

# Biblical Culture

God spoke to biblical writers in specific periods to communicate his message. Therefore, we cannot separate their words from their historical and cultural context. Instead, to know what God is saying to us, we must find what he was saying to them. Familiarity with biblical culture will move us toward that goal.

Although twenty-first-century Western civilization often highlights individualism over collectivism, biblical society, like 60–70% of the world today, was a collectivist and primarily honor/shame culture. A person's community supplied identity and security, so group honor habitually outranked self-fulfillment. Furthermore, society set and enforced honorable versus dishonorable/shameful standards. When people upheld the group's expectations, they conferred honor on everyone, but violating the community norms contaminated the group, resulting in collective shame.

Understanding the primary forces of honor/shame cultures will open our eyes to insights hidden in God's Word. Some of the significant cultural dynamics we find in Scripture are:

1. **Love of Honor:** The foremost goal of honor/shame cultures is gaining honor and avoiding shame, with ancestry as the starting point. (This explains the purpose of biblical genealogies.) Therefore, to lose honor is to lose everything of value. In a collective culture, honor and shame are contagious; what affects one group member affects all.
2. **Two Sources of Honor:** A person gains honor from two sources—*ascribed* (the most coveted) or *achieved*. *Ascribed* honor comes by association, by relationships with the honored; *achieved* honor comes by action, by one's accomplishments.

3. **Importance of Face:** People in honor/shame cultures guard their face. “Face” expresses social reputation or public image. Therefore, losing face results in a loss of honor.
4. **Belief in Limited Good:** Everything wanted in life—e.g., food, water, wealth, respect, power, influence, honor—exists in limited quantity. More for others means less for us.
5. **Challenge and Riposte:** When people perceive honor as their most valuable possession, they compete for it. Thus, life becomes a never-ending honor game in a social tug of war. (Many of Jesus’ interactions with the religious leaders took the form of honor competitions.) A contest often follows four steps:
  - Honor claim
  - Challenge or refusal to acknowledge the claim
  - Riposte (a clever reply to an insult) or defense of the claim
  - Public verdict
6. **System of Patronage:** The arrangement involves two unequal parties, both of whom have responsibilities to the relationship. The patron supplies the client access to goods, protection, money, and connections. The grateful client repays with recognition, praise, obedience, and loyalty. Fulfilling one’s responsibility brings honor; failure to fulfill brings shame.
7. **Emphasis on Purity:** People, places, time, and things can be clean or unclean. While cleanness stands for purity/honor before God, uncleanness refers not to hygiene but to a condition of impurity/shame.
8. **Honor-Status Reversal:** We find a theme of honor-status reversal throughout the Bible. The turnaround may be from shame to honor or vice versa.