. Positive challenges take the form of gifts or compliments. Though a positive challenge is congenial, it is nevertheless an attempt to enter into the social space of another and to share in some way that person's honor. In such as society, honorable people of equal status never compliment others. As with negative challenges, a positive challenge must be answered or there is a loss of honor. The man who addressed Jesus as "Good Master" (Matthew 19:16) may have issued a positive honor challenge. Bruce J. Malina explains, "Jesus repudiates that compliment, as any honorable man would: 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:17–18)."[17]

Negative challenges include insults, dares, verbal challenges, and physical blows—almost any word, gesture, or action that seeks to undermine the honor of another person. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns that calling another "*raca*" puts one in danger of trial by the Sanhedrin and that those who say, "Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matthew 5:22). Some have suggested that "*raca*" and "fool" were so opprobrious that they merited extreme punishments.[18] However, it is more likely that these were ordinary insults. *Raca* literally means "empty head" and is equivalent to us calling someone stupid. "Fool" is an expression of contempt, similar to "scoundrel" or "jerk." These were condemned

not because they were opprobrious and vile terms but because they were insulting and thus challenges to honor. This suggests that God would prefer a community where hearts are knit together in love over an agonistic community constantly at strife.

A physical assault is a most serious challenge to one's honor. Unless the assaulted person publicly retaliates, his honor is permanently lost. Even the slightest injury must be avenged or honor is severely impugned. Once again, Jesus' directives in the Sermon on the Mount would be astounding to a person in an agonistic society. If someone smites a person on the right cheek, which would require a doubly insulting backhanded slap, the aggrieved person is to offer the left cheek for another blow (see Matthew 5:39). To understand the enormity of Christ's directive, we must remember that challenges are "never, ever, under any circumstances, run from or ignored."[19] Thus the assaulted disciple is not simply to return hostility with humility; he is to willingly capitulate in the honor game. He is to forfeit his honor, his most important asset, for the sake of peace.

To further illustrate the point, Jesus stated, "If any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also" (Matthew 5:40). It was highly dishonorable to go to court, for it was a tacit admission that the persons could not deal with the situation through the normal channels of challenge-riposte and were thus lacking in honor. This was especially the case when the two parties were of the same social status.[20] Thus legal procedures were primarily used to dishonor someone perceived to be of higher, more powerful status. Jesus told those who were sued at the law (presumably someone of higher status) to willingly give the plaintiff (presumably someone of lower status) his coat and his cloak, indicating he has lost the honor challenge. This concession would be almost unimaginable to a New Testament audience.

Jesus also states in the Sermon on the Mount, "Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform [fulfill] unto the Lord thine oaths: but I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: nor by the earth; for it is his footstool. . . . But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay; nay" (Matthew 5:33–35, 37). Old Testament law did not prohibit the swearing of oaths but did require that a person fulfill the oaths he had taken. By the time of Christ, there was a concern "about the devaluation

of oaths through their indiscriminate use and a growing tendency to 'weasel out' of oaths by swearing by less sacred things."[21] Christ categorically denounced all such loopholes. He declared that a person's word—a plain yes or no—should be so reliable that no oath was necessary. This is the heart of the matter. However, it is worth noting that swearing an oath is equivalent to giving a word of honor. Thus, even though integrity is the core issue, honor is involved.

In an honor-shame society, oaths are important because telling the truth is not an absolute virtue. Lying and deception can be honorable and legitimate if the person lied to is an outsider, one who has no right to the truth. "The right to the truth only exists where respect [honor] is due (in the family, to superiors, and not necessarily to equals with whom [one] compete[s] or to inferiors)."[22] To be misleadingly ambiguous, to hedge the truth, and even to brazenly lie to a member of an outgroup is to dishonor and humiliate him, but it is not morally wrong. In a society where lying is not categorically wrong, an oath would be an important attestation.

