

Death with Honor:

The Mediterranean Style Death of Jesus in Mark

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Abstract: In Mark's gospel, Jesus suffers for as long as six hours apparently without resistance or complaint and says nothing until he shrieks just before dying. The way he died makes a favorable impression on the centurion who witnessed the execution (14:39). With the aid of two social science models, it is possible to offer a plausible, Mediterranean cultural explanation for this pagan's reaction. The basic personality model (Cook) would explain that Jesus' behavior at death is the result of his training in suffering during his youth. Jesus' death proves that he was reared well. The cultural ideology model (McClelland) argues that Mediterranean ideology, that is, its norms and values reinforced by its maintenance system is the central determining factor of adult personality and child-rearing practices. Jesus dies honorably as one would expect of an adult, Mediterranean male.

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The circumstances of Jesus' death as reported by Mark pose challenging questions to readers from Western cultures. An adult male resigns himself completely to an imminent, shameful, and painful death willed by his father (Mark 14:36). This same adult male is physically scourged and beaten by his captors yet appears to suffer without complaining, in complete silence (Mark 15:16-20). When finally nailed to a tree, this adult hangs (apparently) in silence from the third hour to the ninth hour before shrieking and dying (Mark 15:25, 33, 36). (The "last words" of Jesus reported by all the Evangelists are probably retrojections from the Christian community.) The pagan centurion assigned to supervise and witness the execution is impressed by the way he died (hoti houtos exepneusen). One interpretation of his comment is that Jesus died in as manly a fashion as any cultural hero ("son of god" or "having the quality of god, god-like, divine-like") the Centurion ever knew (Mark 15:39).

Mediterranean informants, i.e., Hellenistic authors, help a western reader imagine what the centurion and others witnessed in the death of Jesus (see Neyrey). Crucifixion in the Greco-Roman world was the utmost shameful experience, since it was considered a slave's punishment (Valerius Maximus 2.7.12). The public trial that preceded was equally shameful (Cicero, Pro Rabinio 9-17). The honorable course was to do all one could to avoid going to court (Prov 20:3; Matt 5:26).

Those condemned to die were flogged and tortured (Josephus, BJ 5:449-50). Special concern was taken to blind the eyes (see Luke 22:63) and cause blood to flow (Mark 15:15, 17). According to the Mishnah (Makkoth 3.12), the victim was scourged from front and back presumably while nude. Shock and pain

caused the sphincters to relax. Loss of bowel control added further shame when the victim befouled himself with excrement and urine (3.14).

Nailing to the cross mutilated and disempowered the victim by constraining hands, arms, and feet. Often victims were attached to their crosses in whimsical ways, and some were impaled. The clothes were confiscated (Diod.Sic. 33:15:1; Mark 15:24), and nudity heaped still more shame on the condemned. Gradual loss of control over bodily functions caused additional befoulment, and gross enlargement of the male organ made the victim a target of humiliating laughter. The slow and protracted death, more likely from suffocation than loss of blood, permitted a long period of public mockery and derision. Loss of life without the possibility of vengeance by one's next-of kin, and lack of honorable burial with one's ancestors was the ultimate stroke of shame.

Why did Jesus, who was an accomplished master of challenge and riposte and insulting repartee during his life-time, apparently accept all this shame without responding? Why in Mark did he shriek from the pain and flies and other annoyances only just before he died? What in Jesus' manner of death stirred the admiration of the centurion?

In this article, I propose some insights from the Mediterranean culture shared in common by the centurion, Jesus, and the Evangelist. With the aid of two social science models, I explore two possible explanations for the centurion's response to "how Jesus died."

The Basic Personality Structure Model (Cook)

The **basic personality structure** model is represented by the saying: "as the twig is bent, so the tree will grow" (for information on basic personality structures in the ancient world, see Carney 92-93, 249-251). Cook (1978) designed a model to contrast two approaches to parenting: a distrustful directive approach and a trusting cooperative approach. His analysis of historical, cultural, and biological data suggested that the experiences of early childhood shape the adult character. Severe physical discipline of young boys as proposed by the distrustful directive approach produces long-suffering adult males. He noted that particularly in the 20th century and in western culture, parenting styles moved toward a more trusting and cooperative character producing mature males less inclined toward violent behavior.

