

# Honour and shame as key concepts in Chrysostom's exegesis of the Gospel of John

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## Abstract

*Recently, studies have illustrated that honour and shame were core values in the Mediterranean world in general and in the Bible too. These studies usually resort to classical sources to support the claims being made. Modern scholars, who take the historical-critical approach seriously, have come to realize the importance of reading the Bible according to its appropriate cultural context, which of necessity includes an appreciation of honour and shame as social core values. However, the article shows that patristic sources have been neglected by many scholars who study the social values of the ancient world. This article illustrates the importance of these values for patristic authors. John Chrysostom's homilies on the Gospel of John are used as an example to prove how he employed values such as honour and shame as exegetical keys to unlock the meaning of John's gospel.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is now generally accepted that honour and shame were pivotal values in antiquity (Malina 2001:27ff; Pilch and Malina 1993:106-107; Peristiany 1966). These social values shaped the lives of peoples in the ancient Mediterranean world, including Jesus and his disciples (Neyrey 1998:3). We, therefore, have to read ancient documents according to its appropriate cultural context, which necessarily includes appreciation of honour and shame as core social values (Neyrey 1998:4). Scholars therefore attempt to read the New Testament in terms

of prevalent social values (Neyrey 1998; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1993; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998).

Modern scholars would often appeal to the works of classical authors in order to show how important these values were in the ancient world. It is interesting, however, that these scholars very seldom consult the patristic writings (the only exception is Botha who has written extensively on the social values in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian; see Botha 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2002). Ancient theologians, such as Chrysostom, had first-hand knowledge of these values, and honour and shame were key concepts in their exegesis of the Scriptures. The aim of this article is to show to what extent Chrysostom employed social values such as honour and shame as exegetical keys in his reading of the Gospel of John.

## **2. CHRYSOSTOM'S INVITATION TO HIS CONGREGATION TO LISTEN TO HIS HOMILIES**

Chrysostom begins his homilies by inviting people to the church and to listen to his preaching on the Gospel of John and to partake of the Eucharist. He emphasizes that it is an honour to be invited to the Eucharist. It is always an honour to be invited by a king and to eat with him in his palace (Hom i.7). Once one has enjoyed the privilege of such a company, it is a shame to leave the church and to go to the theatre and watch pernicious plays (Hom i.6).

Chrysostom employs these social values to admonish his congregation to practise in their lives what they have heard in the church.

The contents of what is being taught can also ascribe honour or shame to listeners. Chrysostom therefore argues that it is also more honourable to listen to John than to philosophers such as Plato and Pythagoras (Hom ii.3). The latter spoke from their own imagination, but John was inspired by God. The teaching of John is also more honourable, because he is more steadfast, while the philosophers are continuously changing their minds. Moreover, the philosophers are also robbing us of honour when they teach that "the souls of men become flies, and gnats, and bushes" (Hom ii.3).

In the rest of this article it will be shown how Chrysostom employs honour and shame in his exegesis of the Gospel of John. Different genres (or types) of texts will be scrutinized, such as an argumentative text (the Prologue of John), a parable (of the wedding banquet), a miracle (the wedding in Cana and the raising of Lazarus), a discourse (Jesus and the Samaritan woman), and a narrative text (washing of feet and the Last Supper).

### **3. HONOUR AND SHAME IN CHRYSOSTOM'S EXEGESIS OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN**

#### **3.1 The Prologue of the Gospel of John**

Chrysostom says that we always most honour the eldest of beings (Hom ii.7). That explains why John starts his Gospel with the words "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." John is therefore ascribing honour to Christ, and by doing so he is also displaying spiritual wisdom. However, Chrysostom adds that there are people who are always trying to destroy the honour of Christ (Hom iii.2). They argue that the words "in the beginning was the Word" do not denote eternity for this same expression was also used concerning heaven and earth.

What these people don't realize, is that when they destroy the honour of Christ whom they say they worship, they are also destroying their own honour, and "fill their faces with shame" (Hom iii.2). And note that one's face is the most honourable zone of the body, because it refers to the human capabilities of thinking, judging, evaluating and the like (Pilch & Malina 2000:68). Chrysostom answers the shameless people who want to rob Christ of his honour, that, since Christ is the Maker and Creator of everything, He is necessarily before creation (Hom iii.2). He therefore has honour because He is without beginning.

In John 1:3 we read: "All things were made by Him". Chrysostom says that we should not infer from the phrase "by Him" that Christ was inferior to God and that this verse labels Him as a mere instrument. On the contrary, Chrysostom argues that God and Christ have the same honour (Hom v.2).

