

## A Man of No Reputation: Jesus and Ascribed Honor in the Gospel of John

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Who is Jesus? The question of his identity appears to be a leitmotif in the canonical Gospels as a whole and in John's Gospel in particular.<sup>1</sup> Jesus' identity is quite regularly brought into question: *Who is this man that is approaching Jerusalem on a donkey* (Matt 21:10)? *Who is this man that calms storms* (Mark 4:41)? *Who is this man that blasphemes* (Luke 5:21) *and claims to forgive sins* (Luke 7:49)? *Who is this man that heals* (John 5:12)? Each Gospel answers the "identity" question in a particular way. Each writer made deliberate choices in order to nuance and bring to light aspects of Jesus' personality, instruction and character. But, all of them sought to describe him as the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. John's Gospel is known for being distinctive,<sup>2</sup> but it is certainly no less emphatic on this point. It is the manner in which Jesus is portrayed that makes this Gospel stand out in its depiction of his messianic identity.

In order to pursue the method by which John accomplishes this, one must consider the purpose of the Gospel of John. Many have turned to the comment in John 20:31, "these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."<sup>3</sup> Based on texts like this, it is reasonable to suggest that the fourth Gospel was written with the intention of depicting Jesus as the true Messiah who is worthy of belief. Exactly how and why this Gospel is unique is still a matter of some debate. Certainly there is variety in chronology, topology, narrative dynamics, and the development and employment of Jewish and Greco-Roman imagery. One particular method of analysis, though, has been very insightful as an interpretive tool. In the last century many scholars have shown an interest in how cultural anthropology allows the Gospels to be read with an awareness of the societal codes particular to the ancient Mediterranean peoples. Specifically, the study of honor and shame in early cultures has led to fruitful insight into the social dynamics of the Gospels.<sup>4</sup>

One does not have to dig deep in order to notice that John's Gospel is full of the imagery and language of honor and shame commonly found in the

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general corpus of literature at that time. The primary technical term for honor (τιμη) and its cognate verbs and adjectives appear several times throughout the Gospel as well as companion terms that can be closely associated with honor. Additionally, references to concepts and terms related to status, power, and position occur with some frequency.

The Synoptic Gospels also have similar kinds of evidence that lead one to conclude that understanding the honor-shame cultural codes was necessary for proper interpretation. Much attention has been given to the way in which Jesus is characterized as a man of honor according to the system understood in the Mediterranean societies. It is the purpose of this study to investigate how John is distinct in his depiction of Jesus as a man of honor – a man who is worthy of belief as the Messiah. Now, there is no paucity of research on John's understanding of honor,<sup>5</sup> but the interest, for the most part, has focused on what is called *achieved* honor<sup>6</sup> - that is, honor which one earns throughout his or her life. There is another class, *ascribed* honor, which involves the worth which is "passively attained."<sup>7</sup> Ascribed honor is often ignored or simply taken for granted, but plays a vital role in understanding a person's honor rating. And it is specifically this issue that makes John's Gospel unique in its representation of Jesus as a man of honor.

Several commentators and exegetes have argued that the canonical Gospels follow the patterns that would be expected when trying to represent a "hero" (in this case Jesus) as a person of honor. For instance, Jerome Neyrey avers that the author of the Gospel of Matthew clearly depicts Jesus as a man who held both high ascribed and achieved honor throughout his life.<sup>8</sup> However, even though John's Gospel demonstrates an interest in honor language, it would seem that John did not set Jesus up in the same way as Matthew or the other Synoptics. In fact, it would seem that John's Gospel follows the conventions of proving Jesus to be a man of honor according to the established codes of achieved honor, but elements related normally to Jesus' ascribed honor are eliminated, suppressed, or even turned against him from a human perspective. Therefore, Jesus does, in fact, achieve honor in the eyes of the reader through his miracles and works, and through his preaching and teaching, but the typical elements that would be ascribed to him are not represented or highlighted in a way that would be expected by the implied reader. This does not suggest ignorance on the part of John, since he so clearly follows the traditional steps of underscoring Jesus' achieved honor (challenge-riposte, outstanding teaching, virtuous deeds, noble death). Rather, there seems to be intentionality and purpose in this suppression of Jesus' ascribed honor. That is not to say that

John's intention was to depict Jesus as a man without ascribed honor, but he simply did not describe Jesus in a way the typical reader would have expected.

The discussion begins with an overview of the honor-shame system of the time and its relevance to the Gospels and particularly to John. Then, the matter of genre will follow which is relevant when determining the expectations of early readers. Next the context will be set by taking an in-depth look at how ascribed honor was typically determined. Then, the Gospel of John will be explored in order to evaluate exactly how it identifies Jesus with respect to ascribed honor. Finally, some theories will be posited concerning why John would characterize Jesus in such a way.

