

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FROM A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE:  
INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF HONOR AND SHAME

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**Re-Reading the Biblical Text within a Cultural Context**

How might a Chinese cultural lens sharpen the contours of biblical theology? What happens when we intentionally interpret Scripture from a cultural perspective? The result can be called an “exegetical contextualization.” This article gives an example of exegetical contextualization from a Chinese perspective. The first section briefly explains how to relate the biblical text and a cultural context. Thus, one can *exegete* Scripture according to the author’s original intent and, at the same time, convey distinct emphases found within a contemporary setting. After highlighting a few key features of Chinese culture, the bulk of the essay retells and reinterprets the grand biblical narrative in a way that is “meaningful” for Chinese people.<sup>1</sup> What results from this approach? Methodologically, we discover that contextualization via exegesis means listening for the echoes of culture within Scripture. Theologically, we gain a biblical theology as told from the perspective of an honor and shame culture. Missiologically, it is hoped that Christians around the world will be better equipped to contextualize the gospel.

**A Model to Contextualize the Gospel in Any Culture**

A story can be told from multiple perspectives without compromising its truthfulness. The biblical story is no different. Differences in culture will cause some people naturally to notice

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford rightly argues for a biblically “faithful” and culturally “meaningful” gospel in his chapter “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2011), Kindle Loc 3099–3492 (Chapter 8).

different aspects of the Bible. There is no reason to suppose that theologies emerging from these differing contexts will contradict. In fact, if done well, they will complement one another.

People always read the Bible through the lens of culture. Historically, most Christian theology is the product of reading the Bible with Western eyes.<sup>2</sup> As a result, certain themes are especially prominent within western theology, such as law, judgment, and individual salvation. Particular books have been emphasized over others, particularly Romans and Galatians. Furthermore, Westerners have laid great stress on systematic theology, perhaps even neglecting to develop a robust biblical theology.<sup>3</sup> However, what if the Bible were read with non-western eyes? For example, what would a *Chinese* biblical theology look like? We are all shaped by imperfect cultures. Everyone comes to the Bible with limited points of view. A Western lens is every bit as limiting as an Eastern one. Therefore, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the grand biblical narrative, we need also to interpret Scripture from non-western vantage points. One cannot assume *a priori* that using a Chinese lens results in eisegesis, i.e. erroneously forcing one's culture into biblical interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an example discussion on how western culture influences our interpretation of the Bible, see E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> By “biblical theology,” I do not simply mean theology that is biblical. Rather, as Michael Bird states, in biblical theology, “‘the text itself sets the agenda’ and attention is paid to how each author, corpus, or testament addresses their own issues on their own terms and in their own language.” See his article “New Testament Theology Re-Loaded: Integrating Biblical Theology and Christian Origins,” *TynBul* 60, no. 2 (2009): 269. He cites D. A. Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology” A New Testament Perspective,” *BBR* 5 (1995): 29. To oversimplify a bit the distinction between “systematic theology,” and “biblical theology,” one might say that systematic theology begins with the reader’s questions on a topic (i.e. Church, end times, Holy Spirit, etc.). By contrast, biblical theology begins with the authors’ own questions, seeking to find some unity to the biblical authors’ perspective as conveyed by his language within his original context. The two cannot be separated so neatly in actual practice. Theoretically, biblical theology should form the basis for sound systematic theology.

<sup>4</sup> To make this assumption would equally discredit traditional western theology since western theologians have used a “Western” lens to exegete Scripture. For more on this line of thought, see Jackson Wu, “We Compromise the Gospel When We Settle for Truth: How ‘Right’ Interpretations Lead to ‘Wrong’ Contextualization,” *Global Missiology* 2, no. 10 (January 2013), n.p. Online: <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/issue/view/99>. Also, see Jackson Wu, “Contextualizing the One Gospel in any Culture: A Model from the Biblical Text for a Global Context,” *Global Missiology* 2, no. 10 (April 2013), n.p. Online: [www.globalmissiology.org](http://www.globalmissiology.org).

As I have argued previously, contextualization happens where the cultural context overlaps the biblical text.<sup>5</sup> I have suggested a method of contextualization that is both flexible and firm. Flexibility can be found within the firmness of a distinct biblical framework. The Bible speaks to all cultures. Naturally, certain biblical themes will largely be overlooked by some cultures even though they are emphasized in others. For example, many people in African cultures will make special note of passages related to ancestors and spirits. East Asian societies can well grasp the significance of honor-shame texts, while Westerners have been inclined to highlight law-oriented themes.<sup>6</sup> When biblical theologies are contextualized in different cultures, they not only complement but also correct one another.

### **Distinguishing Two Kinds of Contextualization**

Contextualization fundamentally is an act of interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Only then can it be understood as communication or application. Otherwise said, contextualizing Scripture happens whenever we read the Bible from a perspective of given context. Contextualization is not primarily something we do to the gospel. Broadly stated, it is the mind's perception of and response to the gospel. In actual fact, contextualization further subdivides into two types. The first is *exegetical* contextualization; the second is *cultural* contextualization.