Declarations of Honor

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, the "blessed are" statements. Pronouncing a person "blessed" (*makarios*) is a declaration of honor.[23] What is particularly interesting about these declarations is that those Christ pronounces as honorable are they who would not rank high on the honor scale of the ancient Mediterranean world. For instance, those who have all manner of evil spoken against them (see Matthew 5:11) are those whose name has been dishonored. The poor (see Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3) would also not be considered honorable. To understand this we must first know that "the poor" were not those who had few worldly goods. Such was the condition of the vast majority of the people of the ancient Mediterranean world. Although most peasants labored to exhaustion and had barely enough to survive, as long as they had enough to survive they were not poor. The true poor were those who were destitute of all resources and were reduced to begging. Even more to the point, they were poor because in such condition they had lost their honor and had plummeted on the social scale. Thus the word "poor" is connected with but is not primarily about economics. It is about honor. Christ's beatitude "blessed be ye poor" (Luke 6:20)[24] is an oxymoron. It

says in essence, "How honorable are those who suffer a loss of honour."[25] Essential to understanding this enigmatic statement is determining why those whom Christ blesses have lost their honor.

The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are not directed to the general populace but to Christ's disciples. Jerome Neyrey suggests that the four beatitudes in Luke (which he considers to be more original than Matthew's) all together describe the "fate of a disciple who has been ostracized as a 'rebellious son' by his family for loyalty to Jesus."[36] In the ancient Mediterranean society, the family was everything—the source of one's identity and honor and the means of one's survival. In such societies, "the organizing principle of life is belongingness."[27] To be cut off from one's family was to experience a tragic and total loss of honor. In such a condition, one was truly poor. Additionally, "if a son were driven away from the family land, he would immediately experience the loss of access to the grain, vegetables, fruits etc. which were the daily food of peasants; no doubt he would literally be 'hungry and thirsty.'"[28] To be cut off from family and sustenance would unquestionably be cause for weeping. Thus, the first three beatitudes in Luke, "blessed be ye poor," "blessed are ye that hunger now," and "blessed are ye that weep now" (Luke 6:20, 21), all describe the calamitous consequences of being cut off from one's family.

The fourth beatitude, "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake" (Luke 6:22), is the culmination of the beatitudes in Luke. Each of the four statements expresses the disastrous results of social estrangement. Luke's first statement, "when men shall hate you," may or may not include the strong emotions we associate with hate. Rather, hate and love have to do with group attachment and group bonding. To be hated is a formal rejection. It is to be cut off. The second statement, "when they shall separate you from their company," means the disciple is outside the social group. When belonging is a dominant value, this is a grievous condition. The third statement, "and shall reproach you," designates an act of shaming. The fourth statement, "and cast out your name as evil," means to have one's reputation maligned and one's name denigrated. Christ specifies that these grave misfortunes are "for the Son of man's sake." It is likely that consequent to following

Christ, this man has been disinherited by his father and shunned by his family. His village or community would not be sympathetic to his plight for he has rebelled against family tradition. He has become shameful in the eyes of the village. Thus he is estranged from family and community.

The alienated disciple has suffered a true and total loss of honor and status, yet Jesus pronounces him honorable. In doing so, Jesus does not challenge the construct of honor but makes some significant changes in who constitutes the court of opinion. It is God's assessment, not man's, that matters. Moreover, for those who suffer a crisis of kinship because of their discipleship, Christ promises "they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9). In other words, with baptism they are received into a new family—the family of God—and receive all the blessings of belonging to this new family, including the honor rating of the most honorable family in existence.

Patronage

Patronage is another concept that dominated the social landscape of the ancient Mediterranean world. Like honor and shame, it is a concept with which many Americans may have a hard time relating. In the United States, we value fairness, equal rights, and equal opportunity. "Where patronage occurs (often deridingly called nepotism: channeling opportunities to relations or personal friends), it is often done 'under the table' and kept as quiet as possible."[29] In the ancient Mediterranean world, patronage was expected, essential, and publicized.

