JETS 43/2 (June 2000) 213–228

CHALLENGING THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS: MARK 11:27–33 AND MEDITERRANEAN NOTIONS OF HONOR AND SHAME

JOSEPH H. HELLERMAN*

The final quarter of the twentieth century has been characterized by the employment of a variety of new methodologies in NT study. Models imported from the field of cultural anthropology have proved particularly fruitful for scholars interested in gaining a better understanding of the world of the early Christians. Near the beginning of almost every introductory textbook dealing with the cultural background of the NT, the reader encounters a chapter addressing Mediterranean sensibilities concerning honor and shame. Honor is consistently identified as the single most important value or "good" in the ancient world. The cultural centrality of honor serves, in turn, to explain much about Jesus' interactions with his antagonists in the Gospel narratives. Specifically, the questions which Jewish leaders repeatedly bring to Jesus must be interpreted as challenges to Jesus' honor.[1]

Beyond these general observations, however, few writers have attempted to utilize the honor-shame construct in a close reading of a specific Gospel passage.[2] The escalating confrontations between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Mark 11:27–12:34 offer particularly promising material for such

* Joseph H. Hellerman is associate professor of New Testament language and literature at Biola University, La Mirada, CA.

[1] Standard introductory treatments of honor-shame as a cultural script for NT interpretation include B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1993); H. Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (ed. R. L. Rohrbaugh; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1996) 20–40. For specific application to the Lukan corpus, see B. J. Malina and J. H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. J. H. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1991) 25–65. Each of these works draws upon the recent insights of social anthropologists studying Mediterranean society, helpfully summarized in three important collections of essays: J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966); D. D. Gilmore, ed., *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (American Anthropological Association Special Publication 22; Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1987); J. G. Peristiany and J. Pitt-Rivers, eds., *Honour and Grace in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[2] Or any NT passage, for that matter. There are some exceptions. See, for example, D. M. May, "Mark 3:20–35 from the Perspective of Shame/Honor," *BTB* 17 (1987) 83–87; K. C. Hanson, "How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew's Makarisms and Reproaches," *Semeia* 68 (1996) 81–111; and, most notably, the works of D. A. deSilva: "'Let the One Who Claims

analysis, and this has not gone unnoticed in the literature.[3] But even in commentaries intentionally designed to highlight the socio-cultural background of the Gospels, one finds only general comments about the place of honor-and-shame, and challenge-and-riposte, in the conflicts between Jesus and his opponents.[4] My intent here is to carefully examine a single important encounter between Jesus and his adversaries narrated in Mark 11:27–33. I will highlight the way in which the pivotal value of honor in Mediterranean society illumines the text at crucial points in the course of the highly charged dialogue.

I. UNDERSTANDING HONOR AND SHAME

1. *Defining honor*. Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey define honor as "the positive value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the positive appreciation of that person in the eyes of his or her social group." As they proceed to elaborate, "In this perspective honor is a claim to positive worth along with the social acknowledgment of that worth by others."[5] Ideas about honor and shame can be found in virtually all societies. Scholars highlight two crucial characteristics, however, which serve to mark out the ancient Mediterranean world as distinct from contemporary Western culture in this regard:

1. In the world of the NT, honor was not a secondary value (less important, for example, than wealth), as is the case in the modern West. Honor was a pivotal cultural value.
2. In the collectivist culture of antiquity, one's honor was almost exclusively dependent upon the affirmation of the claim to honor by the larger social group to which the individual belonged.

It will prove useful to offer some reflections on each of these two important qualifications.

Honor Establish that Claim in the Lord': Honor Discourse in the Corinthian Correspondence," *BTB* 28 (1998) 61–73; "Honor Discourse and the Rhetorical Strategy of the Apocalypse of John," *JSNT* 71 (1998) 79–110; "Worthy of his Kingdom: Honor Discourse and Social Engineering in 1 Thessalonians," *JSNT* 64 (1996) 49–79; *Despising Shame: The Social Function of the Rhetoric of Honor and Dishonor in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 152; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). Cf. also Malina and Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts" 49–52; and, in less detail, Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, eds., *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

[3] C. Blomberg correctly describes this series of debates leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion as "most notably" concerned with the value of honor (*Jesus and the Gospels* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997] 65). See also the repeated references to "honor-shame societies" and "challenge-riposte" throughout Malina and Rohrbaugh's interpretation of Mark 11:27–12:34 (*Social Science Commentary* 254–260).

[4] For example, Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary* 254–260. The primary liability under which this immensely helpful work labors is the broad scope of its subject matter. Perhaps one should not expect more than general observations on specific Gospel pericopes from a work which attempts to comment on all of the Synoptic Gospels from a social-scientific perspective.