In previous publications (Pilch 1991; 1993) I used the Cook model as an heuristic tool for analyzing Proverbs and Sirach and highlighted the repeated advice that physical punishment of boys is the recommended mode of rearing young boys in Mediterranean cultures (see Prov 13:23; 19:18 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15; 29:17; 29:19; Sir 30:1-12). From a cultural perspective, this distrustful and directive style of parenting a son was intended to instill loyalty to the boy's family of origin, particularly to the father (Lozios). The intensely close relationship of mothers and sons in which boys were pampered required fathers to teach their sons how to be a man, namely, to obey without hesitation, question, or complain even when obedience might be distasteful. Physical punishment "manfully" accepted was considered the best strategy (see also Queen and Habenstein 165).

The Hellenistic world provides some examples. Regarding sons, Protagoras observed: "If he is willing, he obeys, but if not, they straighten him, just like a bent and twisted piece of wood, with threats and blows" (Plato, Prt. 35d). Lysis, very likely in his early teens, considered beatings to be quite an ordinary part of life (Plato, Lys. 208d-209a).

Mediterranean anthropologists pointed out that suffering in silence was an admirable trait men observed in sheep as they were led to slaughter. In the Middle East, sheep traditionally are animals associated with men, while goats are animals traditionally associated with women. Sheep reflect honorable behavior (e.g., suffering in silence), goats reflect shameful behavior (e.g., the lascivious tendencies of male and female goats, see Pilch 1992). Men strive to replicate the impressive behavior of sheep.

Child-rearing practices such as swaddling an infant tightly not only insured the growth of a straight and sturdy body but also prepared the infant for a life-time of constraint and subjection to others.

The Cook model would interpret these various practices (swaddling; bearing physical punishment without crying; suffering without complaint, in silence) as key strategies for producing an adult man who would be most likely to demonstrate heroic endurance of painful suffering without complaining or resisting as in the case of the Servant of Yahweh (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13--53:12), or revealing (and boasting of) their suffering for the admiration and edification of others as in Jeremiah's Lamentations (1:12; 3). The public prayers of those who suffered innocently (e.g., Psa 22) are similarly illustrative. Indeed, some like Paul would boast about his superior record of manly suffering (2 Cor 11:21-30).

This background helps construct a fitting reading scenario in which to understand the suffering and death of Jesus. During his ministry, this master of insult surely knows that already early on, his opponents are bent on destroying him (Mark 3:6). He anticipates a violent and perhaps even shameful end (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-31; 10:32-34). Yet he does nothing to prevent the inevitable. Instead, he professes his obedience to the Father (14:36) who he recognizes as having designated this manner of death for him.

According to the Cook model, the way in which Jesus died and the impression it made on the centurion would seem to indicate that Jesus was raised properly and successfully by his family. If the lad's behavior warranted it, the just man, Joseph, would have followed the directives of Proverbs about disciplining sons. The canonical gospels say nothing about Jesus' childhood, but the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (5:2) reports that Joseph punished Jesus on one occasion by taking him by the ear and pulling it hard.

The early Christian author of Hebrews appears to confirm the validity of interpreting the influence of Mediterranean culture in Jesus' death precisely in this way (deSilva). "Precisely because he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him..." (Heb 5:7-10; the social system suggests that "because" is preferable to "although" found in most translations).

And as Jesus exhorted his followers to expect and manfully endure suffering (Mark 8:34-38), the author of Hebrews reminds early Christians to behave in similar fashion. For God fuses love with violence (Prov 3:11-12 cited in Heb 12:5-6), and physical discipline is a sign of God's love. As honorable sons accept without complaint physical discipline from their fathers, so ought God's creatures accept physical discipline when it is sent.

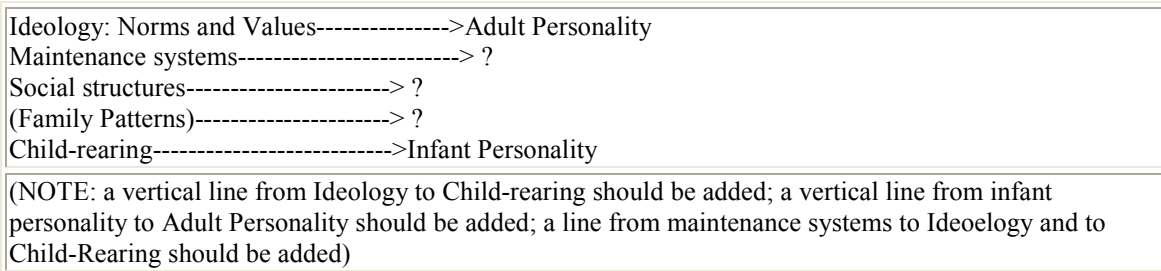
To summarize, the Cook model highlights the fact that severe physical discipline of young boys produces adult males trained to suffer in silence. Owing an intellectual debt to Darwin, Marx, and Freud, the basic personality model was shaped in the 1930's and held sway until the '70's when fresh research cast doubt on the alleged causal connection between child-training and adult personality.