The world of the New Testament was one of a significantly limited access to goods. A small, elite group controlled the greater part of the property, wealth, and power. Common, everyday goods were bought and sold in the market, but for everything else, one approached the person who controlled the resource, entered into a special relationship with that person, and thereby received as a favor that which he wanted or needed. This system of patronage was as fundamental to the ancient Mediterranean world as using money as a basis for exchanging goods and services is in ours. The players in this system are known as patrons and clients.

A patron is a person of high status who can provide benefits to others based on his superior power, influence, reputation, position, and wealth. A client is a person of lesser status who enters into a relationship with a

patron in order to obtain certain benefits. These benefits might include plots of land, money for a business venture, debt relief, work, food after a crop failure, appointment to a government post, citizenship, freedom from taxes, protection against enemies, or support in a legal case. Sometimes the most important thing a patron could offer was access to another patron who had power over the benefit sought but with whom the client had no access due to the disparity of their social status. This intermediary patron has been called a broker, a mediator, and an advocate.

In Josephus' writings we see the variety of ways in which he, a client to three successive Roman emperors, benefitted from imperial patronage. His emperor-patrons arranged a marriage for him, granted him Roman citizenship, set him up in Rome with an apartment and a pension, gave him land in Judea, granted him freedom from taxes on his Judean estates, freed his family, friends, and acquaintances who were prisoners of war, had three of his friends taken off crosses, and protected him against false accusations.[30] Josephus was a client not only to the Roman emperors but also to the Herodian aristocracy. This was not unusual. It was common for a client to have several patrons. Consequently, a person would have to be careful not to have two patrons who were enemies or rivals. If this were to happen, a client would ultimately have to choose between the two patrons, proving loyal to one and disloyal to the other. Such would be the case if a person entered into a patron-client relationship with God and with mammon. He simply could not be loyal to both (see Matthew 6:24).

Patronage was a reciprocal relationship. Though patrons doled out gifts, privileges, protections, and support, the relationship was not one-sided. The patrons benefited equally, though not materially. Primarily, clients increased their patron's honor and power base. A client was expected to do everything in his power to enhance the patron's name (i.e., his reputation) and honor. He offered public praise and bore public witness to the patron's goodness. This was so incumbent upon a client that its omission would have been an incredible gaffe. This may have been the reason the two blind men whom Jesus healed and then charged to tell no one still "spread abroad his fame in all that country" (Matthew 9:31). They simply could not disregard the entrenched convention of returning praise and honor for benefaction. The phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be thy name," (Matthew 6:9) reflects the appropriate response

of an honorable client committed to seeing his patron's name reverenced, honored, and extolled.

In addition to enhancing the name and honor of one's patron, a client was to be grateful. According to Cicero, a patron could freely choose whether or not to give a gift, but an honorable person had no choice but to respond to the gift with gratitude (*De Officiis* 1:47–48). Gratitude was an absolute duty. Ingratitude was to be avoided by an honorable person at all costs. Gratitude was expressed not only by public declarations of thanks but also through good works. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples to be lights to the world and cities set upon a hill. In other words, as clients to God, they are to show their gratitude by living a life of conspicuous goodness[31] so that others "may see your good works, and glorify [or give honor to] your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Gratitude, whether of words or works, was not only the honorable response; it was the response that guaranteed future benefactions from a patron. When selecting beneficiaries, patrons would seek out those who knew how to be grateful.[32]

A final element of a client's expected and honorable response to his patron's benefactions was trust or faith. The client had to trust that his patron could and would perform what he had promised. For all but the rich, who constituted less than ten percent of the population,[33] existence in the ancient Mediterranean world was precarious at best. Peasants lived at survival level, which meant that a drought, a plague of locusts, or crop failure could threaten their very existence. The possibility of an agricultural misfortune along with unrelenting and onerous taxes made debt bondage a constant specter. It was to such people that Jesus said, "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body. . . . Behold the fowls of the air: for . . . your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they" (Matthew 6:25–26). In this, the Lord was asking a people for whom concerns of physical survival were dominant to have faith and trust in the divine Patron. He was asking them to trust that God was well aware of his clients' needs and would provide for their physical and spiritual well-being.

