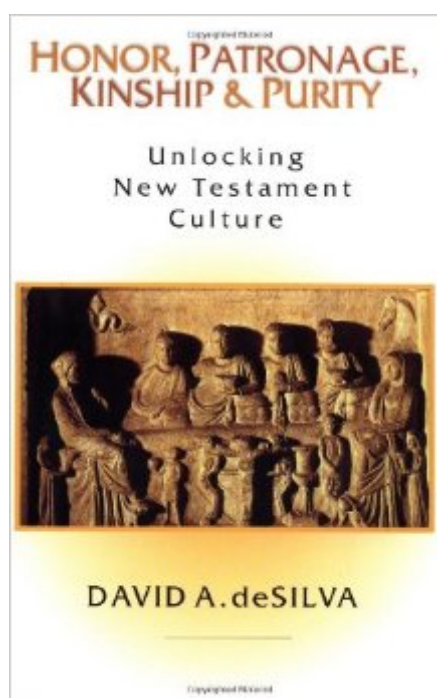


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# Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture



## Synopsis

Contemporary Western readers may find it surprising that honor and shame, patronage and reciprocity, kinship and family, and purity and pollution offer us keys to interpreting the New Testament. But as recent scholarship has proposed and as David deSilva demonstrates, paying attention to these cultural themes opens our eyes and ears to new discoveries and deeper understanding. Through our understanding of honor and shame in the Mediterranean world, we gain new appreciation of the way in which the personhood of early Christians connected with group values. By examining the protocols of patronage and reciprocity, we more firmly grasp the meaning of God's grace--and our response has fresh meaning. In exploring the ethos of kinship and household relations, we enlarge our perspective on the early Christian communities that met in houses and functioned as a new family or "household" of God. And by investigating the notions of purity and pollution along with their associated practices, we come to realize how the ancient "map" of society and the world was revised by the power of the gospel. DeSilva's work will reward you with a deeper appreciation of the New Testament, the gospel and Christian discipleship. More than that, it will also inform your participation in contemporary Christian community.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is helpful to the aspiring biblical scholar and to the Christian layman. It situates the Bible firmly in its 1st Century mediterranean culture, first by exploring the contemporary texts, then examining the scriptures. At the end of the chapters dealing with scripture, he briefly writes on the

practical applications of this knowledge, which is particularly useful. Some feel that he wrecks his book this way, by forcing 1st Century culture into the service of 21st century protestant evangelicalism. However, it is always presented as either a way to fulfill the Great Commission or how to apply the New Testament, a group of books nearly 2000 years old, to our modern lives. I recommend this above Bruce Malina's "The New Testament World" because of its clarity and practical application, although both are wonderfully informative.

In studying the New Testament, or any ancient text, we must understand much about the environment it came out of--the societal values, the cultural assumptions, the historical context, etc--otherwise we unwittingly anachronize our interpretations and read ancient literature as if they were written in our day. David deSilva, a member of the Context Group, has here a wonderful and informative survey of four key social values. Not only does he have a very accessible explanation of each value, he follows with a series of application to the New Testament texts. The client-patron model is observed in Lk 7:2-10 (p.123), which serves as an excellent illustration of how patronage functioned. His discussion of grace (favor) is fascinating (ch. 3), presenting it through the eyes of the ancients. Grace must be met with grace; favor must always give birth to favor; gift must be met with gratitude. (p. 105) He cites Seneca's explanation of the three Graces, which is indeed, in deSilva's words, most revealing. This is an important book, one to be studied alongside other Context Group publications. It will, with diligent study, do much to 'unlock' the background of the New Testament. I would also note, since there is an excellent review by Loren Rosson (my addition can be taken as supplementary or confirmatory), that the particular segment referred to in p.84 is a short section and can easily be skipped. One can come to the book strictly for the social sciences and skip over the application parts--or skim them for helpful references.

DeSilva argues in "Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity" that we need to understand these four pivotal concepts in order to unlock the bible in its original context. Our culture, with its emphasis on individualism, has lost its sense of shame and dishonor which were so important in the ancient world. When the Pharisees challenge Jesus because he eats without washing, they challenged his honor, not just his adherence to purity laws. A need to seek approval from others was pervasive throughout the ancient world, and especially so among Jews. Status and wealth were typically imbued with great honor among the Romans, but right behavior and leading a blameless life was more honorable among the Jews. There is an interesting discussion of the early Christians. "Strict avoidance of participation in idolatrous worship meant that the Christians would need to remove

themselves from much of the public life of their city" (p 47). They formed their own kinship group instead. The believers in Corinth, for example, gained honor by giving alms to congregations in need. Instead of the usual patronage system so common in Rome, a Christian was told to be grateful, not to his wealthy benefactor, but to the God who gave him life. "God's patronage of the Christian community is evidenced in the growth of...churches and members" (p 133). Kinship was the primary source of status, a tendency even more pronounced in Jewish culture. Hence legitimacy of relationship is very important. Huge lists of genealogies were kept in the temple to show who was eligible to be a priest. And later, in early Christianity, much was made of Jesus being the son of the Father, and of adopting us as his legitimate heirs. A very useful book.

Without the social and cultural backgrounds of the 1st Century, a New Testament reader will miss out, misunderstand, and even misinterpret much of the New Testament. deSilva brings this much needed information to the foreground, which will help clarify the New Testament to the honest truth-seeker. I especially liked his clarification of the Grace-gift (Gr. charis), which is too often interpreted as a one-sided coin that is only dependent upon God, without any required and/or expected responses by the recipients of GRACE. Excellent book, highly recommended for the inductive Bible student.

Being required reading for class, I had to read through this one pretty quickly. However, this is one of the better resources for grasping a wide understanding of first century Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. DeSilva breaks the book up into four parts (Honor/Shame, Patronage/Client, Kinship, and Purity/Pollution). He systematically, rhythmically explores each topic as understood by the people groups at the time, how the New Testament speaks both FROM and INTO them, and how we can apply the understandings today in the modern 21st century church. My eyes were opened to much understanding that often goes beneath the surface "between the lines" in the words of the New Testament. Because of DeSilva's work, my understanding of Jesus Christ, his teachings, and his followers are on the verge of a deeper understanding. Cannot wait to go through the New Testament again after having read this one.

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