The Cultural Ideology Model (McClelland)

McClelland began with a study of alcoholism, and noticed the obvious: not all children of alcoholics grew up to be alcoholics. He also observed that physical punishment of a young boy does not always produce an adult male who would continue the "cycle of abuse" as it is called in contemporary, western culture, by meting out physical punishment in turn. Nor does it necessarily produce an adult male who would suffer without complaint, in silence. His **cultural ideology** model proposes that a culture's ideology, namely, its norms and values reinforced by maintenance systems, is the central determining factor of adult personality and child-rearing practices. In other words, an honor-driven culture designates adult males who suffer in silence as honorable cultural heroes and then shapes its child-rearing procedures accordingly to contribute to the production of such adult males. The key difference in this model is that many more elements than endurance of physical pain and suffering enter into the image of an honorable, adult male.

McClelland's research demonstrated that child-training variables are not powerfully interrelated with either social-structural variables or with ideologic variables. In his model, child-rearing does not occupy center stage in the formation of adult personality by way of its influence on infant personality except to the extent that child-rearing reflects the general norms or social structures which exert an influence upon an individual throughout a lifetime from womb to tomb.

Norms and values are only two of many variables that can be traced in history and tradition. From this view, culture can be viewed as a value-driven system. Using this view as a manageable starting point, here is an adaptation of the McClelland model for use in designing a reading scenario in which to interpret biblical texts:



According to the model, child-rearing strategies and techniques produce an infant personality. The infant personality, however, does not infallibly develop into the "honorable" adult personality. McClelland's research has not discovered a causal connection between infant personality and adult personality. In other words, McClelland raises skepticism about explanatory models such as that of Cook presented in the first part of the paper. Thus, in the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28-32), the listener would presume that both sons were raised to be loyal to their father and to behave honorably. Yet one replies to his father with respect ("yes, I go"), the other publicly insults his father ("I will not go"). Then both change their minds. Child-rearing by itself cannot explain these different behaviors by two brothers. But cultural norms and values shed interesting light on why Jesus did not ask which son behaved honorably but rather which did the will of the father.

McClelland's research indicates that it is the ideology of a given culture, that is, its norms and values which define the desirable or, in Mediterranean culture, "honorable" adult personality. Maintenance systems, such as family structure which in the Mediterranean world have been fixed and quite unchanging over millennia, reinforce and maintain that ideology and its appropriate, accompanying child-rearing strategies. Carney describes very well how the family structure of ancient Rome contributed to the production of obedient males capable of enduring all sorts of pain and suffering (92-93, 249-251). Thus, in the biblical world, the norms and values of Mediterranean culture would define the honorable adult male, and appropriate child-rearing strategies would be adopted to help produce such a male.

The following summary review of Mediterranean cultural norms and values helps to flesh out the McClelland model for analyzing biblical descriptions of heroic males and how they died.

1. **Honor and shame**, the core Mediterranean cultural values, are two principles which constitute the public image and moral obligations of each gender (Gilmore, Aggression 127).

On the part of males, honor and shame are manifested by demonstrated physiological masculinity which is elevated to paramount importance in the ascription of male social identity and reputation.

Contemporary Hispanic cultures sometimes call this obsessive concern for manliness "machismo." Yet in contrast to the Western negative interpretation of this term, Hispanics consider machismo an honorable trait in a male. Daughters and sisters are proud to know their father or brother is so described (Baltimore Sun, 9/24/89). It is a positive cultural value. As an illustration, consider this statement by Oscar Lewis (Children of Sanchez) cited in Gilmore 131): "In a fight, I would never give up or say 'enough,' even though the other was killing me. I would try to go to my death, smiling. That is what we mean by being 'macho'" (see also Hofstede). Applying this term to males in biblical literature would be anachronistic, but the concept would be helpful in understanding the biblical notion of manliness.

deSilva's recent study of Hebrews quite correctly notes that Jesus' acceptance of crucifixion as the death willed for him by the Father was interpreted as an act "despising shame," that is, rejecting the customary, cultural definition of honor and shame and relying rather on God estimate of true honor. In either case, the sense of honor is a powerful force shaping the adult male personality.