In the Gospels, Jesus often acts as broker, putting people in contact with their heavenly Patron.[34] A broker was a patron in and of himself but one who also offered access to another patron, one to whom the client has

no access because of the disparity of their social status. As a patron, the broker was to defend his client at court. In the ancient Mediterranean world, it was difficult for commoners to find justice without the support of a patron.[35] A patron would serve as a character witness for the client and also offer his own honor and merits on behalf of the client. This may well be the background of Matthew 7:22, which begins, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." Hans Dieter Betz suggests that in this scene large groups of people are appearing before the throne of God. One group has already been rejected by the divine judge. They turn to Jesus, believing him to be their broker. They plead, "Lord, Lord have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" (Matthew 7:22). By citing the good words they have done (the appropriate response of honorable clients), they are claiming that they are the Lord's legitimate clients.[36] Jesus says that he "will profess [declare publicly[37]] unto them, I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). "I never knew you" is a renunciation formula and "belongs to the context of legal representation. An advocate cannot represent a client whom he or she does not know personally."[38] With this renunciation, Christ not only denies knowing the persons but also denies having any responsibility for them. He is not their patron and will not plead for them or vouch for their character in this court. He will not seek favor for them based on his honor or merits. He will not facilitate an association with the heavenly Patron.

Wealth in a Limited-Goods Society

As previously noted, wealth was not primarily valued as a resource for luxuries or as a way to obtain security; rather, its primary value was within the context of honor. Of course, wealth was appreciated as a way to obtain elegant clothing and expensive jewelry and to put on sumptuous banquets. Truly, wealth provided such things, but these things were important because they were tangible evidences of honor. As noted, the poor were not those lacking in wealth, for the vast majority of people were in this situation, but were those not able to maintain their honor and status because of some unfortunate circumstance such as debt, sickness, accident, or death of a spouse.[39] The poor were the oppressed, the miserable, the dependent, the humiliated. "People who are maimed, lame,

blind, and the like are 'poor,' regardless of how much land they might own. Similarly, a widow owning millions of denarii worth of anything, yet having no son, is always 'a poor widow.' It is social misfortune rather than economic misfortune that makes a person poor."[40]

To these insights, we must add one more. The modern westernized world is a world of abundance. In contrast, the ancient Mediterranean society was a society of limited goods. They believed all desirable things in life, "such as land, wealth, prestige, blood, health, semen, friendship and love, manliness, honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety—literally all goods in life—exist in finite, limited quantity and are always in short supply."[41] Moreover, this limited supply has already been distributed. This means that if one person increases in wealth, another must decrease. Thus the accumulation of wealth was looked down upon. Greed was dishonorable. Only those beyond the pale of public opinion—the elites, the governors, and the kings—could accumulate wealth with impunity.

This cultural context provides background for the enigmatic statement, "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness" (Matthew 6:22–23). "Single" is the translation of the Greek word *haplous*, which may also be translated as "healthy" or "good." Thus the phrase in the Sermon on the Mount could legitimately be read, "If therefore thine eye be good, thy whole body shall be full of light." Marvin R. Wilson explains, "In rabbinic literature, if you have a 'good eye' you are a generous person."[42] On the other hand, an "evil eye" is an idiom for envy and greed.[43] Thus it is completely appropriate that Christ's comment about having a good eye appears between his statements "Lay not up for yourselves treasure upon earth" (Matthew 6:19) and "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). A person with an evil eye—a person who was miserly, stingy, and jealous—would have a low honor rating. Moreover, he would be considered "full of darkness" (Matthew 6:23). In a society that equated light with joy, happiness, and the triumph of good over evil, this was no small thing. No wonder Jesus warned, "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:23).