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Elsewhere (Hom xxxix.1) Chrysostom is again appealing to social values to confirm the doctrine of the Trinity. He says that though God is the Father of Jesus, there is no difference of essence or inferiority of honour. This is proof that Jesus was not begotten, because if He were begotten, that would imply that He afterwards received his honour. And there would be no reason for Him to be assigned this honour at a later stage. The fact of the matter is that Christ is coming to judge us. This necessarily means that He has the same power with the Father, and that He too can punish or honour whom He will (Hom xxxix).

#### **3.1.1 “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive Him” (Jn 1:11)**

Chrysostom also commented upon John 1:11: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive Him.” This was indicative of the folly of the Jews, and we should be ashamed of our common nature (Hom ix.1). He says that the Gentiles, on the contrary, accepted Christ, despite their shameful background: they worshipped these gods by shameful words, and more shameful deeds. Nevertheless, they eventually honoured Jesus (Hom ix.1).

It is honourable to have a teacher with honour. But John is not ashamed of the dishonour of his Teacher, and tells us about the insolence which was used towards Him when the Jews rejected Jesus (Hom x.2). The fact that John records even this, is for Chrysostom a proof of John’s truth-loving disposition. He also says that if we feel shame because of this event, we should rather feel the shame for those who offered the insult, than for Him who was on the receiving end of the insult (Hom x.2).

Christ came to give us the opportunity to become sons of God. This is an honour, and if we do not accept his offer, we deprive ourselves of a great honour. Chrysostom adds that Christ makes this offer to people who have honour and to those who do not have any honour. He then gives examples of people who have honour, namely learned people, males, old men, rich people and rulers. Examples of people, who do not have honour, are unlearned people, females, children, poor people and private people, i e people without state offices (Hom x.2).

Chrysostom says that among men those who have received absolute control of any matters have almost as much power as those who entrusted the authority to them (Hom x.2). Similarly, when God entrusts to us the opportunity to become his sons, we are greatly honoured. This is even more true when it is God who puts this honour in our hands since He is greater and better than all (Hom x.2).

Nobody feels that it is wrong when lawgivers punish criminals. On the contrary, we even honour them the more on account of the punishments they have enacted. Similarly, Chrysostom says, we should not blame God when he punishes those who reject Christ (Hom x.1). He also refers to Paul who initially rejected Christ, but later on received Him. Paul was not ashamed of the deeds formerly dared by him, and often told his hearers about his earlier life in order to highlight the greatness of God's free gift.

### **3.1.2 The parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14)**

Chrysostom drags in the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14), and he refers specifically to the man who was not wearing wedding-clothes, in order to comment on the phrase "his own did not receive Him" (Jn 1:11). Honourable people do not mix with low class people. That is why Chrysostom says that "it is strange that He, who is God and King, is not ashamed of men who are vile, beggars, and of no repute, but brings even them of the crossroads to that table" (Hom x.3).

According to Chrysostom, the one who refuses this honour, is insensible and insolently abuses the unspeakable loving-kindness of God (Hom x.3). Such a man is shameless. But Chrysostom adds that in order to honour the marriage and the guests, God has to drive off these shameless people. If God accepts someone in a filthy garment, he would insult the guests. It is therefore understandable that God punishes the one who behaves with insolence towards Him by not accepting the honour which God bestows on us (Hom x.3).

### **3.1.3 “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14)**

Chrysostom makes a very interesting point regarding honour and shame in antiquity. He says that when a honourable person associates with a low person, it has no effect on his own honour. However he is merely raising up the other person from his excessive lowness. Thus, when God became flesh and made his dwelling among us, He did not diminish his own nature. When a king converses with interest and kindness with a poor and mean man, he does not shame himself. Yet, he causes the low person to be observed by all and to be illustrious (Hom xi.1). And that is exactly what God did when He made his dwelling among us.

### **3.2 The wedding in Cana (Jn 2)**

In order to explain this miracle to his hearers, Chrysostom repeatedly refers to honour and shame as key exegetical principles. He begins his exposition by saying that those who invited Jesus to the marriage, did not do honour to Him, because they did not invite Him as some great one, but merely as an ordinary acquaintance (Hom xxi). It was clear that they had not formed a proper judgment of Him. Chrysostom says that this is what the Evangelist hints at when he says: “The mother of Jesus was there, and His brethren.” Just as they invited her and his brethren, they invited Jesus.

According to Chrysostom, Jesus accepted the invitation because He did not worry about his own honour. He was always willing “to take upon Him the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7). When Mary said to Jesus that the wine was gone, He answered: “Woman, what have I to do with you?” Chrysostom makes it very clear that Jesus was not rude when he spoke these words. He firstly wanted to inform her that she should not always expect to be honoured by Him as by a Son, but that He should also come as her Master (Hom xxi.2).