*Exegetical contextualization* refers to one's interpretation of Scripture from a cultural perspective. It means locating the cultural context within the biblical text. Accordingly, someone with an East Asian worldview will more naturally see a number of concepts within the Bible that

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<sup>5</sup> See Wu, "Contextualizing the One Gospel."

<sup>6</sup> For more elaboration, see the following books: Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, Calif.: WCIUP, 2013), 10–68. This approach is further defended and explained in my article, Jackson Wu, "We Compromise the Gospel When We Settle for Truth."

reflect the distinctives of his or her culture (e.g. honor, shame, and collective identity). This contextualization means seeing what is true of our cultural context within the Bible itself. This is not eisegesis, whereby one forces foreign ideas into Scripture. In exegetical contextualization, one sees what actually is in the text already. In short, we interpret Scripture using a cultural lens.<sup>8</sup>

What might this look like in practice? In an East Asian context, an exegetically contextualized theology would take seriously the frequently used language about God's people not being "put to shame." Also, one could highlight instances of collectivism in both the Testaments, such as when individuals represent entire groups. Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 recounts Israel's history in view of the stubborn refusal of his contemporaries to accept Christ. Abraham's justification is interpreted in two contrary but not contradictory ways due to Paul and James writing from two different settings (cf. Rom 4; Gal 2:16ff; James 2:21–23). Likewise, in Hebrews 11, situational needs produced the biblical theology thematically oriented on faith.

*Cultural contextualization* refers to the interpretation of culture using a Scriptural perspective. It nestles the biblical text within a contemporary cultural context. Hence, one looks at a culture and identifies various concepts that already exist in the Bible. When examining a culture like China, the contextualizer might notice how well the Chinese understand the family motif. An "underground" church is actually called a "family" church (家庭教会). Likewise, one may observe common features within the histories of China and Israel. Both nations suffered from imperialism and have demonstrated strong degrees of ethnocentric/nationalistic prejudice against outsiders. Cultural contextualization means seeing what is true about a culture as a result of having a biblical lens. The Bible provides a fresh assessment of the cultural.

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<sup>8</sup> To some measure, this happens regardless whether one knows it. Therefore, it would be best to be intentional about the lens we use. On the relationship between culture, interpretation, and hermeneutics, see Julian Ruth, "Ground Level Contextualization," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical*

Practically speaking, what does cultural contextualization look like? One could point to rampant consumerism and the fear people have of losing face. In light of Rom 6, we might say people have become slaves to their homes, cars, or even to their own families. Only Christ sets them free. Exodus language is also brought forward to Paul's contemporary context in 1 Cor 5:7, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (ESV).<sup>9</sup>

### **Seeing the World through Lens of Chinese Culture<sup>10</sup>**

What do we see when we look at the world with Chinese eyes? Countless books and articles offer the reader insights into Chinese society.<sup>11</sup> A full rehearsal of China's history and culture will not be given here.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the following section focuses on three major aspects of Chinese culture. In reality, human cultures are far more complex and resist

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*Approach to Contextualization* (ed. Matthew Cook et al.; Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2010), 57–89; Wu, "We Compromise the Gospel When We Settle for Truth."

<sup>9</sup> All Scripture citations come from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout this section, footnotes will be used to express related ideas in Chinese characters.

<sup>11</sup> For a sample of books and articles across disciplines, see Olwen Bedford and Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture: A Cross-Cultural Framework from the Perspective of Morality and Identity," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 127–44; Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Chung-Ying Cheng, "The Concept of Face and Its Confucian Roots," *JCP* 13 (1986): 329–48; Ying-Yi Hong and Chi-Yue Chiu, "A Study of the Comparative Structure of Guilt and Shame in a Chinese Society," *Journal of Psychology* 126, no. 2 (March 1992): 171; Hsien Chin Hu, "The Chinese Concepts of 'Face,'" *American Anthropologist* 46, no. 1 (March 1944): 45–64; Dilin Liu, *Metaphor, Culture, and Worldview: The Case of American English and the Chinese Language* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002); Wenzhong Hu and Cornelius Lee Grove, *Encountering the Chinese: A Guide for Americans* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1991); Kwang-Kuo Hwang, *Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations* (New York, N.Y.: Springer, 2012); Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Li Liu, "Filial Piety, Guanxi, Loyalty, and Money: Trust in China," in *Trust and Distrust: Sociocultural Perspectives* (ed. by Ivana Marková and Alex Gillespie; Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2008), 51–73; Haihua Zhang and Geoffrey Baker, *Think Like Chinese* (Annandale, N.S.W.: Federation Press, 2008). For explicitly Christian perspectives, see Richard R. Cook and David W. Pao, eds., *After Imperialism: Christian Identity in China and the Global Evangelical Movement* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2011); Ralph Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986). Enoch Wan, "Practical Contextualization: A Case Study of Evangelizing Contemporary Chinese," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 1 (Oct 2003). n.p. [cited 27 Dec 2011]. Online: [globalmissiology.org](http://globalmissiology.org); Enoch Wan, "Critiquing the Method of Traditional Western Theology and Calling for Sino-Theology," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 1 (Oct 2003): n.p. [cited 21 Nov 2011]. Online: [globalmissiology.org](http://globalmissiology.org).