The Physical Setting

Understanding the Sermon on the Mount in its sociocultural context extends to understanding certain physical aspects of the Holy Land. For instance, Jerusalem sits atop the Judean hills. It is, no doubt, the city Jesus' listeners thought of when he proclaimed, "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" (Matthew 5:14).[44] This city, though mentioned by name only once in the sermon (see Matthew 5:35), makes several subtle appearances.[45] For instance, when Jesus said, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, . . . for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 4:11, 12), many first-century Jews would have thought of Jerusalem, where many prophets had been killed (see Matthew 23:37). Jerusalem, as a type of the heavenly Jerusalem, may also be the city to which the strait gate and the narrow road (or "way") led (see Matthew 7:13–14).[46] In Matthew 6:5, Jesus says, "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men." Though synagogues, streets, and corners are not unique to Jerusalem, Betz suggests that this vignette of city life is probably describing Jerusalem.[47]

Because the temple was located at Jerusalem, the city was likely the setting for the alms that are to be offered without recognition (see Matthew 6:2) and for the sacrifices that are to be brought to the altar (see Matthew 5:23–24). The implications are important. Christ exhorts his listeners, "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23). The Sermon on the Mount was delivered in Galilee. The altar where one would bring his gift or offering was in Jerusalem. In order to comply with Christ's charge, a Jew from Galilee would likely have to undertake the rigorous, hundred-mile journey back to Galilee, reconcile with his brother, and then return to Jerusalem. Understanding this is integral to understanding the physical, emotional, and spiritual distance to which Christ would have us go to be reconciled with an offended brother, wife, or neighbor.

Another instance in which understanding the physical features of the Holy Land illuminates the Sermon on the Mount is the parable of the

houses built upon the rock and the sand. In the Middle East, most rivers are not ever-flowing but are dry washes called "wadis." They become rivers only during the rainy season when a heavy rain sends a flash flood surging down the normally dry wadi, sometimes with devastating consequences. One traveler to Arabia noted: "A temptation exists to build villages to cater for the needs of the caravan traffic in wadis . . . which are thought to have permanently dried up."[48] Since dry wadis are usually sandy, such a village could be described as "houses built upon the sand." However, houses in wadis are in great danger if torrential rains fall and flash floods ensue. The aforementioned traveler witnessed this very thing. He said, "Recently, after many years of drought and consequent security, one such village near the Yemen road was suddenly obliterated when the wadi filled once again with a raging torrent of water from the mountain."[49] No doubt it could be said of this village that which Jesus said of the house built on the sand, "And great was the fall of it" (Matthew 7:27).

As One Having Authority

At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records, "The people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28–29). "The Greek verb *ekplēssō* [astonished] carries the meaning of being 'filled with amazement to the point of being overwhelmed.'"[50] While we ourselves may be astonished, even overwhelmed, at commands to become perfect and not to judge or become angry, the listeners of Galilee had other reasons to be astonished that might escape us. First of all, Jesus of Nazareth, the consummate teacher and theologian, did not have the credentials of a teacher according to the customs of his time. "Those recognized and entitled teachers were typically individuals who taught in the formal educational system. Such instructors taught at either the *bet hasefer* (house of the book), *bet talmud* (house of learning), *bet haknesset* (house of assembly or synagogue), or *bet midrash* (house of study). It was at the *bet midrash* that exceptional students became teachers and were awarded the rank and title of rabbi. Jesus, as far as we can determine, was never a student or a teacher at *bet midrash*."[51]

Secondly, not only did Jesus not teach with the authority of the teachers of the day, he did not teach like the teachers of the day. The New

Testament world was one that embraced the adage, "Older is better, oldest is best."[52] The more ancient someone or something was, the more credibility it had. Thus, it is common to find in rabbinic texts, "Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y, who had it as a tradition from Rabbi Z." This was an authoritative way of substantiating a statement.[53] However, Christ did not cite previous rabbis. Moreover, he did not speak as prophets, who often said, "Thus saith the Lord."[54] With bold audacity, he declared, "I say unto you," asserting his word to be the final authority and holding precedence over the law, its commonly held interpretation, and the customs of the day.