The social function of and interest in honor and worth may seem alien in our modern American society. Why was it so significant? Julian Pitt-Rivers explains that it had a primary place in early societies because it involved "the destiny of a man and his relations with other people and with God."<sup>9</sup> To a large degree, a person at that time determined his or her self-worth on the basis of the honor. Vernon Robbins defines honor in this way:

honor stands for a person's rightful place in society, one's social standing....Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgment of worth. The purpose of honor is to serve as a social rating that entitles a person to interact in specific ways with his or her equals, superiors, and subordinates, according to the prescribed cues of the society.<sup>10</sup>

In our culture there are many different forms of value systems. In early societies there was much more unity when it came to a collective understanding of values upon which the people agreed. In fact, people such as those encountered in the Gospels were forced even at the earliest ages to learn and follow the defined ways of gaining honor and respect. Honor, then, was given based on the person's capability of living out the expected values and virtues that were understood to be worthwhile at that time in that place.<sup>11</sup>

The roots of this contextually determined honor-shame code can be traced even back to Homer. Arthur Adkins, in his highly influential study of Greek values, argues that, for Homer, "the chief good is to be well spoken of, the ill to be badly spoken of, by one's society, as a result of the successes and failures which that society values most highly."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, value was understood primarily in terms of groups. Adkins emphasizes that, as a function of this culture, "the standard remains *overtly* 'what others say'."<sup>13</sup>

Since the study of honor and shame first entered the discipline of cultural and historical anthropology,<sup>14</sup> most scholars have praised its value in

reading ancient texts with the appropriate social awareness. However, this interest has led skeptics to reject the results altogether. It has been noted that “some early cross-cultural studies degenerated into what has been called ‘parallelomania.’ This abuse of parallelism almost caused biblical scholars to discard, rather than refine, cross-cultural studies.”<sup>15</sup> Gary Burge, applying this critique to the Gospels, expresses that “*the sociological grid may be made to fit, even when the ancient evidence is not appropriate to the study at hand.*”<sup>16</sup> It is on the basis of concerns such as these that John’s Gospel must be carefully scrutinized in order to determine whether the honor-shame code and language is relevant enough to warrant reflection.

It has been noted on many occasions by scholar Bruce Malina that the Gospels are about the “transformation of social structure.” In order to defend and evaluate this claim, one must be conversant in the social aspects of that structure, where and how divisions are defined, and what transformation would look like. This can be accomplished by paying attention to clues such as terminology, key images, specific activities, dialogue cues, and physical space and positions.

The fourth Gospel is filled with the language and imagery of honor and shame. David deSilva suggests that the words τιμη and δοξα are the most common terms that are used to refer to “honor” and “reputation.”<sup>17</sup> The former is found in the fourth Gospel only a handful of times even along with its cognate verb (4:44; 5:23; 8:49). However, the latter term, usually translated “glory,” occurs over 30 times in the Gospel. Margaret Davies is convinced, though, that “glory” should not be the primary translation for δοξα in the fourth Gospel. She argues that “the Johannine use of δοξαζω is synonymous with τιμαω (honour) with which it is sometimes juxtaposed.”<sup>18</sup> One must make note of the biographical works of writers such as Plutarch and Suetonius to see how frequently δοξα is used with relationship to honor.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that the Old Testament imagery of glory is irrelevant to John’s use of δοξα. There are clear examples where δοξα necessitates the translation “glory.” However, translators may sometimes be too quick to use “glory” instead of “honor.”<sup>20</sup>

The concept of authority also plays an important role in the honor-shame system and John takes a great interest in this matter.<sup>21</sup> Someone who exercises power and/or has authority must have honor and raises his honor whenever he uses that power. John frequently employs these terms in playful and often ironic ways. A simple survey of John’s Gospel would prove this (1:12; 5:27; 10:18; 17:2; 19:10-11). Bound up in the idea of power is the concept of judgment. Judgment is given by someone with authority, also used in peculiar ways by John (3:19; 5:22, 24, 27, 30; 8:16; 12:31; 16:11).

One might also observe the employment of such key ideas as grace/gift giving<sup>22</sup> (1:16-17; 4:10), the marking of what is evil and what is good (3:19; 7:7; 10:11, 32; 18:23, 30), the socially encoded actions of blasphemy<sup>23</sup> and slander (10:33, 36), and obedience (14:15, 23, 24; 15:10, 20). On a discourse level, David May argues that even Jesus' stock "truly I say" statements introduce a speech with authority based on honor.<sup>24</sup> Such characteristics as those which have been mentioned lead to the conclusion that the author of the fourth Gospel knew and employed the language expected of a text that honors a great person.