reductionistic descriptions. Nevertheless, even a brief introduction can familiarize readers with Chinese culture and sufficiently help them discern ways that a Chinese worldview could shape a contextualized biblical theology. Modern Chinese people see the world through the lens of honor and shame, have a high regard for relationships (*guanxi*), and long to get a share of the “Chinese dream.” More simply, Chinese society is marked by a love of face, family, and fortune.

### Seeking the “Face” of China

China has an honor-shame culture. Another way of saying this is that Chinese people are very concerned with “face”—gaining face, saving face, and not losing face. This concept is multifaceted. Essentially, “face” refers to one’s social value as perceived within some group setting. “Face” is inherently public. One’s face determines his or her group identity.

People gain or lose face for a number of reasons. Some are quite simple, even trivial, such as when a person is clumsy and trips. That can embarrass someone and lose face. On the other hand, honor-shame has a moral dimension. One is “shameful” if he does not conform to the moral demands of the community. No one wants it said of him, “He has no sense of shame.” Likewise, people praise (i.e. honor) those whom they judge as having good character.

Face is either “achieved” or “ascribed”; that is, it is either earned or inherited.<sup>13</sup> For example, one can inherit the honor-shame of a friend group, family, name, or position. A non-named person may suddenly gain face by mere association, as when someone marries a famous actress. In addition, the public awards honor or shame based on what people do. The watching world applauds good grades, winning an award and sporting competitions. Criminal activity and

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<sup>12</sup> I have written in more detail about themes that both pervade Chinese culture and have particular relevance for a contextualized Chinese theology in Wu, *Saving God’s Face*, 69–192.

<sup>13</sup> For a brief introduction with reference to a biblical setting, see deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 23–42, 158–65, 206–12; Halvor Moxnes, “Honor and Shame,” *BTB* 23, no. 4 (1993): 167–76. For a longer treatment, see Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). For Chinese culture, see David Yau-fai Ho, “On the Concept of Face,” *AJS* 81, no. 4 (1976): 870.

failing school bring social shame. We “give face” in various ways, including simple gestures of respect and words of praise. One’s “face” is his or her “social currency.”<sup>14</sup> To give (or withhold) honor to another person is to acknowledge (or deny) their position or worth. It establishes (or breaks) relationship and forms identity. Identity is shaped both by the ways we are different and the same as others.

Face is not unique to Asia. It is a human phenomenon. In the West, the concern for public recognition takes different forms. Every community holds to varying standards of honor-shame. Americans, for example, speak of “people pleasing” and immerse themselves in social media, like Facebook, Twitter, and personal blogs. Westerners typically stress *achieved* or *earned* face, thus *individuality*. Identity is often conceived in terms of how “I” am different than others.

### Relationship is Everything

Face determines relationship (*guanxi*) and vice versa. Foundational to Confucian philosophy is an emphasis on hierarchical social relationships. Moral behavior consists in properly ordering relationships such that “harmony” is achieved. Not surprisingly, Chinese people have prized social conformity for thousands of years. “The bird that sticks out is the one that gets shot.”<sup>15</sup>

A person’s *guanxi* has greater influence in determining a person’s well being than any other single factor. Relationships are managed through an informal but unmistakable custom of reciprocity where people exchange small and large favors or gifts as a way of cultivating mutual favor. One act of kindness puts another person in relational debt. Even if it is not discussed, all parties know the time will come when the gift giver may call for a favor in kind. Since Chinese think primarily in terms of face and *guanxi*, there is less emphasis given to “law” and “absolute

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<sup>14</sup> Hui Ching Chang and G. Richard Holt, “A Chinese Perspective on Face: A Inter-Relational Concern,” in *The Challenge of Facework: Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Issues* (ed. Stella Ting-Toomey; Suny Series in Human Communication Processes; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 122.

truth,” compared to the West. Morality cannot be separated from relationships that exist in concrete situations. The Chinese are keenly aware that right and wrong, to some degree, depend on the circumstances. People should not break the glass on someone’s car, *unless* of course that person needs rescuing. Also, one has a greater obligation to family members than to a stranger.

One’s family relationships are most important. Generally speaking, the parent-child relationship is prioritized above the marriage relationship. Children are to show filial piety to both their parents as well as their ancestors. It is a child’s duty to perpetuate and honor the family name.<sup>15</sup> Elder parents frequently live with their grown children, who are responsible to care for them in old age. It’s not uncommon that grandparents will have as much or more of an active role in raising a grandchild as do the parents, each who may have full time jobs.