Finally, what gave people authority to act in public was their honor rating. Lower-born people (like the son of a carpenter) were not expected to lead in public, to perform miracles, or preach with great wisdom. Yet Christ preached with power, boldness, and unsurpassed wisdom. No wonder the masses were astonished. Jesus Christ, the son of a carpenter, spoke as though He were the son of a king.

Conclusion

There is a great chasm between the ancient Mediterranean world and our modern, Western world. It is not merely a chasm of time or technology. It is a chasm of culture and values. The sociocultural context of the ancient Mediterranean provides a bridge to span the divide. To walk into the New Testament world, we must both think and feel like a person from the ancient Mediterranean. We must feel the critical need for belonging and the horror of experiencing a loss of honor. We must feel the constant, underlying hostility due to the incessant threats to honor that must be parried and returned. We must sense the obligations we would feel to a patron and the scarcity of a limited goods society. Only then do we understand how very much Christ asks of his followers. Only then do we begin to see how life altering and soul changing are his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

NOTES

1. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 6.

2. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 38.

3. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 31.

4. Other countries that are generally individualistic are England, France, Ireland, Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Australia. For further study on individualism, see Malina, *The New Testament World*, 63–73; see also "Individualism versus Collectivism," http://www.via-web.de/ individualism-versus-collectivism/.

5. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 67.

6. Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 8.

7. Jerome H. Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth, Loss of Family and Loss of Honour," in *Modelling Early Christianity*, ed. Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 141.

8. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 50, 55.

9. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 50.

10. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 26; see also Malina, *The New Testament World*, 49–50, and John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 107.

11. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary*, 40.

12. David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 28.

13. James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 63.

14. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 34.

15. If the challenged person is of superior higher status, he may brush aside the challenge with scorn. If the challenged person is of the same status, he may respond with a counter challenge or even up the ante by responding with a more serious challenge.

16. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 38.

17. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 99.

18. See James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 234.

19. Richard L Rohrbaugh, "Legitimating Sonship—A Test of Honour," in *Modelling Early Christianity*, ed. Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 185.

20. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 45.

21. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 232–33.

22. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 43.

23. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 67.

24. Matthew's version has "blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), placing the focus on spiritual poverty.

25. Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth," 140.

26. Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth," 145.

27. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 30.

28. Neyrey, "Loss of Wealth," 148.

29. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 95.

30. Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 74.

31. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 143.

32. The favors or reciprocity of patrons and clients was described with the word "grace." Grace could be used in three different ways. First, grace meant the willingness of a patron to grant a favor or gift to his client. In this sense, the word reflects the generosity and willingness of the patron. Second, grace could be used to refer to the gift, favor, or benefaction itself. Third, grace could be used to describe the client's grateful response. "The fact that one and the same word can be used to speak of a beneficent act and the response to a beneficent act suggests implicitly what many moralists from the Greek and Roman cultures stated explicitly: grace must be met with grace; . . . gift must always be met with gratitude" (deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 105; see D&C 93:12–20).

33. Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), xxiv.

34. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 102.

35. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 299.

36. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount, Hermeneia*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 549.

37. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 551.

38. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 551.

39. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 106.

40. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 48.

41. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 95.

42. Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 121.

43. It is worth noting that in ancient thought, the eye was not looked upon as an organ that sends visual stimuli to the brain, but as an agent that had thoughts and motives of its own, independent of the brain. Thus, the eye could hate, envy, pity, and be kind (see J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The Evil Eye in the New Testament," in *Modelling Early Christianity*, 67).

44. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 161.

45. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 161–62.

46. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 162.

47. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 162.

48. Norman Lewis, *Sand and Sea in Arabia* (London: Routledge, 1938), 16, quoted in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6 of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 262.

49. Lewis, quoted in Nibley, 262.

50. Frank F. Judd Jr., "The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount," in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1., ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 316.

51. Matthew O. Richardson, "Jesus: The Unorthodox Teacher," in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 230.

52. John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, volume 37b of the Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 370.

53. Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 37.

54. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 109.