As previously emphasized, though, John's Gospel is unique on many levels. Although the Gospel exhibits characteristics of praise and honor in the other Gospels and in other related texts, there are distinct deviations. One particular divergence involves John's portrayal of Jesus' ascribed honor. This area of research, namely Jesus' ascribed honor, is valuable but rarely studied. Philip Esler confesses that "too little attention has been paid in discussion of New Testament Christology to the question of how Jesus' honour is promoted by the various ways in which he is described."<sup>25</sup> Malina and Neyrey are convinced that, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, there is significant weight placed on Jesus' ascribed honor.<sup>26</sup> However, John's Gospel does not seem to follow the same pattern of demonstrating Jesus' honor. Therefore, this study seeks to determine what John was communicating with regard to Jesus' ascribed honor.

Now that the relevance of honor and shame in the fourth Gospel has been presented, it is beneficial at this point to examine the various elements of *ascribed* honor. Ascribed honor differs from achieved honor in that it is given to a person passively "on account of accidents of birth or grants bestowed by people of higher status and power."<sup>27</sup> This is contrasted with the fame which one gains by his or her own virtue, teaching, bravery, power, and good deeds. A thorough assessment of the elements that make up ascribed honor is compulsory for two reasons. First, scholars often focus on one or two areas such as birth and provenance instead of the sum of the components. And, secondly, the aspects of ascribed glory may be very different in that time and place than what we might expect here and now. This leads to oversimplification and many valuable factors tend to be neglected.

The first and possibly most important way to show high ascribed honor is based on pedigree – that is, claiming the honor of one's parents or ancestors. Malina and Neyrey comment that "being born into an honorable family makes one honorable, since the family is the repository of the honor of past illustrious ancestors and their accumulated acquired honor."<sup>28</sup> It would have been difficult to determine someone's honor rating without knowing his relative prominence

based on lineage. Maria Pia Di Bella explains that in Mediterranean societies, “every man was invested at his birth with a quota of honor deriving from his family and/or his village, since he was a part of the whole which bequeathed to him, among other things, his ‘share’ of this collective honor.”<sup>29</sup>

The importance of family does not end with associating the person with his parents or forefathers. Other significant factors include issues such as the person’s birth order and whether she was adopted or not. The *πρωτοκος* was commonly the object of blessing and favoritism. This was reinforced not only by Jewish communities (Gen. 25:29-34; Deut. 21:15-17), but also generally in ancient cultures. Therefore it was honorable to be the first-born as well as being a natural son. On the other end of the scale, it was less honorable to be an adopted son. However, being adopted into a prominent family certainly would raise the honor of the child.

Nationality also played a fundamental role in determining honor. Ancient societies often saw people of the same ethnicity as kin and spoke of them in like terms, calling one another “brothers” (Gen 19:7; Tob 2:2; 2 Macc 1:1; Acts 1:16) and speaking of patriarchs like Abraham as their “father” (Isa 51:2; Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; John 8:39). The Jews were not unique in this belief as ancient Greek literature clearly attests.<sup>30</sup>

Another factor in ascribed honor is the presence or absence of remarkable physical attributes. Often the appearance of the person was taken for granted or simply ignored in ancient biographies partly because there was little to discuss and largely because it was simply unknown. The exceptions occurred when there existed numerous artistic works upon which to draw (especially statues) or, as legend tells, if their beauty was incredible or a physical feature was unusual or even disgraceful. Plutarch, writing about Marcus Cato, stated that “he was of a ruddy complexion and grey-eyed” (*Cat. Maj.* 2.1.3) and that Agesilaus had one leg that was shorter than the other (*Ages.* 5.2.1). Suetonius, on the other hand, commented that Gaius Caligula was of “outstanding physical excellence” and a “handsome” man (*Cal.* 4.3.1-3).

Related to birth and honor are also any occurrences associated with one’s nativity that would have been considered noteworthy. Often, in ancient *vitae* such happenings included omens, miracles, and divine manifestations. Plutarch made mention of these sorts of incidents such as the visions of the mother of Pericles and the parents of Alexander (*Per.* 3.3.2).

Several components of ascribed honor were not directly associated with the family. For instance, a person may have had honor ascribed to him through endowments and public acknowledgment by an official. Along with wealth that was inherited, these elements affected the person beyond their own actions.

Included in this category we may add *honor by association*. Someone's worth and value may have been directly or indirectly changed by virtue of their relationship or proximity to a prominent person. This kind of collateral impact may be seen in the significance of one's education. Neyrey argues that "a person's education and training offer an encomiast an occasion to praise an individual both for ascribed and achieved honor.... Thus education and nurture by an outstanding teacher ascribe honor to an individual precisely because of the excellence of the teacher."<sup>31</sup> This may be the thinking behind the Apostle Paul's mention of Gamaliel in defense of his actions in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3).

