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Book Review

Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World

E. Randolph Richards and Richard James
InterVarsity Press, 2020
281 pages

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The Bible was written from a collectivist cultural worldview that functioned under the societal structures of kinship, patronage, and honor/shame. If the Bible is to be understood as its original authors intended and as the people to whom it was written would have understood and interpreted it, these cultural values cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, as authors E. Randolph Richards and Richard James note in *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*, Westerners tend to read Scripture through the eyes of individualist culture and miss much of the deeper level meanings that went without being said in biblical collectivist culture. Thus, reading Scripture with individualist eyes can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misapplications of the Bible.

Kinship, patronage, and honor/shame are as ingrained in collectivist societies as the concepts of rights, fairness, and freedom

are in individualist ones. The book examines for example, how kinship for collectivists contributes to a totally different understanding of family relationships. While individualists see family as primarily composed of parents and children, collectivists understand family and community much more broadly and extended. Family and community also function inseparably from one's identity. The family and group from which one comes can never be ignored, discounted, or forgotten. This collectivist worldview has a huge impact on one's choices, life events, and actions. One of Richards and James' biblical examples of this is the story of Joseph (see pp. 11-12). Individualists read it as a story about personal or career success amid trying circumstances and make applications to life with that in mind, whereas the original collectivist readers of the story would see it as a story of the restoration of relationships in the family of Jacob. The resulting applications end up quite different when the story is read this way and are more faithful to the original intent of the author of Genesis.

Another collectivist social structure that individualists miss in Scripture is patronage, which the book discusses at length. Because collectivists identify themselves as integrally connected to a group, everyone in the group is responsible to some extent for others in the group. This creates relationships in the community where sharing and caring take on reciprocal expectations. The challenge, however, is to meet reciprocal expectations when there is an inequity of wealth and power in a relationship. How can a poor man ever expect to repay a rich man in his community for help given? The answer is patronage. In a patron-client relationship, the patron will provide opportunity, resources, or other benefits to the client in return for loyalty, respect, faithfulness, and gratitude. Biblically, the best example of this asymmetrical relationship is God to humans, but Scripture also shows this dynamic in human relationships. The story of Elisha and the wealthy Shunammite woman in 2 Kings (see p. 89-91), for example, shows how each brought to the other benefits which the other was not able to provide. Both persons were helped by the relationship, and the Lord worked in the situation to accomplish his purposes. This is not to say that collectivist patronage is better than individualism, just different, and the

differences are important to be aware of. Jesus in fact critiqued some of the negative aspects of patronage and put limits on reciprocity so it would not be abused (See Matt. 5:38-42 discussed on p. 81-82). The point is to understand that patronage is part of the biblical social world and if individualists do not understand that it is there, much will be missed, and misunderstood.

Individualists also frequently miss in Scripture the dynamic of honor and shame found in collectivist cultures. Honor and shame are social tools used to reinforce community values and boundaries. Individualists on the other hand frequently use guilt to impose values. Honor and shame can be part of an individualist's perspective, but they are typically interpreted through individualist eyes rather than communally. Collective honor and shame are found all throughout Scripture. Honor is what people desired in the Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman worlds, whether they were a king, like Saul, or a simple fisherman, like Peter. The book examines various kinds of ascribed or earned honor, and even honor contests, which motivated and impacted collective human relationships and institutions. Shame on the other hand, which is not the opposite of honor in the Bible, was most often used biblically in a positive way to refocus or improve behavior in a group, resulting in transformation and growth for the person and community. Jesus, for example, used shame in Matt. 18:15-17 (See page 192). His teaching here uses gentle shaming to accomplish restoration to the community. Individualists, however, typically apply a negative use of shame. Individualist shame used with guilt ostracizes, but collective shame is restorative. Honor and shame clearly function differently in the biblical world. Understanding collective honor and shame will therefore lead to deeper biblical insights and applications to life.

The book is extremely insightful on two levels. First, it helps individualist students and teachers of Scripture develop an awareness and understanding of collective societal functioning in the interpretation of Scripture. This awareness would be very helpful for pastors and church leaders to minister more effectively to collectivist peoples amid an individualist culture. Second, the authors share fascinating personal experiences as they encounter

modern-day collectivism cross-culturally. Individualist cross-cultural workers will therefore gain a greater awareness of collectivist worldviews as they read, which will help in doing more effective evangelism, discipleship, and ministry among collective cultures. The value of an individualist understanding biblical collectivism for Bible study, ministry, and cross-cultural engagement cannot be overstated.

If the book lacks anything, it is a discussion of how to tell when a collectivist worldview is in play in a Bible passage so misreading as an individualist can be avoided. Though there are many Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and commentaries available, these are often written from an individualist perspective. A listing of resources from collective cultures that highlight and explain collective cultural aspects in the Bible would be helpful. Still, this book will have a great impact in leading readers to a transformative awareness of the importance of seeing Scripture through collectivist eyes. It is a must-read for all individualists who read and teach the Bible and desire to interpret and apply Scripture more closely to its original collectivist context.