2. In the Gospels, Jesus the Mediterranean male demonstrates his masculinity particularly with exhortations to **endurance** magnificently illustrated with his own example on the cross. Some of the Greek words that express this idea (hypomeneo; hypomone) carry the idea of continuing to bear up despite difficulty and suffering. Thus Jesus forewarns his followers that they will be faced with betrayal, suffering and death, but only those who "endure to the end" will be saved (Mark 13:13; Matt 10:22; 24:13). Paul encourages the Romans to "rejoice in hope, patiently endure suffering, and persevere in prayer" (12:12; see also 1 Cor 13:7). The Pastor reminds Timothy that he personally endures suffering for the sake of the elect, and quotes an early christian hymn to testify to the value of behaving in this way:

If we have died with him,
we shall also live with him;
if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful
--for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:10).

The author of Hebrews encourages endurance in the face of suffering (10:32-39) presenting Jesus himself as a model (12:2-3). Significantly, the author links his reflections with Prov 3:11-12, the biblical book that advises physical punishment of boys as the proper way of rearing them to honorable adulthood. And Revelation contains the greatest concentration of such exhortations to and example of endurance in suffering (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).

3. Another value critical to honor in Mediterranean culture is **obedience**. The physical punishment routinely meted out to boys was intended primarily to insure obedience to the father and other males to whom such honorable obedience was due. John the Evangelist emphasizes that the Father gave Jesus strict commands about what to say and to speak (12:49), and Jesus declares that he obeyed these commandments (14:31), included the commandment to lay down his life (10:18). Indeed, the Mediterranean adult male, Jesus, demonstrated his honorable status by obeying to a heroic degree: he was obedient even to death (Phil 2:8).

4. **Suffering in silence, without complaining**. Recognizing the influence of the Isaian Servant of Yahweh songs on the formation of the Passion Narratives, traditional interpretation has tended to follow Isa 53:7 literally: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (see Acts 8:32-35) Suffering in silence is honorable for a Mediterranean man, but the matter is perhaps more complex than a simple reading of that text might suggest.

People who suffered innocently yet poured out their laments in psalms curiously described themselves as mute: "like a dumb man who does not open his mouth" (Ps 38:13-14; Ps 39:10). Even while foregoing the opportunity to offer riposte to the enemies' challenges (Ps 38:14), one victim does not hesitate to groan (Ps

38:8) and sigh (Ps 38:9) and pray (very likely aloud, Ps 38:16). Another victim recognizes that silent endurance is the proper response to God's decree of suffering (Ps 39:9-11; see also Lam 3:28-30), yet the resolve to keep silent is difficult to keep (Ps 39:2), and he prays (presumably) aloud to God. It would seem that vocal prayer is an acceptable element of suffering in silence. ("Mental" prayer in the ancient world was probably as anomalous as "silent" reading.) The victim hopes to stir God to action and perhaps even to work a change of opinion among the witnesses to this shameful suffering of an innocent person. This at least seems to be the conviction among early Christians (see 1 Peter 2:19-25; 3:9-7).

Moreover, the impressive story of the martyrdom of the aged Eleazar (2 Macc 6) recounts that he preferred "death with honor rather than life with pollution" (6:19). He refused to deceive and mislead young witnesses to his ordeal and thereby "disgrace and defile my old age" (6:24). As he died, he groaned aloud and said for all to hear that he was glad to suffer because he feared (=respected) God (6:30). Eleazar's example suggests that suffering in silence does not forbid the victim from speaking respectfully about God or taking an honorable view of one's tragic end.

- The tale of the seven brothers who died remaining obedient to the Law recounts that each of them had something significant and honorably impressive to announce before dying. Neither the threat nor the experience of violent torture prompted any of them to complain (2 Macc 7). To suffer in silence excludes complaints or, in the honor perspective, insulting challenges like that of the thief crucified with Jesus (Luke 23:9).