[5] "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts" 25–26.

a. *The centrality of honor*. Writers consistently identify honor as the "dominant" or "paramount" value in Mediterranean culture.[6] Halvor Moxnes suggests that understanding honor and shame is crucial for gaining any meaningful appreciation of the social environment of early Christianity. He offers several examples:

> . . . it is possible to fathom the Mediterranean kinship system only if one understands that family honor is on the line in every public interaction. Similarly, one can understand the division between public and private space, a separation that often occurs along gender lines, only by recognizing the special roles of men and women in the honor system. Patronage, slavery, economic practices, purity rules, meal practices, and even the peculiar Mediterranean sense of identity that derives from group membership must likewise be understood in terms of honor and shame.[7]

My own research into but a single social component of the ancient world—the Mediterranean family—has only served to convince me of the general validity of Moxnes's observations.[8]

Ancient peoples are not unique in embracing honor as a primary cultural value. The pervasive centrality of honor can also be observed in collectivist societies in the world today. Early 1998 found the nation of Korea experiencing a severe economic crisis. Many successful executives lost their jobs. More troubling than the financial woes ensuing from unemployment, however, was the potential loss of family honor. Korean males, responsible in their society for augmenting and defending family honor, now found themselves unable to do so, due to the shame of unemployment. These Korean men responded to their tragic situation in a way which strikes Westerners (whose concerns with personal and family honor are, at best, secondary) as rather odd. Their behavior also illustrates the way in which honor can displace other social values—here, convictions about honesty and truth-telling—when primary and secondary values come into conflict with one another. A major newspaper relates,

> The nation is in serious trouble, and personal dreams have been shattered. Thus the hiking trails at nearby Pukhansan National Park have become a sort of hide-out for newly unemployed businessmen. Too embarrassed to tell their families the bad news, the men continue to leave their homes each morning dressed in work attire but head for the mountains instead of their offices.[9]
> Judging from the efforts to maintain appearances—and thereby preserve honor—reflected in the above quotation, certain high-group Koreans apparently

[6] Ibid. 26. Honor and shame are "core values" according to J. J. Pilch ("Honor/Shame," *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning* [ed. J. J. Pilch and B. J. Malina; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1993] 95).

[7] "Honor and Shame" 19–20. Moxnes's overview of honor and shame includes a balanced and insightful discussion of this key cultural value as well as a helpful summary of the writings of cultural anthropologists who have addressed the issue in their studies of Mediterranean society.

[8] See J. H. Hellerman, *The Church as a Family: Early Christian Communities as Surrogate Kinship Groups* (Ph. D. Diss., UCLA, 1998).

[9] Los Angeles Times, January 14, 1998, PART 'A.'

value honor more highly than they value truth. The same is the case for much of the Mediterranean world.[10]

Honor is not only valued more highly than truth. It is also considered a far more valuable commodity than wealth, among high-group people such as those who lived in the New Testament world. Indeed, for the elites of the Roman Empire, wealth was primarily a vehicle to be utilized to acquire a much more treasured good: public honor. Persons who hoarded their wealth were dishonorable.[11] Those who spent it on elaborate municipal edifices, such as temples and public baths, were accorded great honor for their benefactions.[12] The salient point in all of this is that honor was a central cultural value for the persons among whom Jesus walked and taught in first-century Palestine.[13]

[10] See, for example, the fascinating study by J. Du Boulay ("Lies, Mockery and Family Integrity," *Mediterranean Family Structures* [ed. J. G. Peristiany; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976] 389–406); and my survey of the priority of honor over truth in Mediterranean antiquity (*The Church as a Family*). It is especially common in honor and shame cultures to find persons willing to conceal the truth from those *outside* of their kin group. Thus, the patriarch Joseph lies to the Ishmaelites about his origins in order to preserve the honor of his brothers who betrayed him: "I . . . honored my brothers, and out of regard for them even when they sold me I was silent rather than tell the Ishmaelites that I was the son of Jacob. . . . they kept asking me, 'Are you a slave?' And I replied, 'I am a slave out of a household,' so as not to disgrace my brothers. The greatest of them said to me, 'You are not a slave; even your appearance discloses that.' But I told them that I was a slave" (*T. Jos.* 10:6–11:3).

[11] Pliny the Younger, for example, in a letter in which he informs a friend about a library he built and *alimenta* he financed for the children of his hometown, observes, ". . . the cultivation of liberal inclinations . . . taught me to be free from the general bondage to avarice." Earlier in the letter, Pliny had specifically identified this "bondage" with the "innate disposition to accumulate wealth" by which, Pliny regrets, "mankind is universally governed" (*Ep*. 1.8).

[12] In view here, of course, is the practice of urban patronage, so prevalent in Graeco-Roman antiquity. See R. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); H. Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. J. H. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1991) 241–268. J. Nicols documents a change in the nature of the elite patron's traditional rewards, as Rome transitioned from Republic to Empire. During the republican era, the patron received from his clients votes at election time, soldiers for military campaigns, and the company of his clients as faithful retainers in public. The offices attained and battles won through the support of one's clients served, in turn, to enhance individual and familial honor. Centralization of power in the hands of the emperor, however, put an effective end to these avenues of public honor. Instead, Rome now encouraged a new ideology in which patronage was defined more in terms of civic virtue. In Rome and in the provinces, elites increasingly turned wealth into honor by spending their money on projects which benefited the public. Nicols refers to "the enormous (and virtually unparalleled) outpouring of private capital for public welfare in the second century" ("Pliny and the Patronage of Communities," *Hermes* 108 [1980] 385).

[13] F. G. Downing has recently challenged the categorical assertions of Malina, Neyrey, and others who identify honor as *the* most important social value for persons in Mediterranean antiquity. Downing maintains instead that "'respect' ('honor and shame') is *an* issue of which we need to be aware, but that it is only dominant, 'pivotal,' central (the 'core') when, and where, it is clearly shown to be" ("'Honor' among Exegetes," *CBQ* 61 [1999] 55, author's emphasis).