A final factor in determining someone's ascribed honor is provenance, that is, one's *πατρις*. Apparently it was commonly believed that certain places were marked as locales of honor. Cities like Athens, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Rome were known for having people of great intellect and wealth. Even the apostle Paul preserved his honor and petitioned for the opportunity to speak to an angry Jewish crowd by claiming that he was from Tarsus in Cilicia, "no ordinary city" (Acts 21:39).

All of the aforementioned qualities, attributes, or situations demonstrated one's ascribed honor. Encomiasts rarely referred to each and every aspect, but utilized whatever means necessary to persuade the audience to favor a certain individual. A person's ascribed honor was usually detailed at the beginning of the discourse. One may have assumed a person's nationality, wealth, social status, and even occupation based on name and title. However, regardless of whether mention was made of one's ascribed honor repeatedly in a biographical work or not, it was of critical value in the mind of ancient readers. It is this point that needs to be kept in mind as these cultural particularities are understood with a view towards the portrait of Jesus in John's Gospel.

Scholars have studied John's representation of achieved honor and found it more or less in tandem with comparative Greco-Roman literature. But, how exactly does this Gospel represent Jesus' ascribed glory – especially with the Synoptics in view? On this very matter, I believe it is demonstrable that John is unique and purposely does not amplify or highlight these ascribed attributes as the early readers would have expected. In fact, it would seem that instead elements that normally would raise Jesus' ascribed worth are suppressed and sometimes ignored. So, on the one hand Jesus is praised by many for his miracles, teaching, and bravery; but, on the other hand, he seems to have a poor reputation if any at all from a typical social-value audit. After an analysis of this argument is sustained through a survey of the Gospel as a whole, some cursory conclusions will be made concerning why the author would wish to do this in

contrast with the conventions of the time. In the same way that ascribed honor was outlined above, the next task is to consider each area in the Gospel of John.

The first factor, and probably most important, involves lineage. Aristotle argues that “good birth has the effect on its possessor of making him more ambitious; for if a man has something to start with, he will tend, as men commonly do, to add to the pile” (*Rhet.* 2.15.6-8). In Greek or Roman biographies the lineage is typically discussed as an introduction. It is interesting, for example, to note that many classical scholars believe that, although no extant manuscripts of Suetonius’ biography of Julius Caesar have the origins of his family, it is assumed that the introduction contained such information and is now lost.<sup>32</sup> But, what is one looking for in the family line? Aristotle recommends that remark be made of anything “notable for virtue, or wealth, or for something else which men think honorable, and that many of the line...have been persons of eminence” (*Rhet.* 1.5.44-55).

This interest in lineage does not belong only to the Greeks and Romans. Josephus, in his *Vita*, began with tracing his sacerdotal ancestry claiming that “with us a connexion with the priesthood is the hallmark of an illustrious line” (1:1-2). Now, the style of presentation was usually a prosaic narrative recounting significant figures in one’s past, as is the case in most Greco-Roman and Jewish biographies. Philo, for example, began his *De Vita Mosis* with the race, provenance, and merits of Moses’ parents and ancestors (1.5-8). It was also common for the same sort of thing to be accomplished through genealogies (e.g. Exod 6:14-27). The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both contain genealogies that trace Jesus’ ancestry (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). It is the opinion of many scholars that these genealogies were included for the purpose of ascribing Jesus with honor in view of respected and noteworthy forefathers.<sup>33</sup>

However, John’s Gospel does not begin with a family history of any kind. It is unique in many ways, but it would be odd to the first century reader that no history is provided of his family. We do have hints all throughout the Gospel that Jesus no ordinary man. According to H. Moxnes, in the eyes of his readers, Jesus’ claims “were inconsistent with the modest village in which he was raised.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, John’s Gospel begins with the famous *logos* prologue and not with the typical social history. John Stibbe argues that the author is purposefully withholding information and comments that “the Word comes on stage with a complete absence of preliminaries. Who is the Word? Where does he hail from?”<sup>35</sup> Though some scholars are hesitant to view chapter one alongside the other Gospels, Culpepper argues that, “in order to appreciate the distinctiveness of the prologue, one must compare it with the beginnings of the three Synoptic Gospels.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, one should seriously consider John’s

intention in suppressing Jesus' past, especially concerning his parents and ancestors. At various times in the fourth Gospel, questions concerning ancestry are prominent (John 8:19, 33, 39). And, what is more, even the brief comments made incidentally about Jesus' family reveal his ancestry to be at best modest and at worst disgraceful. Early on, Jesus is referred to as the son of Joseph (1:45), an unusual appellation amongst the Gospels, but C.K. Barrett is convinced that this kind of title firmly grounds him as a real human being and even "discredits his claim to have come down from heaven."<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that the Jews, in defense of their own heritage, claim that "we were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God" (8:41). Certainly this might be their way of claiming a pure line, but several interpreters consider the possibility that the Jews suspected that Jesus' birth was illegitimate.<sup>38</sup> Here is another example of how elements such as the miraculous events are concealed or ignored. Jesus' virgin birth is of great significance in Matthew and Luke, but not in John.

