

September 16, 2019

The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/september/reading-romans-eastern-eyes-jackson-w.html>

Christianity Today, August, 2019

INTERVIEW

There's More to Romans Than Personal Salvation

How Western readers miss the meaning of Paul's letter—and how an Eastern perspective can correct the imbalance.

INTERVIEW BY JAYSON GEORGES / POSTED AUGUST 19, 2019



Image: Getty Images

For much of church history, Christians have brought Western cultural assumptions to their reading of Scripture. But as the church's geographic center of gravity has shifted from the West to the Majority World, believers across the globe have come forward to offer fresh insights on God's Word. Jackson W. (a pseudonym), an American-born theologian teaching at an Asian seminary, builds on that work in his latest book, *Reading Romans with Eastern*

Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission, which reexamines the apostle's famous letter. Missiologist Jayson Georges, coauthor of Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials, spoke with Jackson about the value of bringing East Asian perspectives to bear on the message of Romans.

The ideas in *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* emerged from both your research and overseas ministry experience. Can you share some of the story behind the book?

For some time, I've noticed confusion stemming from the way Western Christians evangelize and explain Christianity to people in China. Whether you talk about certain terms, concepts, or emphases, there is a basic disconnect. However, the Bible has several themes that make more sense to a typical person in East Asia: specifically, issues related to honor, shame, and group identity.

At the same time, many Westerners overlook the significance of honor and shame in the Bible and the Christian life. Their reading of Romans minimizes the importance of honor and shame. For them, Romans is definitive proof that legal categories trump all other metaphors and concepts in Scripture. So I figured I would make my case from perhaps the most so-called "legal" book in the New Testament. If we can see the pervasive influence of honor-shame dynamics in Romans, then clearly these are critical categories of thought that should shape how we read the entire Bible.

How does reading Paul's letter through an "honor-shame lens" help us understand his argument?

One major theme is collective identity. For most readers, Paul is speaking to individuals about being saved from sin and then sanctified as they walk in the Spirit. But that oversimplification misses a more fundamental concern that underlies Paul's letter—*who* is God's family?

The Jew-Gentile divide is central to Paul. God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations is at the crux of Paul's theology. God's honor is at stake. Will he keep his promises? If Paul's Jewish opponents are correct to say that people must become Jews as a prerequisite to becoming God's people, then God cannot keep his promise from Genesis 12:3, which Paul explicitly calls "the gospel" in Galatians 3:8.

What's more, reading Romans with an honor-shame lens helps us see more subtle dynamics at play. For instance, when Paul recounts Israel's story and her presumption of divine favor, he makes a subtle yet superb argument against the mindset held by certain readers. Many Romans saw themselves as "Greek," which implied that they were full of wisdom and the cultural envy of the world. They looked down on non-Greeks, who were derided as "barbarians." However, it is this "backward" group of people in Spain to whom Paul professes a desire to preach the gospel (Rom. 15:24). He wants assistance from the Roman church but worries that the cultural pride of its members might discourage them from supporting his mission. So Paul recasts the Romans in the role of ancient Jews and the barbarians in the place of Gentiles.

Can you point to particular passages in Romans that an honor-shame lens helps us better interpret?

In Romans 9–11, Paul draws from multiple Old Testament passages that are heavily shaped by honor and shame. Many people are familiar with Romans 10:13, which quotes Joel 2:32: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But ask yourself, "Saved from what?" If you look closer at Joel 2, the prophet answers the question two times, saying, "never again will my people be shamed" (v. 26–27).

Also, Romans 9:33 and 10:11 are especially interesting. In a span of 12 verses, Paul twice draws from the same passage, Isaiah 28:16. In Romans 9, he renders it like this: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame." Paul's letters weave together logically tight arguments. He tends to be rather economical with his words. It raises the question: Why does Paul repeat himself? Why does the language of "put to shame" appear in the context of so many passages he quotes in Romans? When we explore these observations, we find that honor and shame link several critical themes within Romans.

In recent decades, New Testament scholars have debated the purpose and theology of Paul's letter to the Romans. Some align with the "New Perspective" on Paul, which emphasizes the corporate dimensions of salvation, while others prefer an older understanding that stresses individual guilt and atonement. How does your interpretation relate to these conversations?

I agree with several scholars who argue that both "perspectives" are right but in different ways. It's not necessary for us to pick one over the other.

I believe Romans has a strong collectivist bent. Group identity is a fundamental theme throughout the letter. This point is consistent with the so-called "New Perspective." However, there is much to affirm with respect to the "Old" or "Traditional" perspective. Paul's message very much concerns individual salvation. While Romans certainly deals with the matter of church unity, that concern does not set aside questions about what it means to be justified through faith in Christ.

Reading Romans with an Eastern lens helps bring the two perspectives into balance. The two views complement one another, akin to a “yin-yang” relationship. Paul rebuts the notion that salvation is limited to a particular socio-ethnic identity. With the coming of Christ, belonging to one particular nation, like Israel, does not confer saving benefits that are denied to outsiders. Wedding the two “perspectives” in this way yields many other helpful insights.

People sometimes observe how honor and shame are becoming more prevalent in American culture, particularly among millennials. How might Western believers benefit from an Eastern perspective on Romans?

All cultures are infused with honor-shame dynamics, not merely East Asian cultures. However, it’s sometimes hard to see the cultural subtleties of our own context. By intentionally taking on an “Eastern” perspective, we become more attuned to similar aspects of honor-shame within an American setting.

Within an American context, several applications come to mind. For instance, we can express the meaning of faith in ways that reflect the ideas in Romans. We have faith in the One whom we want to honor and whose praise we seek. To have faith in Christ entails pursuing his glory and praise. Furthermore, the gospel transforms our perspective about what is worthy of praise or shame. Like Christ, we seek God’s glory in ways that redefine social honor or status.

Also, reading Romans from an Eastern perspective alerts us to the central importance of the church, our fundamental group identity as followers of Christ. In fact, we regain a long-forgotten truth among Christians, that salvation entails a change in collective identity. The gospel transforms how we distinguish insiders and outsiders. What’s more, if we really want to love others, we need a proper sense of shame and must grasp the importance of honoring others, as Paul explains throughout Romans.