Jesus also realised that a miracle is more appreciated when the request comes from those in need and not from a family member. Chrysostom again emphasizes that Jesus was careful to honour his mother, but He also cared more

for the salvation of her soul, and for doing good to many. Jesus wanted the miracle to be attended with that honour which was meet (Hom xxi.3).

The question then arises why did Jesus then continue to perform the miracle if He would have preferred the request to come from those who were in need. The answer is very simple: Chrysostom says that it is because he wanted to honour his mother, so that He might not be seen to shame her that bare Him in the presence of many (Hom xxii.1).

Chrysostom also asks why did Jesus not himself produce the water which He afterwards showed to be wine, instead of bidding the servants bring it. He said Jesus had a very good reason: If there were anybody who would be shameless, and frown upon the miracle, the servants could testify that it was no delusion.

We read that after the miracle Jesus and his mother, brothers and disciples went to Capernaum. Chrysostom again emphasises that Jesus took his mother home to honour her (Hom xxiii.1). It is clear that Chrysostom wants to drive home the point that Jesus honoured his mother.

### **3.3 Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4)**

The account about Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan begins with the remark that "Jesus had to go through Samaria" (Jn 4:4). Chrysostom says that it is explicitly stated that it was not Jesus' primary goal to minister to the Samaritan woman. He merely "had to go through Samaria". No Jew without shame could therefore ever accuse Him and say: "Jesus left us, and went to the uncircumcised" (Hom xxxi.2).

It was a great shame to say something and not to do it yourself. Chrysostom says that this is the reason why it is stated clearly that the woman came for another purpose, namely to draw water (Hom xxxi.4). No shameless Jew could therefore say to Jesus that He acted in opposition to his own command, since He had ordered his disciples not to enter into any city of the Samaritans (cf Mt 10:5).

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The fact that the Samaritan woman called Jesus “Lord” (“Sir”) is proof that she assigned to Him high honour (Hom xxxi.4). It was shameful to have been married with five men, and to live with another man without being married. Chrysostom adds that this woman wanted to conceal her shameful circumstances, and that is why she said to Jesus: “I haven’t got a husband.”

In antiquity women were not supposed to get involved in discussions on doctrinal matters. Chrysostom therefore says that his readers should be ashamed and blush, since this woman who lives in shameful circumstances, is prepared to inquire into doctrinal matters, while his own readers are indifferent (Hom xxxii.3).

Chrysostom also argues that in her discussions the woman was eager to point out to Jesus that her worship was more honourable than that of the Jews. But Jesus showed to her that the Jewish worship was more honourable since they realized that God was the God of the world, and that He was not restricted to a place (Hom xxxiii.1). But both the Samaritans and the Jews possessed nothing great in comparison with that which was to be given.

This woman had a shameful background, but was not too ashamed to tell the people in the town that Jesus had told her “everything she had ever done” (Hom xxxiv.1). Chrysostom says she could have said: “Come, see one that prophesies”, but she didn’t. He says that he can only ascribe this to the fact that her soul was inflamed with holy fire. Nothing earthly, neither shame nor glory, is then important. Chrysostom therefore exhorts his readers to imitate this woman and to refrain from being ashamed of men.

It was always regarded as a shame when the behaviour of lower class people is superior to that of the upper class. That is why Chrysostom says that the Jews should be ashamed, since the Samaritans received Christ through the words of a Samaritan woman, while the Galileans received Christ only after they had seen the miracles which He did.

### **3.4 The raising of Lazarus (Jn 11)**

In his homily on the raising of Lazarus, Chrysostom speaks to his congregation about the meaning of the Resurrection (Hom lxii). He says that it is a pity that Christian women go to the market place, and in the presence of men, pluck their hair, rend their garments, and wail loudly when a beloved has died. Chrysostom says that the pagans would think that the Christian teachings are fables because Christian women lament as though there is no resurrection.

Chrysostom argues that he is also ashamed that rich pagan women show more wisdom. Because of shame they would never lament in this way. Their shame is stronger than their grief. Yet the Christian women's fear of God is not stronger than their grief. Christian women even incite their maidens to act as mourners to honour the dead. But actually it is a shame to honour the dead by lamenting. If one really wants to honour the dead, one should rather sing hymns and psalms.

In this section (Hom lxii.4) Chrysostom gives us some very interesting information on how values such as honour and shame operated in the ancient world when someone had died. Poor pagan women would act unseemly in the public to demonstrate their grief. Christian women acted similarly. Rich women, on the other hand, would not become involved in these activities. Because of their status and honour, they would not shame themselves. Chrysostom therefore want Christian women to also display this kind of shame when they are in grief because of the death of a beloved one. They would always remember that they also have to honour God with their behaviour (Hom lxii.5).