What about Jesus' other family members? Matthew, Mark, and Luke freely make mention of Mary, the mother of Jesus; yet John's Gospel appears to go to great lengths to avoid mentioning her by name. Compare the similar questions posed by astonished Jews:

"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" (Matt 13:55 NRSV).

"Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (John 6:42 NRSV).

From beginning to end, Mary is only known as "Jesus' mother" (2:1, 12; 19:25-27). It would stand to reason that if, by the time the fourth Gospel was written, many of the readers would have recognized this mother as Mary, she did not need to be named. But the lengths to which John goes to circumvent mentioning her by name may be a subtle way of suppressing the honor associated with his miraculous birth.

Also related to family is the matter of Jesus' brothers. The first mention of them in John's Gospel involves the simple comment that he traveled to Capernaum with them (2:12). We do not know their names, though Matthew makes it clear that he had four brothers: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (13:55). These brothers do not play a major role in the Gospels and seem to be quite insignificant as characters in John's Gospel. Especially in the Gospel of John, since there is no birth narrative, the reader does not know that Jesus was

the first to be born as in Luke 2:7. D. Bock is convinced that this reference in Luke probably implies that Jesus received the legal rights and privileges ascribed to the firstborn son.<sup>39</sup> John gives no impression that this was the case.

If this ambiguity weren't enough to put Jesus' ascribed honor in question, consider John 7:5, where it is noted that "even his own brothers did not believe in him." Now, it was considered disgraceful for siblings to fail to cooperate. D. deSilva explains that in the ancient Mediterranean world it was taken for granted that "the relationship between siblings is the closest, strongest, and most intimate of relationships."<sup>40</sup> James, the brother of Jesus, became a devoted follower after the resurrection and eventually was known as one of the most influential leaders in the Jerusalem church.<sup>41</sup> However, what we have in John's text does not point in this direction.

Jesus' ethnicity in John's Gospel is also an interesting issue when viewed in light of his ascribed honor. Clearly Jesus was Jewish as reflected in the New Testament as a whole. This fact never seems overtly in question. The woman at the well identifies Jesus correctly as a Jew (4:9). Conversely, though, angered Jews accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan and possessing a demon (8:48). This charge may simply be an insult, since Jesus only responds that he does not have a demon (8:49).<sup>42</sup> However, although Jesus is clearly Jewish, John does not allow this fact to become a key identity marker in the Gospel. Barrett comments that "the Samaritans call Jesus a Jew, just as the Jews call him a Samaritan; in this world he is never anything but a stranger."<sup>43</sup> This kind of selective highlighting by John would put Jesus' ascribed glory in doubt according to human standards. The clear rejection of Jesus' "Jewishness" was a grave insult.<sup>44</sup>

Physical features, as a category, have been known to be a source of praise and honor for the encomiast. For example, Suetonius commented that Otho was "bow-legged, and with splay feet....His entire body was depilated [hairless], and a well-made toupee covered his practically bald head" (*Lives of the Caesars* 8.12.1-4). Now, nothing is really known about the true physical appearance of Jesus in the New Testament, let alone in John's Gospel. However, in comparison to the Synoptics, Jesus is represented a bit differently. First, as mentioned before, there is a bit of uncertainty regarding his ethnicity (whether Jewish or Samaritan), if one could interpret the accusation in such a way. Also, Jesus, in the Synoptics, was often accosted by others, whether blind men (Matt 9:27; 20:30; Mark 10:47; Luke 18:38) or a desperate mother or father (Matt 9:18; 15:22). In other words, he was, apparently, easily recognized in the Synoptics. Whether this was because of his entourage or his physical features cannot be determined. But, in John's Gospel, Jesus tends to be the one who

pursues others, whether the lame man in Bethesda (John 5:1-6) or the man blind from birth (John 9); he calls upon them and not the opposite.<sup>45</sup> We have no reason to believe that either man would have recognized Jesus as a healer or the Messiah. The blind man describes his healer as the “the man they call Jesus” (9:11). Leon Morris posits that “since he speaks of him as no more than a man [it] shows that he has, as yet, little understanding of his Person.”<sup>46</sup>