5. A cluster of Mediterranean value preferences (following Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck as developed in Pilch 1991; Pilch and Malina 1993) provides additional information for applying the model to biblical texts. The value preferences reflected in the Bible are the following:

- subordination to nature and life events, rather than confidence in mastering them. Given the limitations of human abilities, a person will have to yield and suffer rather than hope to overcome or master difficulties. One is expected to take up the cross rather than seek to evade it (Mark 8:34-35).
- being is preferred to doing, that is, people tend to respond to situations spontaneously and without any plan, because there is no hope for controlling events. Sensing imminent danger after the last supper, Jesus proposed no plan to his disciples to avert danger and escape to preach another day. Jesus spontaneously and honorably accedes to the Father's will (Mark 14:36), just as a bystander at Jesus' arrest in the dark garden impetuously swings a sword and cuts off someone's ear (Mark 14:47). There was no contingency plan for avoiding violence.
- present time orientation rather than future. This cultural value relates to the preceding one. The honorable male is expected to meet each challenge as it occurs. There is no future planning or contingency plans. Though it is better to avoid going to court (Prov 20:3; Matt 5:26), when one is dragged before law courts help will be spontaneously provided for self-defense as needed (Matt 10:19-20; Luke 21:14-15).
- human nature is mixture of good and evil, it is unreliable and unpredictable. Your very relatives, those whom you expect to love and protect you, will put you to the test going so far as to have you to death (Matt 10:21-22; Luke 21:16). Imagine what you can expect from outsiders particularly your enemies.
- collateral and hierarchical relationships are preferred rather than an emphasis on the individual; group goals prevail over individual goals. If the group deserts a member, the member alone is powerless and must demonstrate heroic endurance. Jesus' family thought he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). Of the Twelve, one betrayed him (Mark 14:10-11), one denied him (Mark 14:66-72), and all abandoned him (Mark 14:50). In his moment of need, he was quite alone.

Filling in the McClelland model with these values helps a reader to understand and appreciate the cultural dynamics in the biblical accounts of adult males who suffer "in silence" and face death in manly fashion, with honor. The adult male strives to measure up to an ideal of honor. This entails identifying and selecting

true honor over specious honor, honor determined by God more so than honor determined by fellow ethnics. The honorable Mediterranean male accepts suffering and strives to endure suffering without complaint. The honorable male can groan, sigh, pray, and make other honor-enhancing statements.

The dominance of kinship as a central social institution in the Mediterranean world, and group-centeredness as a key value serve as elements of the maintenance system which teaches young boys honorable patterns of behavior and provides opportunities for demonstrating those behaviors. Moreover, the cluster of value preferences that characterize Mediterranean culture also constitute part of the maintenance system that support the culture's definition of the honorable male and honorable male behavior such as enduring suffering and dying with honor.

Death with Honor

Drawing insight from the stories of Eleazar and the Seven brothers in 2 and 4 Macc, David Seeley constructed a model of "The Noble Death" to which he assigned five characteristics: obedience; overcoming physical vulnerability; a military setting for the death; vicariousness, or the quality of being beneficial for others; and sacrificial metaphors. A search of Greco-Roman literature (e.g., Seneca, Epictetus, Silius Italicus, and Tacitus among others) confirmed the model.

Seeley conducted his research by a close and careful reading of texts based mostly on intuition, a common strategy among interpreters of the Bible. He did not employ social scientific methodology. When the evidence for any part of his model was not as strong as might be desirable (for example, the sacrificial metaphors), he would say that that element is not really all that essential to the model. In the end, he concluded that Paul (his focus) may not have had this model explicitly in mind, but it was out there in the cultural atmosphere to influence him. The model has been critically evaluated by others (see CBQ 54:[1992] 172-174; JBL 111/3:[1992] 544-546), and a more thorough social-scientific evaluation of it lies beyond the scope of this present article.

Seeley's intuition of a cultural pattern which he called "The Noble Death" (for males) is quite likely correct. The model he designed could be refined with insights from social science methodology and heuristic, cross-cultural models such as those utilized in this article. Models, especially when fine-tuned according to the data retrieved, have been proven to be quite reliable (see Levinson). In this article, the McClelland model which urges a researcher to cast the net wider than the Cook model facilitated a preliminary examination of suffering in silence, that is, without complaint, as an element that perhaps to be sought in the Greco-Roman evidence for The Noble Death. Seeley's conclusion that the Servant of Yahweh poems had no influence on Paul's interpretations may have been premature and too hasty, as his critics have pointed out. The Noble Death, or Death with Honor deserves further study.

Conclusion

Child-rearing strategies alone cannot adequately explain why adult Mediterranean males would be resigned to suffering torture and death in silence, that is, without complaining. Rather, the ideology, that is, history, tradition, norms and values of ancient Mediterranean culture appear to be the more influential force for defining honorable adult male personality and behavior and for designating suitable child-rearing techniques for training a person in the requisite beliefs, values, and behaviors. The centurion in Mark's gospel is impressed by the way in which Jesus died not so much because no other male faced violent death in this fashion but more likely because Jesus exhibited the expected complex of values that constitute Death with Honor in an exceptional way.

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