Identity is a collective idea: “I am who I know.” Descartes said, “I think therefore I am.” A Chinese could paraphrase, “I belong therefore I am.”<sup>17</sup> History, age, and ethnicity shape how a person is seen in the eyes of others. One must respect his or her elders, whether living and dead. Ethnicity is more than one mere descriptor among others. The Chinese are proud of their long history. To be “Chinese” is to identify with an ethnic people whose glory extends for generations past. As a nation, they should act like a family. Literally, the Chinese word for country is *guo jia*, meaning “kingdom-family.” Famously, China is called the Middle Kingdom (*zhong guo*, 中国), signifying its perceived place in the world. Naturally, people are divided into insiders and outsiders. Anyone who is not Chinese is simply called an *outside-country-person*, *wai guo ren*.

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<sup>15</sup> In Chinese, 枪打出头鸟 (qiāng dǎ chū tóu niǎo).

<sup>16</sup> This ideal is captured by the phrase 传宗接代.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Andrew M. Mbuvu, “African Theology from the Perspective of Honor and Shame,” in *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World* (ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2002), 288–89. He suggests, “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”

## Finding Good Fortune

To twist the words of Karl Marx, money is the “opium of the people.” The country opened to the outside world in the late 1970s, quickly becoming a socialist state with capitalistic characteristics. Increasingly, one feels inclined to switch the order. The population has grown wealthier since former President Deng Xiaoping urged his people to try their best to get rich for the sake of the country. There remains a huge gap that separates the wealthiest and poorest Chinese.

In keeping with traditional thought, education is regarded as the key to economic success (not counting one’s *guanxi*). Children endure incredible pressure to study, study, study in order to get higher grades and eventually pass the nationwide *gao kao* (“high exam”), which can single-handedly determine if and where a student attends college. The education system is consistent with the need to learn Chinese characters. Memorization is emphasized more than creative and critical thinking, which run counter to group conformity.

Chinese people take a rather pragmatic approach to life. They are less interested in systematic theories and focus more on concrete solutions to get what is wanted. Traditionally, religion serves a practical function of gaining blessings in this life and after death. Political leaders in China have always assessed religions based on their social utility—how they help or hinder the goals of the state. It is not surprising that the one-child policy, which has been in place since 1982, has resulted in parents essentially treating their one child like an idol. The family’s hopes for face and fortune hinge on its one and only son or daughter. For the sake of lineage and economics, sons are generally preferred over daughters.

A number of themes mentioned in this brief sketch of Chinese culture will appear in the contextualization that follows. Contextualizing a biblical theology for a given culture requires finding motifs that are found both in the ancient text and the contemporary context. In particular,

we can anticipate an emphasis on family, God's fatherhood, kingship, honor, shame, debt, loyalty, and group-membership. Thus, Chinese may have a heightened sensitivity regarding ethnic identity, tradition, and the use of power by foreigners.

Lastly, a specific point of clarification may be necessary. So many features of Chinese society, whether moral and relational norms, collective identity, public policies, etc., find their root in an honor-shame orientation, broadly understood. If non-Chinese outsiders do not understand this facet of the culture, they will be less inclined to notice and appreciate occurrences of honor-shame in Scripture. Shame is both the cause and the consequence of sin. This important point must be made in order to correct potential misconceptions. Shame is more than a subjective, psychological experience. Honor is more than medieval chivalry and heroism. Honor and shame each have objective and subjective dimensions.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, God is the supreme measure of honor. Because God's image-bearers bring shame upon God's name, they themselves become shameful (cf. Rom 1:21–28; 2:23–24; 3:23). Conversely, Jesus grants people to have his own glory (John 17:22).

### **Interpreting the Biblical Text from a Chinese Context**

Contextualized theology exists for the sake of a particular context. Accordingly, a good contextualization will use language, idioms, and word-pictures that naturally communicate to the local listener, even if they perhaps sound awkward to outsiders. How then should one proceed to write a contextualization *for Chinese speakers* while writing the essay *for English readers*? Much of what follows was originally written in the Chinese language and has had to be translated back into English. Some expressions simply lose their force in translation. Many

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Christopher L. Flanders, "Shame," ed. by William A. Dyrness et al., *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010); G. B. Funderburke, "Shame," ed by Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975); Robert Priest, "Shame,"

cultural allusions are subtle. If told well, a contextualization of the grand narrative, in one sense, will sound different than a traditional reading; on the other hand, the content will all be quite familiar. To maintain a flow to the story, I will use footnotes to make explanatory comments about culture and theology. Contextual theology is inherently complex but it should also be coherent. Finally, given the sheer scope of the story, it is not possible to give citations defending every theological assertion. Readers can follow up for themselves using more focused sources.