Another major feature of ascribed honor is provenance or origin. Menander, in his writings on rhetoric, explains of a hero that “if his native country is famous, you should place your account of it first, and mention it before his family” (see 369.18-370.5).<sup>47</sup> In the Gospel of John Jesus’ origin is of deep interest, as marked by the frequency of *ποθεν* (John 7:27; 9:28; 19:9). The Gospels describe Jesus as a Nazorean (Matt 26:71; Mark 1:24; Luke 18:37; John 19:19). What did it mean to be from Nazareth? Nathaniel’s comment is illuminating: *Can anything good come from there* (John 1:45)? J. Beasley-Murray observes that “Nazareth was utterly insignificant...akin to his birth in a stable; it is part of the offense of the incarnation.”<sup>48</sup> From a sociological perspective J. Neyrey states that “Nazareth in Galilee had a low or negative honor rating.”<sup>49</sup> How is John distinctive when the Gospels refer to his home as Nazareth? It appears that Matthew would have understood that readers may look unfavorably upon Jesus’ place of origin, so he purposefully described Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem – the honorable city of David. If that weren’t enough, Matthew associated Jesus and Nazareth with the realization of prophecy: “So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene’” (2:23). Matthew felt that an explanation was necessary since Jesus was raised in such an “unpromising location.”<sup>50</sup>

The region of Galilee is also associated with Jesus (John 7:41) and this fact seemed to be well known by the Jews, as mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels. This was quite natural since Nazareth was known to reside in the lower region of Galilee. However, Galilee, as a locale, had a distinct image and reputation apart from the city of Nazareth. It could be viewed a number of ways depending on one’s perspective and opinion. On the one hand it was known to be prosperous and growing, rich with produce from the land, in a prime location along many trade routes, and so “was far from being a rural backwater.”<sup>51</sup> However, if one were to take the comment about Galileans in Acts 2:7 as sarcastic, it might be concluded that some Judean groups would have thought of them with less appreciation.<sup>52</sup> In John’s Gospel we are not meant to hold Galileans in high regard. Firstly, the multitudes that heard Jesus’ teaching in chapter seven show disunity over his identity. Some attest that he must be the Messiah. Others refuse to believe this claim, asking, “How can the Christ come

from Galilee?" (7:41). The reasoning behind this response can be found a bit later in the chapter when the Pharisees exclaim that "a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (7:52). These Pharisees do not speak with the knowledge of any prophecy explicit in the Old Testament and they also do not seem to be aware that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it would seem that these Pharisees were also ignorant of Matthew's argument that his birth was in unison with prophecy. If that weren't enough, when Nicodemus came to the defense of Jesus, the others accused him by asking, "Are you from Galilee, too (7:52)?" It is possible that Nicodemus was, in fact, from Galilee and this was just a case of "local patriotism."<sup>54</sup> However, this very well may be an insult; after all, in the eyes of some Jews "Galilee was despised as an area that did not keep the Law with the scrupulousness of Judea."<sup>55</sup> It is not compulsory to infer from this that Galilee was looked down upon. But, neither is Galilee set up as a prominent area and the center of fulfilled prophecy (Matt 4:14-16). At the very least it is clear that John made no explicit attempt to represent Galilee as an honorable and prestigious place.

Finally, the matter of upbringing and education was important in the evaluation of one's ascribed honor. Josephus remarks, in his own *Vita*, "I made great progress in education" and goes on to explain that at the age of fourteen, "the chief priests and leading men of the city used constantly to come to me for precise information on some particular in our ordinances" (1:9). This was quite remarkable for a teenager! Apparently it was rather common to note one's advanced understanding at a young age. F. Bovon explains that "in both Greek and Jewish biography, there is the topos of the gifted hero, who at twelve years demonstrates his superior intelligence: Cyrus, Cambyses, Alexander, and Epicurus-or Solomon, Samuel, and Daniel."<sup>56</sup> Luke records an episode where Jesus is with the teachers in the temple and interacting in such a way that the onlookers were astonished with his brilliance (2:47). The fourth Gospel gives no hint that Jesus had such an honor-raising interaction. In fact, the Jews who heard him teaching in the temple marveled, saying, "How did this man get such learning without having studied (7:15)?" This comment does offer some honor to Jesus in that he showed clarity in understanding, but this would be classified as achieved or earned honor. It is the particular manner and status of his schooling that would have ascribed him honor. If anything, the Jews' words were scornful and not merely evidence of surprise.<sup>57</sup> They may have even been envious and enraged because he was so wise and yet did not formally study under a great rabbi.<sup>58</sup> Jesus did not have the appearance, name, wealth, or status in the eyes of these Jews to warrant such respect based on his teaching. They perceived themselves as the appropriate teachers who fit all the right social

criteria for such distinction. Jesus was an uneducated, poor, wandering teacher from the meek region of Galilee. He was no famous or honorable figure – at least not by their standards.