We read that after Lazarus' death, Mary ran to Jesus "and fell at his feet." According to Chrysostom, this was to honour Jesus. She was not ashamed of all the enemies of Jesus who were also present and who asked why He who opened the eyes of the blind, did not keep Lazarus from dying (Hom lxiii.1).

When Jesus arrived at the tomb, He prayed and said: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me" (Jn

11:41-42). Chrysostom says that this prayer proves that in his ministry Christ looks not so much to his own honour as to our salvation (Hom Ixiv.1).

### **3.5 Washing of feet and the Last Supper (Jn 13)**

Judas is being portrayed as shameless by Chrysostom (Hom Ixx.10). Jesus had enough reason to destroy Judas because the latter was deemed worthy of sharing the table of Jesus and his disciples. He also saw all the miracles. Yet, he did not honour Jesus. Even when Jesus washed his feet, he was not ashamed. Chrysostom adds that Jesus did not wash any other part of the body, but the feet. And he emphasizes that the feet were the most dishonourable part of the body (Hom Ixx.2).

Jesus also said: “No servant is greater than his master.” Chrysostom is adamant that Jesus said this to shame his disciples (Hom Ixxi.2). When Jesus said “He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me” it was also meant to shame Judas (Hom Ixxi.2). Even the manner of the rebuke was calculated to put Judas to shame. That is why Jesus said: “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish”. It was clear that Judas had no respect for the table. But to receive bread from the hand of Jesus should have shamed him. But it did not. It shows Judas’ utter shamelessness. And he became even more shameless when he went out after Jesus said to him: “What you are about to do, do quickly.” This was meant as a reproach, but Judas was so shameless, that he was incorrigible (Hom Ixxii.3).

Chrysostom says that though Jesus actions and words should have shamed Judas, Jesus tried not to shame him in the public. That is why the disciples thought that Jesus was telling Judas to give something for the poor. Chrysostom then admonishes his congregation that they too should try not to shame someone in the public, and not parade the sins of their companions, though the latter may be incurable (Hom Ixxii.3).

Chrysostom is making valuable comments, which are not to be found in modern commentaries (see e g Smelik 1965).

## **4. GENERAL REMARKS ON HONOUR AND SHAME**

Chrysostom's homilies do not only give us valuable comments on the Gospel of John, but they can also be employed as important sources to enable us to gain more insight into ancient social values. Many of his insights are overlooked by modern commentaries (see e.g. Barrett 1978; Beasley-Murray 1987; Bultmann 1964; Carson 1991; Maier 1984; Morris 1995; Smelik 1965; Van Houwelingen 1997 and even Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998).

### **4.1 Clothing was an indication of one's honour**

Pilch and Malina ([1993]1998:22) says that clothing was not mere body covering. It also indicates one's role and status. This same idea is also found in Chrysostom's sermon on the Gospel of John. He says that "to go about naked is a shame" (Hom vi.4). But he adds that to be a sinner is an even greater shame because then one has no excuse. When one is naked, it could perhaps be because of poverty. But there is no excuse for a sinner. That is why Chrysostom says that "nothing has more shame and less honour than the sinner" (Hom vi.4).

Since clothing betrays one's honour, Chrysostom says that "we cannot bear ourselves to put on a garment awkwardly or awry. As a matter of fact, if we see another person in this state, we set him right" (Hom vi.4). Similarly we should help someone who is even more shameful, because he visits a harlot.

### **4.2 The eye is the most honourable part of the body**

The eyes are the most honourable zone of the body (cf Pilch and Malina 1993:68). This is confirmed by Chrysostom who says: "Of our members the most honourable is the eye ... it guides the whole body, it gives beauty to it all, it adorns the countenance, it is the light of all the limbs. What the sun is in the world, that the eye is in the body; quench the sun, and you destroy and confound all things; quench the eyes, and the feet, the hands, the soul, are useless" (Hom lvi.2).

### **4.3 Knowledge brings honour**

Chrysostom says that knowledge brings honour. That is also why Adam was prepared to listen to Satan in Paradise. He expected greater knowledge and

thought he would therefore gain more honour. But instead of that, he lost some of the knowledge he had already possessed. That brought shame on him, and he then also realised that he was naked and needed clothing (Hom vii). Elsewhere (Hom ix.2) Chrysostom again says that Satan brought Adam down from the high honour he had enjoyed (Hom ix.2).