We can divide the grand narrative of Scripture into six parts:<sup>19</sup>

- (1) One Family Under Heaven [天下一家]
- (2) Losing Face and Fighting for Honor [丢脸争面]
- (3) King of All Nations [万民之王]
- (4) Setting the World Right [拨乱反正]
- (5) Honor through Shame [以辱为荣]
- (6) Avenging Shame and Restoring God's Kingdom [雪耻复国]

One can immediately identify key themes in the section titles, like family, honor, shame, and kingdom. These motifs are central to both the Bible and Chinese culture. Also note two more observations. First, the overall outline attempts to give a balanced account of the entire story. Thus, Israel plays as prominent a role in the contextualization as in the Bible. Second, observe how the story integrates the various ideas together. Biblical writers often string together Old Testament allusions while at the same time addressing contemporary cultural concerns. The theology that results is both creative and relevant. In the same way, a contextualized biblical theology should be able to incorporate multiple themes. One must be conscious to avoid any sort of rigidity that is foreign to the biblical text itself.

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ed by Scott Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000); Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 148–53.

## One Family Under Heaven [天下一家]

The Creator God is father and king [父王] over the world. This one true God gives life to every human being. He made the human family in his image. Therefore, we come under his name. In the beginning, God's family enjoyed perfect harmony and was without shame. God created the world to be his kingdom. He put it in good order and ruled in righteousness. The human family is called to serve him as stewards over his creation, bearing the fruit of love and peace.

Humanity owes God a debt of love and honor.<sup>20</sup> We owe him filial piety—the respect due a parent from his children. Likewise, as citizens of his kingdom, we seek to bring him renown. True face [脸] only comes from a close relationship to our father and king. By reflecting his worth in the world, we have a name and status. In fact, this is how we bring honor to our human family. We express our identity in the way that we represent God in the world. Loyalty and honor manifest love for God, our father and king.

## Losing Face and Fighting for Honor [丢脸争面]

What happened? People have publically dishonored God. How? When we lack faith and so rebel against the one who gives life. We do not show God's infinite glory. We have all done wrong. In essence, we have spit in our father's face. People would rather have autonomy than relationship, being unwilling to depend on their heavenly father. We have no sense of shame. Humanity's relationship with God is broken. People refuse to bring glory to the family name.

As a result, our alienation causes us to lose face (脸, *lian*). We have become shameful.

The constant brokenness in human relationships reflects the fact that we have fractured our

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<sup>19</sup> By necessity of space, the following rendering of the biblical story is broad. Many important ideas simply cannot receive the attention one would want to give them. The agenda of this essay is broader than any single doctrine.

<sup>20</sup> One might say, 欠神人情 [qiàn shén rén qíng], indicating that we have a relational debt to God, as a child to his or her parents. Cf. Rom 13:8.

relationship to God. The consequences are serious. We lack love and righteousness. His children disown him and bring disgrace upon the family. Therefore, God kicked our ancestors out of their home. We are isolated. People have lost their true sense of identity. After all, we have lost all standing and honor. Consequently, he cursed the world, allowing death, disease, and suffering to enter the world. Nature turned hostile. God will not tolerate our rebellion. We have brought on ourselves ruin and infamy. Or, as the Chinese idiom puts it, our “names stink forever.”

Consider our earliest ancestors. They began thinking about how to protect face. At their birth, they were not ashamed. In time, however, their actions revealed their real face. Therefore, when they heard God coming, they “hid themselves” because they were “afraid” of his presence (Gen 3:8, 10). Even worse, people begin competing for face. Descendants are the fruit of their ancestors. “Dragons beget dragons, phoenixes beget phoenixes—each after its own kind.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, we can recall the conflict between two brothers, the sons of our earliest ancestors. One day, they offered a sacrifice. God accepted the sacrifice of the younger son but not the older son. The older son became jealous of the younger. Comparison led to competition until there was only one brother. Anger gave birth to murder. God asked the older brother, “Where is your brother?” He replied, “I do not know; and am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9).<sup>22</sup>

Notice the older brother’s implicit criticism. He does not want to be responsible for someone else. He does not want to answer to God. If God will not praise him, then he wants independence. We all are like this older brother. People want relationship with God yet with a

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<sup>21</sup> The idiom in Chinese: 龙生龙凤生凤。

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps a fitting line from Chinese poetry could be cited, “本是同根深相煎何太急,” which roughly translates, “Those who come from the same root are eager to do harm to one another.”

subtle condition: So long as God gives us face, we are willing to have relationship with God.<sup>23</sup>

We want God blindly to give us face. We want God to have no sense of shame.<sup>24</sup>

It is a part of our nature to love face. Everyone pursues honor and wants to avoid shame.

This desire has become distorted, bringing disorder. The love of face stains those made in the image of God. Loss of face and isolation bring fear. We lose our sense of security when other people do not think we have value. Fear grows where face is lost. We content ourselves with being “big fish in a small pond.”<sup>25</sup> In this respect, people establish relationships simply for self-benefit. We see only ourselves and so deny even our family.