Based on this survey of John's Gospel, it is evident that the author was intentionally shaping how the reader understood Jesus' birth, family, ancestry, physical traits, home region and town, and his education. In comparison with the Synoptics especially, and to a lesser degree Jewish narratives and Greco-Roman ancient biographies, it would seem that the natural manner of ascribing honor to a hero was modified in the fourth Gospel. The author of this unique Gospel seems interested in honor, but refuses to follow the expected order or system. Jesus' ascribed honor (according to common conventions) appears to be hidden or at least suppressed, even though the author likely knew of ways to communicate the opposite. The purpose of this investigation was to clarify and evaluate some of these factors.

It would be profitable now to consider some possible reasons why John would represent Jesus in this way, deviating from the basic pattern of the Synoptics. First, John was not as radical to question the validity of the conventional ways of determining honor in that time as one might think. Philo, for instance, found the criteria for ascribed honor problematic and saw little value in simply praising "high offices, fame and honours, abundance of wealth, noble birth, health and efficacy of the sense or strength and beauty of body" (*De Abrahamo*, 263). Showing overall skepticism, he remarks:

Fame (δοξαί) and honour (τιμαί) are a most precarious possession, tossed about on the reckless tempers of flighty words of careless men; and, when it abides, it cannot of its own nature contain genuine good (264; cf. *Virt.* 166).

Such thinking was countercultural, but represented a valid concern regarding the often superficial criteria for determining honor. Nevertheless, it was also possible that John had a theological reason that centered on the person of Jesus. Throughout this Gospel Jesus is abandoned and alienated, yet he remains ever connected and faithful to his sender – the Father. Is it possible that John puts all factors of worth aside in order to highlight that Jesus had no real attachments to the world, whether it was family or hometown? These assertions appear to be central to John's message. Perhaps it is the case that all other factors fade into the background. There is no need for human appreciation or tolerance for petty standards that have no category for who Jesus really is. Another way to look at John's purpose in failing to highlight Jesus' ascribed honor from a human perspective is to understand the Evangelist as transferring

the discussion of honor to another sphere or plane of analysis. DeSilva expresses this notion as the re-drawing of the “court of reputation” – that group from which the honor of a person is recognized.<sup>59</sup> In the case of John’s Gospel, the concern for honor should be with a view towards God’s court. DeSilva is right, then, to point out that John (on a theological level) actually intensifies the honor discourse.<sup>60</sup> This is, perhaps, most apparent in John’s descriptions of Jesus’ lineage and provenance as he claims God to be his father- thus also exposing his belief that he is from God’s realm.<sup>61</sup> Though deSilva has drawn attention to the idea that John does promote ascribed honor to Jesus in his Gospel by not using the traditional criteria, I have chosen not to focus on this “spiritual” aspect. John does not simply replace earthly or mortal categories with heavenly or metaphysical ones. Instead, the reader is confronted with a man who cannot claim any worth by human standards. This, I think, is meant to characterize his life in the world and especially his status before his death.

It is also possible that John’s purpose involved his audience. Though debates continue over whom the Gospel was written for and who his initial audience was, it cannot ever be known for sure.<sup>62</sup> But, it is possible that his audience was composed of poor and less-than-prominent figures in the greater society. If they knew that Jesus the Messiah did not need or exploit any of these qualities, then they could identify with this hero and walk with heads and arms lifted high as part of the family he redeemed by his noble actions and death. After all, “it is their relationship to God that gave Christians their honor- ascribed, not achieved- as ‘children’ of God.”<sup>63</sup>

This revelation had the possibility of revolutionizing the current social system. Value was not dependent on birthright, inheritance, wealth, occupation, beauty or education. Just as it was the case with Jesus, even the simple and meek could be honored – not by the world, but by God himself through Christ. His sacrifice was not just his suffering physical abuse, being slandered, and enduring the crucifixion, but also included the constant accusation of disgrace he received and the general disregard for his honor and value as the Son of God. Truly Jesus was the model of humility, unjustifiably hated, as the prophet Isaiah said, “as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised” (NIV 53:3). The Septuagint expresses it this way – “he was dishonored (LXX ἡτιμασθη) and held of no account.” It is this Jesus – a man of no reputation – that Christians honor in worship.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Leland Rykan et al., eds., "Passion of Christ," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 628.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Kysar, *The Maverick Gospel* (rev. ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> There is some debate about whether or not this statement regarding belief was intended to produce belief or simply to strengthen and encourage existing faith. F.F. Bruce makes a convincing argument that the issue goes beyond textual criticism and should not exclude the possibility of both concepts regardless of aspect. See Frederick F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 395.

<sup>4</sup> See Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> For example see Jerome Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative." *Semeia* 69 (1994): 113-37.

<sup>7</sup> Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, eds., *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 215.