It is certainly the case that much work remains to be done in refining our definitions of honor and shame, and it is preferable to understand the value as one among several important aspects of Mediterranean social life. Downing is therefore on the mark to challenge the reductionistic

b. *Honor as a public value*. A second distinguishing factor concerns the public nature of honor in the ancient world. As we saw above, honor has been defined along two lines: (1) the individual's claim to honor/status and (2) the community's acknowledgment of that claim. Our understanding of the role of honor in Mediterranean antiquity is continually being refined, and it is the second component of the above definition which is increasingly emphasized in the literature. As Moxnes maintains, "Honor is fundamentally

---

tendency among certain exegetes to understand every interpersonal encounter in the NT primarily in terms of honor and shame. To support his contentions, Downing offers persuasive critiques of a number of recent, unconvincing attempts to read the Gospel pericopes in this manner ("Honor among Exegetes," 58–70). To this degree, Downing's conclusion is a sound one: "The issue of honor, of respect in community, is important, and it may even *on occasion* be of prime importance. It does not help to assume—irrespective of evidence—that it always must be dominant" (ibid. 73, author's emphasis).

What will continue to be debated, of course, is what counts for convincing evidence in any given text-segment. The one passage Downing cites as "a pericope whose overriding concerns are quite clearly 'honor' and 'shame'" is Luke 14:8–10, where such concerns are explicitly evidenced in the language (ἐντιμότερός; μετὰ αἰσχύνης; ἔσται σοι δόξα; ibid. 53). To be fair, Downing allows for the possibility that honor/shame might be important to a particular narrative even in the absence of explicit semantic indicators (ibid. 60–61). He seems more comfortable, however, acknowledging the significance of the value for interpretation primarily in those passages that contain honor/shame terminology.

A strictly linguistic approach has the potential, however, to be unnecessarily limiting where the application of broad social values to Biblical materials is concerned. Important social conventions are at times strongly reflected in a text even in the absence of specific semantic indicators. An illustration will prove helpful. The primary metaphor for the social organization of early Christian communities was the metaphor of family. Early Christian churches thought of themselves as surrogate Mediterranean kinship groups, and they exhibited behavior consonant with that social model. Often we find both family language and family-like behavior exhibited—or enjoined—in a single text-segment. 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 is illustrative. Paul challenges his readers to refrain from unfamily-like behavior (litigation) *and* he utilizes "brother" terminology in four instances to make his point. The family construct is clearly central here, as demonstrated by both Paul's language and the behavioral values that he promotes.

Note, in contrast, Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–37. Neither passage contains kinship terminology in its near context. Nevertheless, as S. S. Bartchy has demonstrated, the behavior exhibited—the sharing of material possessions—is best understood as an expression of the Jerusalem Christians' conception of their community as a surrogate kinship group ("Community of Goods in Acts: Idealization of Social Reality?," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* [ed. B. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 309–318). That is, social values characteristic of the Mediterranean family best explain the behavior exhibited by the Jerusalem Christians—despite the absence of family language in the surrounding context.

The same methodology should be applied to the value of honor and shame. The exegete will of course gravitate toward those texts containing explicit terminology as the most likely candidates for the application of the construct as a useful hermeneutical device. Certain other texts, however, which lack such semantic indicators, will also be better understood when viewed through the lens of this important social value. I hope to demonstrate in what follows that honor serves as *the* primary social value energizing the encounter between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Mark 11:27–33, even in the absence of specific terminology.

As Downing appropriately notes, the importance of honor and shame—or of any allegedly implicit social value, for that matter—in a given text must be demonstrated by the illumination it brings to the interpretation of the passage. To be sure, some of the recent attempts to apply the honor/shame construct to NT narratives are forced and artificial; others, however, are quite convincing. The reader will decide whether the present essay falls in the former, or latter, category.

the *public* recognition of one's social standing."[14] The collectivist nature of ancient society in fact necessitates that one's personal claim to honor is ultimately inconsequential apart from group affirmation. Moxnes proceeds to explain:

> Since the group is so important for the identity of a Mediterranean person, it is critical to recognize that honor status comes primarily from *group* recognition. While honor may sometimes be an inner quality, the value of a person in his or her own eyes, it depends ultimately on recognition from significant others in society. It is a public matter. When someone's claim to honor is recognized by the group, honor is confirmed, and the result is a new social status.[15]

Thus, as Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh assert, "To claim honor that the community does not recognize is to play the fool."[16] The centrality of honor in the world of Jesus, along with the indispensable affirmation of an individual's claim to honor by the person's group, guarantee that in the ancient world honor functioned in a markedly different way than it does in Western society today. Both of these distinguishing characteristics will prove essential for my interpretation of Mark 11:27–33.

2. *Gaining and losing honor*. Honor accrues to an individual in two ways. At the most basic level lies the social standing one inherits at birth, usually referred to in the literature as *ascribed* honor. Each child assumes the general honor status of his birth family. Ascribed honor thus comes directly from the family relationship, not from personal achievement. Inherited family honor served as a key criterion for defining a person's place in ancient Mediterranean society—thus the pervasive recourse throughout ancient literature to genealogies and extended descriptions of ancestral relations.

Ascribed honor, however, is a tenuous commodity. A person can lose or enhance the honor inherited at birth. More important for our purposes is a second avenue for gaining honor. Anthropologists label it *acquired* honor, and it comes through an ongoing social dynamic referred to as "challenge-riposte." In societies in which honor is perceived to be a pivotal social value, interaction between people is typically characterized by competition with others for this prized social commodity. Anthropologists thus refer to Mediterranean culture as an *agonistic* culture. Persons are constantly wrestling with one another to defend or improve their social position, and these interactions occur almost exclusively through public avenues. Malina and Neyrey go so far as to insist that "every social interaction that takes place outside one's family or one's circle of friends is perceived as a challenge to honor, a mutual attempt to acquire honor from one's social equal."[17]

[14] "Honor and Shame" 20, author's emphasis.

