

(Review by) Peter Balla:

David A. deSilva: *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Second edition.

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The text provided here below is the same as the text of the printed version, however, not following the line division of the printed version. The page numbers of the printed version are indicated with square brackets in the text below. (We have omitted here the French and the German summary of the review, published only in the printed version.)

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Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture.

Second edition

David A. deSilva

Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022; xviii + 388 pp, pb, \$40; ISBN 978-1-5140-0385-5

Summary

This book is a thoroughly revised edition of an important work that summarises the cultural and social world of the first century AD as a background for a better understanding of the New Testament. The title of the book mentions the four large areas in which deSilva surveys the social forms and cultural values of the first century. He also aims to help present-day Christians to have a missionary commitment combined with an openness to learn as much as possible about the addressees of the gospel. This excellent work is rich in examples from non-Christian sources and offers much literature for further study.

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The first edition of this important work (2000) has already greatly contributed to New Testament scholarship by emphasising the significance of a thorough knowledge of the cultural and social world in the first century AD for a better understanding of the life and theology of the early Christians. The second edition is thoroughly revised: it is ca. 20 percent longer than the original edition and contains further examples, and even ‘improvements in the exegesis’ (xi).

The title of the book mentions the four large areas in which deSilva surveys social forms and cultural values of the first century AD in order to help the reader understand better the life and the missionary endeavour of the early Christians. The four themes are dealt with in chapters in pairs: after marshalling many examples from the environment of the New Testament in a chapter, deSilva shows in the next chapter how that background can help us to a deeper understanding of concrete New Testament texts. The four large areas which were of high

significance in the life of the Greco-Roman world and of the Jewish people in the first century AD appear in the titles and subtitles of the relevant chapters: 'Honor and Shame: Connecting Personhood to Group Values' (ch. 1); 'Patronage and Reciprocity: The Social Context of Grace' (ch. 3); 'Kinship: Living as a Family in the First-Century World' (ch. 5); 'Purity and Pollution: Ordering the World Before a Holy God' (ch. 7). In chapters 2, 4, 6 and 8 deSilva discusses many New Testament texts in the light of relevant examples from the environment of the early Christians. His aim is to help present-day readers 'not to miss what it is that the text does seek to convey', but at the same time he wants to help us so that 'we do not import into the text what is not there' (2).

This monograph is not only an excellent work about the first century, but it also openly aims to help present-day Christians in relation to the question, how they can address their fellow countrymen with the gospel in a more informed way if they seek to better understand their contemporaries. When the early Christians communicated the gospel, they considered how their contemporaries would 'hear' the content of their message on the basis of [p. 348] their social customs and moral values. Their example may serve as a welcome call upon present-day Christians to have a missionary zeal combined with an openness to learn as much as possible about their addressees.

I mention only two examples of how knowledge of the social and cultural life of the people in the environment of the early Christians can illuminate our understanding of certain New Testament texts. Concerning Jesus' death, deSilva affirms (47):

Jesus suffered crucifixion, known as an intentionally degrading death, fixing the criminal's honor at the lowest end of the spectrum and serving as an effective deterrent to the observers. ... No member of the Jewish community or the Greco-Roman society would have come to faith or joined the Christian movement without first accepting that God's perspective on what merits honor has the potential to differ exceedingly from the perspective of human beings...

He points out that 'both the Jewish and Gentile leaders of Jerusalem evaluated Jesus, his convictions and his deeds as meriting a shameful death, but God overturned their evaluation of Jesus by raising him from the dead' (47-48). Thus deSilva even claims that the apostle Paul 'understated the case when he referred to the proclamation of this cross as the wisdom of God as a "stumbling block" to Jews and "folly" to Gentiles' (47).

The other example is 'grace' (*charis*), a term used in the Greco-Roman world in the context of the 'patron-client relationship, friendship, and public benefaction' (107). The term 'was used to refer to the willingness of a patron to grant some benefit to another person or to a group' (107). The same term is also used to refer to the 'gratitude' of the recipient: '*grace* can be used to speak of the response to a benefactor and his or her gifts' (108; italics original). DeSilva affirms: 'grace must answer grace' (174). Grace is 'free' on God's side; we cannot merit it, but once we receive it, it obliges us 'to live *worthily* of God's invitation' (173; italics original).

DeSilva's excellent work is rich in examples from non-Christian sources as well as their thoughtful application to New Testament texts; it also offers extensive literature for further study. Immersing ourselves in the life and thought of the first Christians in the light of their environment will help us to communicate the gospel more effectively among our contemporaries.

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