<sup>10</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 76.

<sup>11</sup> David A. deSilva, "Honor and Shame," *DNTB* 518.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, c1960), 154.

<sup>13</sup> Adkins, *Greek Values*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Pitt-Rivers identifies that the first study of honor and anthropology occurred in the 1960's. See *Honor and Grace*, 215.

<sup>15</sup> Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, "Honor and Shame in the World of the Bible," *Semeia* 68 (1994):1-161.

<sup>16</sup> Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 31.

<sup>17</sup> David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: The Social Function of the Rhetoric of Honor and Dishonor in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 132. See also Ronald Piper, "Glory, Honor and Patronage in the Fourth Gospel: Understanding the *doxa* Given to the Disciples in John 17," in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible* (ed. John Pilch; Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 283.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Suetonius' work on Claudius (5:1:29) and Galba (6:3:1-2).

<sup>20</sup>For instance John 5:41, 44; 7:18; 9:24; 12:28, 43; 17:4.

<sup>21</sup>See J. Neyrey, "Johannine Passion Narratives," 160.

<sup>22</sup>The act of gift giving is an act of conferring honor. See Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, *Honor and Grace*, 240.

<sup>23</sup>See David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 28.

<sup>24</sup>David M. May, "Mark 3:20-35 from the Perspective of Shame/Honor," *BTB* 17 (1987): 84.

<sup>25</sup>Philip Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 25.

<sup>26</sup>See Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. Jerome Neyrey; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 47; Neyrey, *Matthew*, 90-105.

<sup>27</sup>deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 28.

<sup>28</sup>Malina and Neyrey, "Luke-Acts," 27.

<sup>29</sup>Maria Pia Di Bella, "Name, Blood and Miracles: The Claims to Renown in Traditional Sicily," in *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (ed. John G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt Rivers; Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 151. See also Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," 172.

<sup>30</sup>See deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 164.

<sup>31</sup>Neyrey, *Matthew*, 102.

<sup>32</sup>Suetonius, introduction to *The Twelve Caesars*, (trans. Robert Graves; Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1957), 9.

<sup>33</sup>Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 77. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 65; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Press, 1992), 24. For similar comments on the Gospel of Luke, see Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 72; Malina, *Synoptic Commentary*, 306; John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 169.

<sup>34</sup>Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," 172.

<sup>35</sup>M. Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 13.

<sup>36</sup>Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 110.

<sup>37</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 184. See also Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 292. I would not go as far as Haenchen does, supposing that John was denying or ignoring the virgin birth. More likely this demonstrates the subtle concealment of Jesus' ascribed glory.

<sup>38</sup>For example see Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 409; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 357.

<sup>39</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1-9:50* (BEC 1; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 207.

- <sup>40</sup> deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 166.
- <sup>41</sup> See Peter H. Davids, "James," *NBD* 541.
- <sup>42</sup> Barrett offers some insightful comments on this interaction (*St. John*, 350).
- <sup>43</sup> Barrett, *St. John*, 232.
- <sup>44</sup> See Smith, *John*, 23.
- <sup>45</sup> The story of the official's son (4.46-54) is certainly an exception.
- <sup>46</sup> Morris, *John*, 429. See also Barrett, *St. John*, 359.
- <sup>47</sup> See Neyrey, *Matthew*, 93.
- <sup>48</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1999), 27. See also Morris, *John*, 145; James Strange, "Nazareth," *ABD* 4:1050. Brown also entertains the possibility that Nathaniel, being from Cana, is reacting to something like rivalry among neighboring small towns. See *The Birth of the Messiah*, 63.
- <sup>49</sup> Neyrey, *Matthew*, 96.
- <sup>50</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 1; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 39.
- <sup>51</sup> J.H. Paterson, "Galilee," *NBD* 394.
- <sup>52</sup> See R. Reisner, "Galilee," *DJG* 253.
- <sup>53</sup> Smith, *John*, 177.
- <sup>54</sup> Barrett, *St. John*, 332.
- <sup>55</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 121.
- <sup>56</sup> François Bovon, *Luke* (Hermeneia 1; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 111.
- <sup>57</sup> Barrett, *St. John*, 317.
- <sup>58</sup> See Morris, *John*, 359; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 316.
- <sup>59</sup> David deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 81.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.
- <sup>61</sup> Note how often Jesus refers to God as his father, literally dozens of times especially throughout chapters 5, 8, and 14-17; see deSilva, *Hope of Glory*, 84-5. In terms of Jesus' true "home," consider the provocative use of ἀνωθεν ("from above") in chapter 3 (vv. 3, 7; cf. 8.23). John 3:31 is quite explicit: "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthy things. The one who comes from heaven is above all."
- <sup>62</sup> See Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- <sup>63</sup> Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," 23, 175.