[15] Ibid.

[16] *Social Science Commentary* 213.

[17] "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts" 29. The qualifier "outside one's family" is an important one. The blood kin group was the one social group in which the honor game was off-limits. This was also true of a social group which perceived itself to be surrogate family. Thus Paul exhorts his

Such interactions include both positive and negative overtures of challenge and riposte. Insults and verbal attacks come to mind as the most obvious examples of challenges to one's honor. Also to be included, however, are such everyday occurrences as gift-giving, invitations to dinner, debates over legal issues, mutual assistance, bartering for material goods like food and clothing, and arranging marriages. In each case a challenge has been given—"a claim to enter into the social space of another," and the recipient must now interpret the challenge and respond in a culturally appropriate manner in order to defend his honor.[18]

Malina and Neyrey outline the typical structural elements of the highly stylized game of challenge-riposte as follows:[19]

1. Claim to Honor (often implied by action or gesture)
2. Challenge
3. Riposte
4. Public Verdict

This template proves to be a highly profitable heuristic device through which to read a number of the Gospel debates between Jesus and his adversaries. I will now turn to Jesus' encounter with the Jewish leaders in Mark 11:27–33 in order to demonstrate the value of the above four-stage model for Biblical exegesis.

II. AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHALLENGE TO JESUS' AUTHORITY

1. *Step One: Jesus' claim to honor*. Jesus' claim to a high position of honor is not explicitly asserted. It is simply assumed as a given at the outset of the dialogue which begins in Mark 11:28. It in fact forms the backdrop to the whole encounter. The position our text occupies in Mark's broader narrative serves, moreover, to establish this particular verbal exchange as a critical flash-point for (a) the validity of Jesus' claim to honor and (b) the corresponding resistance to that claim on the part of the Jewish aristocracy. The reason for this is the close proximity of our text to the story of Jesus' action in the temple (Mark 11:15–19).[20] I view the temple incident as Jesus' most overt self-assertion of divine authority in the Markan account. In first-century Jewish Palestine, a claim of divine authority represented a correspondingly profound claim of honor, thus the ensuing challenge to Jesus's authority—and thereby to his honor—in the confrontation portrayed in our text.

"brothers and sisters" to "outdo one another in showing honor." The Christian "brother," therefore, is to grant honor to others in the family, rather than seek to acquire it for himself (Rom 12:1, 10).

[18] Ibid. 30.

[19] Ibid.

[20] See J. P. Heil's survey of the central role of the temple in Mark's narrative. Notably, Heil provides the following heading for the portion of his essay which deals with our text: "Jesus demonstrates his authority to replace the temple (11:23–27)" ("The Narrative Strategy and Pragmatics of the Temple Theme in Mark," *CBQ* 59 [1997] 81).

Mark takes pains throughout his Gospel to assure the readers that Jesus of Nazareth has great honor—both *ascribed* and *acquired*. Jesus is the anointed Son of God (1:1), whose honor is publicly proclaimed by none other than God himself (1:11). His divine family pedigree is therefore unassailable despite the reservations of his blood family and local villagers (3:21; 6:1–6). Jesus' authority is emphasized throughout Mark's account (1:22, 27; 2:10), and Jesus can delegate this authority to others (6:7).[21] As his authority is demonstrated in the presence of his followers through his miraculous healings and victorious encounters with demons, Jesus' honor rating among the people increases proportionally (cf. 5:1–20; 7:31–37).

The connection between Jesus' authority and his honor rating is an important one. As I observed above, honor represents the pivotal cultural value in high-group, honor and shame societies such as first-century Palestine. However, that which constitutes honor—i.e. the *content* of this abstract commodity labeled "honor"—differs somewhat from culture to culture. What is honorable in a given society is what that society's people consider valuable or worthy.[22] Erudition in the Jewish Torah, for example, guaranteed one a place of considerable honor among first-century Judeans.[23] Most Jews in Jesus' world also viewed manual labor as an honorable endeavor. Pagan elites in cities throughout the empire, however, would have viewed Torah scholarship as irrelevant to the honor question and manual labor as outright dishonorable.

It is important, then, to determine precisely what the inhabitants of a particular culture deem honorable or shameful, and this is where the authority of Jesus and his honor rating closely coincide. Among Jesus' Jewish peers, it is patently clear that spiritual/religious authority was held in the highest esteem. Jesus displayed that authority every time he taught, healed or delivered persons from the tyranny of demonic forces. These undeniable demonstrations of divine authority naturally resulted in a steady increase in the honor that was *ascribed* to Jesus by his followers. I discussed above the indispensable component of the public affirmation of one's claim to honor. For Mark, the public verdict of affirmation of Jesus' honor comes again and again, as the "crowd" (ὁ ὄχλος) responds to Jesus' authoritative teaching and marvelous deeds.[24]

It is not until his final week in Jerusalem, however, that Jesus himself openly asserts his claim to honor in a most straightforward, indisputable

[21] See the detailed survey in J. R. Edwards, "The Authority of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark," *JETS* 37 (1994) 217–233. Edwards suggests "that the essential and distinctive characteristic of Jesus is to be found in his *exousia* and that his authority is perhaps the most significant example of implicit Christology in the gospel tradition" (217–218).