When families are corrupted, human societies fall into chaos. Consider the story of Babel. An entire community shared a common dream. They said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). The people have two inter-related motives. First, they want a great name: “let us make a name for ourselves.” Second, they want security: “lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” However, God looks down on them. Genesis 11:5 says, “And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.” Although their tower aimed for the heavens, notice verse 5’s irony, “the LORD came down to see.” In other words, they cannot reach the heavens. The story of Babel illustrates how we all “fall short of the glory of God” (cf. Rom 3:23).

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<sup>23</sup> This is an implicit dynamic in *guanxi* cultures. Relationships are simply means to an end.

<sup>24</sup> “我们要神不知廉耻。” In essence, we want God to become as us, being indifferent to so much of the shameful behavior done in the world.

<sup>25</sup> The Chinese equivalent for this idiom says that a person “prefers to be the head of a chicken rather than the tail of a phoenix.”

Humans try to use circumstantial face (面子, *mianzi*) somehow to compensate for a lack of enduring face (脸, *lian*).<sup>26</sup> This is impossible. *Lian* involves our character, our essential value as humans. We have formed countless factions, dividing into groups in which we might be respected. Trivial commonalities piece together a seeming unity. These include one's nationality, ethnicity, hometown, interests, traditions, and language. We think, "This is my country. That is your country," or "This is my home. That is your home." On the surface, everything looks good. In reality, the human family is scattered, cut off from one another, each in a different corner of the world. However, superficial characteristics can only fabricate a hollow sort of harmony. Popular opinion controls us. We are concerned about our image, not God's. We constantly think about how we compare to others.<sup>27</sup> The world is full of hypocrisy and lip service.

Even if we reject God as Father, he remains the world's one true king. Accordingly, our disregard and disobedience can also be considered a "crime," even treason.<sup>28</sup> Humans are not willing to confess God as Lord. We have betrayed our king. In effect, humans launched a coup. Over time, humans multiplied, divided into factions. As we filled the earth, we colonized the world.<sup>29</sup> As rebels, humanity lives as an enemy to God. Harmony has turned to hostility. Within God's kingdom, divorce and civil war are obvious marks that humanity does not seek God's face.

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<sup>26</sup> In Chinese, "face" can be translated two ways, *lian* and *mianzi*. Although they generally have the same meaning, there remains a subtle and important distinction. *Lian* is the kind of face that refers to our character, who we really are. It is precious and enduring. *Mianzi* is more circumstantial. It can simply refer to the general way that people respect or honor others. It could simply mean a person is famous. *Lian* is a kind of *mianzi*, but *mianzi* is not necessarily *lian*.

<sup>27</sup> 攀比; Perhaps, one could also say 高攀 or 和人高攀.

<sup>28</sup> In the standard Chinese Bible (和合本), the word for "sin" is 罪 (*zui*), meaning "crime."

<sup>29</sup> China herself suffered under colonial imperialism during the "hundred years of humiliation."

## King of All Nations [万民之王]

Where do we belong? Who are we? What do we depend on? People naturally depend on their relationship network. Someone once said, “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>30</sup> People think their relationships (*guanxi*) can save them. Of course, not all relationships are the same. Consider the following questions. Whom do we regard as our authority? Whom do we follow? In other words, to whom are we loyal? If we have relationship with God, we *really* have *guanxi*. We *really* have honor.

Out of fear, humans even began to worship false gods. With their own hands, they used wood and stone to make idols. In every land, all the nations created their own local god to protect them from outsiders and from nature. As a result, people worship created things rather than the Creator. In short, people created false gods in their own image. Everyone worships himself. We have brought shame upon God’s name and cannot blot out this most fundamental offense against him.<sup>31</sup> Because there is only one God, he is the king of all nations. Idolatry is betrayal. How can God vindicate his honor, restore his kingdom, and bring reconciliation to his family?

The one true God takes the initiative to spread his renown among all nations, who are continually bent on seeking fame and wealth. God throughout history has sought to gather his children and restore human dignity. Long ago, he chose to use a small and seemingly insignificant people to reestablish his kingdom in the world. God revealed himself to Abraham in Gen 12, commanding to leave his “country and [his] kindred and [his] father’s household.” He promised to give Abraham have a great name. In addition, God made a covenant with Abraham,

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<sup>30</sup> This is an obvious adaption of Descartes dictum, “I think, therefore I am.” Mbuvi, “African Theology from the Perspective of Honor and Shame,” 288–89.

<sup>31</sup> In Chinese, this could be stated with subtle irony: 我们在神的脸上抹黑而无法抹掉这最根本的触犯. “抹黑” signifies “smearing” a black upon God’s face, which we cannot “wipe away” [抹掉].

saying, “through your offspring, all nations will be blessed” (cf. Gen 22:18; Acts 3:25). Through Abraham’s offspring, all nations will eventually become God’s reconstituted family.