#### **4.4 Seeking honour for oneself**

Normally men are trying to gain more honour for themselves. Chrysostom says that Jesus, on the other hand, was not looking for his own honour only, but also for what might be profitable to his hearers (Hom vi).

### **5. A CHANGED SOCIAL VALUE SYSTEM**

The original generation of anthropologists talked about honour and shame as core values in the Mediterranean world, yet they focused on Iraq, Turkey, Greece, Spain and Morocco. Neyrey (1998:8) admits that there are historically minded scholars (such as Herzfeld 1987) who take issue with this generalization. These scholars call for more nuanced studies of individual areas. Rohrbaugh (1996:9) says that what was honourable could vary from region to region, and even from village to village. It also varied considerably among elite and nonelite sectors of the society.

In this article we want to emphasize another aspect in this debate, and that is that the values in a Christian community also differed from values in a secular community. Modern scholars who write about social values in antiquity, often fail to point out to what extent these prevalent social values were overturned in a Christian community. Believers did not have the same value system than unbelievers. We can see it clearly in the post-New Testament era. In the secular world wealth caused someone to be honoured in his or her community. But Christians would honour ascetics who had renounced worldly possessions.

Modern scholars should therefore be very careful when they read the New Testament in terms of pivotal values of the ancient world. They should bear in mind that Christian communities functioned differently. This can clearly be seen when we read Chrysostom's homilies on the Gospel of John. He frequently refers

to a Christian value system which differed from the secular world. Some may argue that we should be careful not to assume that the value system described by Chrysostom prevailed in the New Testament era as well. It is true. However, Rohrbaugh (1996:9) has already shown that the Mediterranean value set has persisted over very long periods. He even claims that the Mediterranean region is an honour-shame society even today.

One may ask why the believers in Chrysostom's church were prepared to adhere to a different value system. The social values of the ancient world can easily provide an answer to this question. We know that honour basically has to do with social perception: What do people think of this person? (Neyrey 1998:5). But Chrysostom says that one should also bear in mind who are the people who are ascribing honour to yourself. Applause from the populace has no worth. To yearn after such honour, brings shame and dishonour (Hom iii.6). We should rather "seek honour that comes from God alone".

According to Chrysostom we should never seek honour from fools, but rather from men of understanding (Hom iv.4). He adds that honour from mortals often arises from flattery and brings no profit. One should therefore rather look at God for praise (Hom iv.4). When Chrysostom discusses the Jews' denial of Christ, he says that the Jews did not deny Him because of their ignorance, but because of honour: They wanted to obtain honour from the multitude (Hom iii.5). This shows their folly.

Chrysostom states it explicitly when he says: "For nothing is so ridiculous and disgraceful as this passion (= to desire honour from humans), nothing so full of shame and dishonour. One may in many ways see that to love honour, is dishonour, and that true honour consists in neglecting honour, in making no account of it, but in saying and doing everything according to what seems good to God" (Hom iii.6). Chrysostom therefore appeals to Paul who said: "We seek not honour of men, neither of you, nor yet of others." It is very important to note the shift in social values in Christian communities.

Elsewhere (Hom lxxvi.3) Chrysostom says: "Gold procures us much luxury, and therefore it makes us honourable". He adds that heaven brings us much more honour. He argues that many even turn aside from wealthy men, but they respect and honour those who live virtuously. However, he immediately

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acknowledges that some people would argue that “the poor man is derided, even though he be virtuous” (Hom lxxvii.3). Chrysostom’s answer is that one should always look at the honour of the person who honours you. When one is commended by wise men, one should not even take notice if asses were to bray and daws were to chatter at us. People who admire present things, are daws, and even worse than asses (Hom lxxvi.3).

If a king approves of us, it is much more honourable than when ordinary people praise us. Similarly, if the Lord of the universe praises us, we should not seek the good words of beetles and gnats (Hom lxxvi.3). And he adds that men who are merely looking at present things actually are viler than these bugs. Poverty is honourable since it teaches us prudence, endurance and true wisdom.

From these excerpts it is clear why the believers were prepared to follow a different set of values in their community. God, who assigns the honour, is more honourable than ordinary men. Thus the motivation for overturning the values of the secular world is also firmly rooted in the social value system.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

To read an ancient text such as the Bible according to its appropriate cultural context is definitely not an optional enterprise. It should be an integral part of our analysis of any ancient text. But this exegetical approach to a text is not as new as some of us might have thought. As a matter of fact, it is clear from the above that social values such as honour and shame played an important role in Chrysostom’s exegesis of the Gospel of John. Unfortunately the works of the ancient theologians have been neglected for too long. These writings can serve as valuable sources for our understanding of the social values of the ancient world.

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