[22] Malina and Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts" 26–27. DeSilva carefully contrasts perspectives on honor held in minority cultures (e.g. first-century Judeans, or second-century Christians) with convictions about honor which characterized ancient society in general (*Despising Shame*).

[23] Thus Gamaliel is introduced in Acts as (and his influence in the Sanhedrin explained by the fact that he is) νομοδιδάσκαλος τίμιος παντὶ τῷ λαῷ (5:34).

[24] The role of the crowd (versus the disciples) in the Gospel narratives has attracted attention in recent scholarship. See the summary in D. F. Watson, "People, Crowds," *Dictionary of Jesus and*

way. This occurs in what has been traditionally identified as the "Temple cleansing" (Mark 11:15–18). Jesus' action in the temple has been a focal point of recent scholarship, resulting in several competing views about the meaning of the incident. I am convinced that Jesus' actions constitute a symbolic prophetic action condemning (and perhaps prophesying the destruction of) the temple.[25] Mark's audience would have likely interpreted the action in view of early Christian understandings about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus prophesies the end of the temple system, because "the sacrificial system will be outmoded and superseded as soon as Christ dies and is raised again. . . . Only in Jesus will forgiveness of sins then be available."[26] William Herzog is certainly correct, however, to read the incident historically as a response on the part of Jesus to the Jewish aristocracy's "exploitative and oppressive domination of the people through taxation and tribute."[27]

The connection of the temple incident with Jesus' honor rating is as follows. In his symbolic prophetic warning of the imminent destruction of the Jerusalem temple—the very center of Jewish social and religious life—Jesus intentionally identifies himself with Old Testament prophets who, at

---

the Gospels (ed. J. B. Green and S. McKnight; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 605–609. For Mark, note particularly E. S. Malbon, "Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers," *NovT* 28 (1986) 104–130. As I will demonstrate below, the crowds constitute an indispensable component of the challenge-riposte scenario detailed in Mark 11:27–33. Specifically, the crowds are the people who offer what Malina and Neyrey refer to as the "public verdict" which declares the winner of the honor contest reflected in the pericope ("Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts" 30).

Although it is beyond the scope of my essay, I suspect it would prove quite profitable to reexamine the role of the "crowds" through the lens of honor-shame in a number of Gospel pericopes. I believe we would discover that the crowds function as much more than simply "realistic models of Christian discipleship for the reader" (Watson, "People, Crowds" 607). In Mark, for example, the ὄχλος word group occurs thirty-eight times. Only the final four occurrences (surrounding the crucifixion) show the crowd responding to Jesus in a negative way. In every other instance (there is one exception, a neutral use of the term in 12:41 to refer to "the crowd putting money into the treasury"), the crowd is *attracted* to Jesus—an implicit acknowledgment of his increasing honor as a teacher and a healer.

The reaction of the crowd is a particularly important component in the series of honor challenges Jesus fields in Mark 11–12 (cf. ὄχλος: 11:18, 32; 12:12, 37). In fact, in these climactic confrontations it is clear to me that the primary narrative function of the crowd is to publicly affirm Jesus' honor (cf. 12:37—"And the large crowd was listening to him with delight") at the expense of that of the Jewish leaders who challenge him in the temple court.

[25] Cf. W. R. Herzog II, "Temple Cleansing," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* 820. Important treatments include E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 61–76; C. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *CBQ* 51 (1989) 237–270; R. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987/1993) 297–300. See also more recently B. Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); and the nuanced critique of Chilton's reconstruction in C. Evans, "Jesus and the 'Cave of Robbers': Toward a Jewish Context for the Temple Action," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993) 93–110.

[26] Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* 317–318.

[27] Herzog, "Temple Cleansing" 820.

God's command, acted out their verbal prophecies by means of certain striking behaviors (cf. Jer 19:27–28). In so doing, Jesus thus pointedly claims for himself the divine authority characteristic of God's messengers in the classical prophetic tradition. This, in turn, constitutes a profound, overtly public, declaration of honor on the part of Jesus, due to the relationship between religious authority and social standing in Jesus' world. Finally, Jesus' claim to honor is, once again, immediately—and publicly—acknowledged as legitimate, for, as Mark is quick to inform us, ὁ ὄχλος ἐχεπλήσσετο ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ (11:18). The stage is now set for a direct challenge to Jesus' honor.

2. *Step Two: The challenge of the Jewish Sanhedrin*. The opening of our narrative finds Jesus and the Twelve "walking in the temple" where, Mark informs us, "the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him" (11:27).[28] To fully appreciate the highly charged nature of the ensuing verbal duel, we must keep in mind the physical environment in which the confrontation occurs. Recent archaeological work in Jerusalem has generally confirmed the magnitude of the temple mount as detailed in ancient sources. The mount occupied more than 172,000 square yards—"a rhomboid equivalent in area to thirty-five football fields"—making it the largest site of its kind in the world.[29] Much of the site was open space, the largest portion of which is known as the Court of the Gentiles. Jesus is believed to have taught his followers in the pillared halls surrounding this outermost court. The Court of the Gentiles is therefore the most probable setting for the confrontation outlined in Mark 11:27–33. It is not unreasonable to assume the presence of several thousand persons in the outer court on the day in question, for Passover week attracted great crowds of people to Jerusalem. The encounter narrated in our text is therefore a highly public one, thus reinforcing my contention that the offensive initiated by the Jewish leaders is essentially a challenge to Jesus' honor.

The representatives of the Sanhedrin ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?" (11:28). Robert Gundry rightly interprets "these things" and "them" (translating ταῦτα in each case) to refer to Jesus' action in the temple.[30] The leaders are specifically challenging Jesus' divine authority to prophetically denounce the temple.