God’s promise sounds especially strange, however, since Abraham and his wife were very old and still had no children. Their bodies could not birth children. They did not completely understand God’s word, so Abraham lay with his servant. She birthed a son but God did not want to use this boy. God’s promise does not depend on ancestral lineage. Afterward, Abraham sent the servant and her son away. The family God had promised Abraham would not come entirely through bloodline, but through God’s grace.

Abraham’s descendants had to be loyal to the one true God, who always keeps his promises. When Abraham’s wife was 90 years old, God allowed her to become pregnant with a son named Isaac. Only this God creates life. God tested Abraham, telling him to sacrifice Isaac his only son (Gen 22).<sup>32</sup> Abraham believed God and so gave him glory. He was willing to offer his only hope for continuing his family line. Yet, God stopped Abraham and provided Abraham a substitute, a lamb. This substitute protected God’s promise and his family. In faithfulness, God saves life.

God’s covenant with Abraham created a problem. Since people have dishonored God, he should put them to shame. However, he makes a commitment to Abraham save and bless all nations. How can God keep his promises and yet uphold his honor? He cannot simply overlook human evil. That would be disgraceful. He also cannot break his covenant. That would also be shameful. How would God set the world right? For many years, this remained a mystery.

Abraham’s family eventually becomes a nation called “Israel.” At times, it seemed God forgot his people. Because of famine, Israel had to go to the country of Egypt. God continued to multiply Abraham’s descendants; thus, the Egyptian king began to fear them. The king of Egypt

decided to enslave them, using them to increase his own country's wealth. Nevertheless, God defeated the false gods of Egypt and rescued them from oppression. God showed he was not simply the God of one small area of land; he governs the entire world. No earthly power can usurp his authority. He is the king of all nations.

As king, God redeems Israel from slavery; as father to the nation, he calls Israel his "firstborn son" (Exod 4:22–23). In addition, he declares to his people, "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). In other words, God adopts them in order to bear his name among the nations. They do not exist for themselves. Rather, Israel had a God-given vocation. Collectively, they were to be a mediator among the nations. Through Israel—Abraham's offspring—God would restore the harmony to the world.

God commands all nations worship him, the only true God. Therefore, he gave Israel a law [礼仪]. This law reveals the character of the world's true father and king. Through God's law, they were supposed to learn righteousness and a sense of shame.<sup>33</sup> God's will was that Israel would be a nation of love and righteousness. Through his people, God lovingly manifests his glory to the nations. He exposes the true face of the false gods. In contrast, the one true God does not hide his face.<sup>34</sup> He was gracious to his people, giving them security and fertile land.

Unfortunately, Israel was unfaithful.<sup>35</sup> They cast aside the one true God as father and king. They wanted a human king, like other nations. God showed tolerance and allowed them to have a king. The first king was taller and more handsome than other people. Despite all appearances, he was unfaithful. "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam

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<sup>32</sup> One should be keen to hear this from the perspective of someone living under the "one child" policy.

<sup>33</sup> "礼仪" refers to the rituals and manners that distinctly mark the Chinese sense of propriety. Though out of use today, it still represents quintessential Chinese virtue. It is included among the "four social bonds," "礼义廉耻."

<sup>34</sup> "不要向世人掩面."

<sup>35</sup> Rather than simply saying they were "不忠的," it may be better to say they "缺乏忠义" in order to connect with the righteousness theme found elsewhere in the Bible.

16:7).” Therefore, God chose an unlikely man named David. David had no *guanxi* or *mianzi*, yet God made a covenant with David. Although David rose from humble beginnings and made many mistakes, nevertheless God promised that David’s offspring would reign as king forever. Not only that, God adds, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam 7:14a). In essence, God narrows the means by which he will keep his covenant with Abraham. Through David’s offspring, all nations will be blessed.

Over time, the people of Israel believed in themselves more than God. They confused religion, tradition, and relationship. They worshipped God only for the sake of private blessing.<sup>36</sup> During times of trouble, they would appeal to God for help.<sup>37</sup> They even asked false gods to bless them. In society, people cared only for themselves, growing increasingly individualistic. The nation’s leaders treated the weak and poor unjustly. The people of Israel were utterly shameless.<sup>38</sup> In Mal 1:6, God even asks, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear?”

In short, Israel repeats the mistakes of their ancestors. They lacked filial love. They feared the surrounding nations and their false gods. They turned to idols, exchanging the glory of Creator God for created things (cf. Rom 1:23). For the sake of food and wealth, they turned against one another. God had set Israel “in the center of the nations” (Ezek 5:5). She was supposed to be a light to the nations, being God’s “middle kingdom.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, God will avenge himself. Israel was cursed and suffered exile. Once again, God’s people are forced to

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps, one might regard God as a “backdoor,” from whom one calls on favors; “人们算神为后台。”

<sup>37</sup> Chinese language has a saying in which one grabs upon Buddha’s feet in times of trouble (临时抱佛脚). Students might use this expression before an exam. We could adjust the phrasing such that a person grabs upon Jesus’ feet merely in times of trouble (临时抱耶稣脚).