[28] I cite the NRSV throughout.

[29] M. O. Wise, "Temple," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* 812. See also C. Meyers, "Temple, Jerusalem," *ABD* 6:350–369; K. Ritmeyer and L. Ritmeyer, "Reconstructing Herod's Temple Mount in Jerusalem," *BAR* 15.6 (1989) 23–43.

[30] R. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 657. J. Kingsbury concurs, suggesting that the authorities confront Jesus in our text with "the cleansing of the temple still fresh in their minds" (*Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] 79). Gundry cites the forward position of ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ in the previous verse as evidence that Mark wishes at this point in the narrative to recall the temple incident. Alternative understandings of ταύτα are significantly less persuasive (*Mark* 666).

A further aspect of interpersonal behavior in honor-shame societies highlights the significance of the confrontation. As we saw above, traditional societies have clear rules for the kind of challenge-riposte scenario we find in Mark 11:27–33. One of the unspoken assumptions of this cultural script is that a proper challenge to one's honor can take place only among equals. As Moxnes relates, "A challenge always implies recognition of the honor of the other person; hence to challenge an inferior or somebody without honor brings shame and humiliation to the challenger. Likewise, when a challenge is issued, it is accepted only if one considers the challenger worthy of respect."[31] By publicly challenging Jesus in the presence of a multitude in the temple court, the leaders thereby implicitly acknowledge Jesus as an equal in honor, even as they seek to publicly shame him.[32]

Gundry maintains that the questions posed by Jesus' adversaries are not designed to elicit any information in return but only to embarrass Jesus and expose him as a fraud. The members of Sanhedrin, he reasons, "do not need to be told that Jesus lacks the kind of authority that rabbinic ordination confers, and they would not dream of suggesting that he got authority from God."[33] Gundry is overly preoccupied, however, with the specific content of the leaders' questions. Verbal exchanges like that outlined in our text operate at two levels. At one level is the logical meaning of the questions and answers in the exchange itself. At another level (a more important one, I suggest), these exchanges of information serve only as vehicles for the challenge-riposte scenarios discussed above. Western interpreters tend to focus their discussions around the import of the various statements in these dialogues, ignoring the broader social context of the honor challenge. But it is the latter which ultimately drives the whole enterprise.

In the present case, the questions from the Jewish Sanhedrin function primarily as a challenge to Jesus' honor. To this extent, Gundry is correct to suggest that the Jewish leaders already have answers to the questions they pose—they are not eliciting information. However, in order to defend his honor, Jesus must offer a riposte which deals fairly with the specific information sought by his adversaries. It is thus not the case that Jesus' adversaries expected no response from their challenge. According to the cultural script shared by those in Jesus' audience, the questions would have been interpreted as a public challenge to Jesus' honor, and all eyes would have

[31] "Honor and Shame" 20–21.

[32] Whether or not the Jewish leaders truly consider Jesus their peer is not at issue here. His honor rating with the crowds is now such that the Sanhedrin must deal with Jesus as a social equal, or else lose face with the populace. The cultural script of honor-shame, challenge-riposte, therefore necessitates the confrontation outlined in our text, irrespective of the leaders' personal opinions about the character or authority of Jesus. It is no accident, then, that 11:27 marks the first point in the narrative in which Jesus encounters representatives of all three groups from the Sanhedrin together: οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι. Jesus' *acquired* honor has increased to the point that he must now be publicly challenged by the highest authorities in Jerusalem. Nor is it coincidental, in view of the shaming they received here at the hands of Jesus, that these same groups are listed together as collectively responsible for Jesus' arrest and condemnation (14:43, 53; 15:1).

[33] *Mark* 657.

been on Jesus in anticipation of a verbal riposte of some kind. What the Sanhedrin certainly did not expect was a riposte that turned their attempt to dishonor Jesus right back on their own heads.[34]

3. *Step Three: Jesus' brilliant riposte*. Jesus immediately responds in a way that forces his challengers to defend their own honor: "Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me'" (11:29–30). Jesus does not directly interact with the content of the leaders' questions. Instead, he forcefully takes charge of the broader challenge-riposte scenario. By responding to a question with another question, Jesus essentially establishes the ground rules for the balance of the dialogue. Forced to play by rules established by their opponent, the Jewish leaders will soon discover that their options are highly limited—a limitation Jesus will use to great advantage as the heated exchange unfolds. Jesus' intention here is not first and foremost to answer the questions that have been posed. His first priority is to gain the upper hand in an encounter in which the public honor of each party is at stake. The text demonstrates this in a variety of ways.

First, notice that Jesus immediately answers his challengers by offering to pose "one question" (ἕνα λόγον). The word ἕνα may be generally equivalent to τινα, "a certain (question)." Conversely, however, the numeral can carry distinct cardinal emphasis. In light of the cultural script being played out in the present narrative, Gundry is correct to contrast "the oneness of Jesus' question with the twoness of the questions asked him by the Sanhedrin."[35] Jesus' challengers have failed to dishonor him with two questions. He will shame them with but a single question. Jesus thus aggressively embraces the challenge to defend his honor. Secondly, his repeated call to his adversaries to respond to his single question also portrays Jesus as taking charge of the encounter. The insistent repetition in the imperative—ἀποκρίθητέ μοι . . . ἀποκρίθητέ μοι (11:29–30)—serves further to put the Sanhedrin on the defensive.

The specific question about John's baptism thus finds itself sandwiched between rhetorical barbs which can be properly understood only as reflections of the struggle for honor which ultimately defines the encounter. The above considerations therefore lead me to diagram Jesus' riposte structurally as follows:

[34] At the opposite end of the spectrum from Gundry is H. Waetjen. Waetjen is so preoccupied with the content of the Jewish leaders' questions, that he suggests the encounter might be "an unofficial judicial inquiry" which "may produce evidence that can be used against [Jesus] and result in bringing him to trial on substantive charges before the court" (*A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] 185). This is to read too much into the questions, which, again, are subordinate in importance to the overall thrust of the confrontation.

[35] *Mark* 657.

ἐπερωτήσω ὑμᾶς ἕνα λόγον
καὶ ἀποκρίθητέ μοι καὶ ἐρῶ ὑμῖν ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ·
τὸ βάπτισμα τὸ Ἰωάννου ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἦν ἢ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων;
ἀποκρίθητέ μοι.

The diagram visually illustrates the subsidiary role which Jesus' question plays in a dialogue which is primarily an agonistic exchange over honor. The question concerning John's baptism is simply a vehicle Jesus draws upon in order to seize control of the encounter. His efforts to take charge—represented in the three non-indented clauses above—constitute the rhetorical focal point of his response. The question remains indispensable, however, for now the leaders must respond to the specifics of Jesus' query in order to defend their own honor.

4. *Step Four: The implicit public verdict*. Mark informs us (with a certain delight, we may imagine) of the quandary in which the Jewish leaders found themselves:

> They argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'Of human origin'?"—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (11:31–33).

Jesus' opponents discuss two possible responses. We must consider each of the options in turn. For the dilemma of Jesus' adversaries is not simply that they can offer no reasonable answer to his question. More to the point, their options have been so limited by Jesus' brilliant riposte that they have no way to publicly defend their honor. This will become apparent as we examine the alternatives.

Like Jesus, the Sanhedrin depended upon the populace for the public affirmation of their claim to honor in Jewish society. Legitimation by Roman imperial authorities was, of course, an absolute necessity for elite Jewish retainers who wished to occupy positions of power in Jerusalem. Apart from popular support, however, the aristocracy's claims to authority counted for little, as the events of A.D. 67–70 tragically illustrate. When Mark informs us that the leaders "were afraid of the crowd" (11:32), we may interpret this to mean that Jesus' adversaries were afraid to compromise the public affirmation of honor which had been theirs up to this point in their lives as members of the ruling Sanhedrin.

This suggests that to answer that John's baptism was "of human origin" would have been unthinkable for the Jewish leaders. The people in the crowd, Mark tells us, "all regarded John as truly a prophet." To publicly deny the truth of that conviction would be to compromise the Sanhedrin's honor among the people and, by extension, the leaders' effectiveness as Roman retainers. In contrast, the other option—to answer that John's baptism was "from heaven"—would have been most compelling to Jesus' adversaries.

Indeed, for the Jewish leaders to *retain* their honor among the crowds, "from heaven" constitutes the ideal response. After all, the baptizer was dead, so there was no potential conflict of interest or authority in agreeing with the people's assessment of John.[36] And we must keep in mind that it is the crowd, throughout the tension-filled debates of Mark 11–12, that proffers the public verdict in these challenge-riposte encounters. To reply to Jesus that John's baptism was "from heaven," then, would align the Sanhedrin with the onlooking crowd, protect their honor in a highly-charged public setting, and put Jesus, once again, on the defensive.

Or would it? The rhetorical knife, as the reader is well aware, sharply cuts both ways. Although agreement with the convictions of the crowd would have preserved the Sanhedrin's honor in the short run, it would have left them open to another riposte from Jesus, one which would have proved ultimately devastating: "Why then did you not believe him?" (11:31). For to acknowledge the authority of John—i.e. to "believe him"—is to acknowledge Jesus' own authority to prophetically denounce the whole temple enterprise and therefore to implicitly legitimate Jesus' action in the temple on the previous day (11:15–19). This is so because of John the Baptizer's attitude both toward the temple and toward Jesus.

Mark's narrative begins with John appearing in the wilderness, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). The reference to "forgiveness of sins" has been interpreted in a variety of ways.[37] What is important for our purposes is that the locale or institution immediately associated with "forgiveness of sins" in first-century Judea was the Jerusalem temple—not the Jordan river. For John to offer the forgiveness of sins outside the normal avenues of the centralized sacrificial system was to essentially call into question the ongoing validity of that system for the procurement of divine forgiveness.

The Lukan infancy narrative relates that John came from priestly stock, a heritage which he apparently later rejected. The coherence between Mark 1 and Luke 1 suggests that John Meier is quite on target (in spite of his own continuing reservations) in his description of John the Baptizer's activities: " . . . the only son of a priest turned his back on the vocation decreed for him by his birth, effectively rejected both his priestly family and the temple, and struck out into the desert to embrace the role of an Israelite prophet of judgment."[38]

[36] Jesus elsewhere specifically refers to the practice of posthumously honoring dead prophets who were resisted by Israel's leaders during their lifetime: "So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs" (Luke 11:48; cf. Matt 23:29).

[37] See J. Meier's helpful discussion of the alternatives (*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [New York: Doubleday, 1994] 2:53–56). I am attracted to Meier's suggestion that John's baptism was symbolic in nature, "proclaiming, anticipating, and assuring the cleansing from sin that the holy spirit would effect on the last day when it was poured out like water on the repentant sinner by the stronger one" (ibid. 2:55).

[38] Ibid. 25.

The salient points for the interpretation of our text are found in John's rejection of temple and priesthood. For the Jewish leaders to concede the divine authority of John's baptism—and thereby preserve their honor among the temple crowd—they must simultaneously acknowledge John's critique of the temple's sacrificial system, along with his promise of forgiveness apart from the temple through the agency of a "stronger one" still to come (1:7). Such an acknowledgment, in turn, implicitly affirms the legitimacy of Jesus' prophetic challenge to the temple system in Mark 11:15–19.

For Mark's audience, John's attitude toward Jesus, of course, stands as the more obvious reason that the Sanhedrin cannot publicly affirm John's baptism. It is hard to tell how much the Jewish authorities knew about the relationship between Jesus and John during the latter's lifetime. The reader of Mark's account, however, recognizes that Jesus is the "stronger one" whom John baptized and whom God honored with a declaration of his sonship from on high.[39] Although it must remain speculative, I suspect that Jesus' adversaries knew enough about the relationship between Jesus and John to recognize that any affirmation of the latter's authority implied at least some recognition of the authority—and honor—of Jesus.

Jesus thus places his challengers on the horns of a dilemma.[40] He has erected an impermeable roadblock along the only possible avenue of riposte available to his adversaries. The Jewish leaders had come to challenge Jesus' honor. Now the tables are turned, and the opponents suddenly find themselves with only one way to preserve their own honor rating in the midst of this heated public exchange. Regardless of their true convictions, the representatives of the Jewish Sanhedrin surely long to agree with the crowd that John's baptism was "from heaven" and thus retain their honor among the people.[41] They could not, however, for to concede to John divine authority was to concede the same to Jesus, thereby (a) answering their own initial questions concerning the nature of Jesus' authority and (b) publicly placing Jesus in a position of honor wholly unparalleled and unassailable.

The Jewish leaders are irredeemably trapped, and they are finally reduced to uttering a falsehood which, ironically, becomes true in a most profound sense. They answer Jesus' brilliant riposte with the statement, "We do not know" (11:33). The statement is deceptive, of course, in the sense

[39] B. van Iersel views Jesus' baptism at the hands of John as the key referent for the question in Mark 11:30: "Jesus has the right to act the way he does because of what the voice from heaven said to him. He, more than the authorities, is more at home in the temple, because God has called him his dear son" (*Reading Mark* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989] 148). So also K. Huber, "Zur Frage nach christologischen Implikationen in den 'Jerusalemer Streitgesprächen' bei Markus," *SNT(SU)* 21 (1996) 5–19.

[40] Mark's observation, "They argued with one another," should not be missed (11:31). Again, the encounter is a public one, and Mark's intention in vividly portraying the perplexity of Jesus' opponents (imperfect διελογίζοντο) is clearly to underline the social discomfort the Sanhedrin experienced at the hands of Mark's protagonist.

[41] As noted above, honor is more valued than truth in agonistic societies, and I am quite persuaded that the leaders would have aligned themselves with the crowd's opinion of John (regardless of their own convictions), had not Jesus effectively prevented them from doing so.

that the Jewish leaders certainly did have convictions concerning the source of John's—and Jesus'—authority. They obviously believed that John's authority was "from men." But they falsely assert their ignorance. However, at another level—the level at which the high-stakes game of challenge-riposte is being played out—Jesus has finally forced his challengers to confess the truth. They really "do not know." These august, (in many cases) rabbinically schooled representatives of the Jewish Sanhedrin are, in the final analysis, wholly ignorant of divine things. They cannot tell whether John's baptism is from men or from God. And Jesus leaves them no other option than to admit their spiritual ignorance—on their own turf (the temple court), in the presence of scores of captivated onlookers. In accordance with his own conditions (11:29), then, Jesus has earned the right to refuse to answer his opponents' initial question, and this proves him wholly victorious in the challenge-riposte engagement.[42]

III. CONCLUSION

Robert Gundry summarizes his characteristically thorough analysis of Mark 11:29–33 with a categorical assertion: "The whole dialogue has to do with nothing *deeper* than saving and losing face."[43] In view of the above analysis, I would substitute, for Gundry's "deeper," the term "other." In the agonistic society of Graeco-Roman Palestine there *was* nothing "deeper"—nothing more important—than saving and losing face in public contests over honor. The perspicuity of Scripture is such that a background in cultural anthropology is hardly necessary in order to perceive that Jesus makes his challengers look foolish in the series of strained encounters in Mark 11–12. A grasp of honor-shame cultural sensibilities is indispensable, however, for properly appreciating just how utterly intolerable such behavior is in a society in which religious leaders are so dependent upon public affirmation to maintain their status in society's pecking order.

Therefore, to rephrase Gundry's assertion, we must conclude that Jesus' encounter with the Jewish Sanhedrin in Mark 11:29–33 "has to do with nothing *other* than saving and losing face." Jesus victoriously enhanced his honor at the expense of the Jewish leaders who confronted him. And the public shame to which Jesus subjected these esteemed representatives of the Jewish Sanhedrin surely contributed toward the fate he suffered only a few days later as he hung on a Roman cross.

[42] Incredibly, C. Myers, initially sensitive to the "narrative structure of challenge/riposte" in our passage, nevertheless concludes, "The episode ends in a draw: the leaders are unwilling to publicly commit themselves, and Jesus refuses their interrogation" (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988] 306–307).

[43] *Mark* 667.