<sup>38</sup> “厚颜无耻.”

<sup>39</sup> The echo to China’s name is obvious. In Chinese, “China” is literally translated “middle kingdom.” Cf. Ezek 5:5–6, “Thus says the Lord GOD: This is Jerusalem. *I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries*

leave their home. Israel was put to shame. Foreign powers oppressed them. Even worse, the nations blasphemed God. God's chosen people are supposed to be a vessel through which God blesses all nations. Instead, they are cursed. They preferred death to life, shame rather than the honor of God.<sup>40</sup> How would God vindicate his name?

Human unfaithfulness does not nullify the faithfulness of God. God is righteous; therefore he always keeps his promise. He will not forsake his family. God reaffirms his covenant with his people. He promises to put his Holy Spirit within them. In effect, this means God puts his law into the hearts of his people.<sup>41</sup> Israel's exile would not last forever. God promises to wipe away their national humiliation.<sup>42</sup> However, he does not simply point to *the resurgence of their nation*. God will surprise his people and exceed our expectations.

### Setting the World Right [拨乱反正]

Years later, God the Father graciously returns his children back to their motherland; however, various foreign powers continue to rule over them. At that time, people of Israel were also called Jews. Their most powerful oppressor came from the West—the Roman Empire. The Jews resented foreign occupation. When the Roman Empire ruled, the Jews were full of nationalistic zeal. Many people wanted to overthrow the imperialists.<sup>43</sup> In order to show patriotism, people were very serious about the Jewish law. After all, they thought, their shame was due to their disregarding to words God had given to their ancestors. Never forgetting their national

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*all around her.* And she has rebelled against my rules by doing wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her; for they have rejected my rules and have not walked in my statutes.”

<sup>40</sup> “他们宁死不活，宁辱不荣耀神。”

<sup>41</sup> Once again, it might be appropriate to use 礼仪 rather than 律法 for “law.”

<sup>42</sup> “洗雪他们的国耻。”

<sup>43</sup> Once again, Chinese can sympathize with Israel on these points.

humiliation,<sup>44</sup> the Jewish people became more and more concerned with who was in and who was out, dividing the world into “insiders” and “outsiders.”

Many Jews misunderstood the essence of their law.<sup>45</sup> They used the law and their traditions to keep out “Gentiles,” whom they essentially regarded as “foreign devils.”<sup>46</sup> The family of Israel became exclusivistic. They thought their nation was the center of the world. Ancestral heritage, place of birth, land, human connections, and material blessings are no guarantee of God’s blessing. His many blessings do not suggest Israel has “most favored nation status.”<sup>47</sup> God does not show partiality (Rom 2:11). Rather, it is only a relationship with their Father that sets them apart. It has always been this way. God’s people are blessed to be a blessing. In reality, Israel, like the rest of humanity, forgot their calling.

Behind their zeal and nationalism lay an ironic tragedy. The Jews had indeed forgotten their earliest ancestors. On the one hand, they had not learned from the mistakes of the past. They continued to compete for face. Although coming from the same root, they sought each other’s harm.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, they did not follow their father Abraham’s example. Abraham was faithful; therefore, God declared him righteous. Yet, the Jews did not truly honor Abraham as a family ancestor. Otherwise, they would listen to Abraham and worship the one true God. Even though the Jews loved their motherland, they disregarded their father. They had forgotten that God’s family consisted of all nations. As a result, they essentially disowned their relatives.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> William C. Callahan observes, “Indeed, the theme of [China’s] 2004 National Defense Education Day was ‘Never forget national humiliation, strengthen our national defense’” in his article William C. Callahan, “History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China,” *BCAS* 38, no. 2 (2006): 180. See also his work, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (Mar-May 2004): 199–218.

<sup>45</sup> “律法/礼仪的精髓。”

<sup>46</sup> 洋鬼子 is a slanderous term used during the Mao-Period to refer to foreigner.

<sup>47</sup> “最惠国的身份。”

<sup>48</sup> “本是同根深相煎何太急。”

<sup>49</sup> “六亲不认。”

It was into this darkness that a man named Jesus was born. God himself came into the world he made. Although God is spirit, he took on human flesh. The name “Jesus” means “God saves.” Through Jesus, God will set the world right. In him, God would fulfill all his promises. As David’s offspring, Jesus is called “Christ” and the “Son of God.” These titles were given to Israel’s king. The story of Jesus is called the “gospel” (Mark 1:1).<sup>50</sup> Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and future return can be explained in the following way:<sup>51</sup>

Jesus’	English	Chinese	Literal Meaning	Significance
Life	reveals	服侍 (fú shì)	“serve”	Jesus’ mission (serves God and people), character (humble, loving); Isaiah’s “suffering servant” <sup>52</sup>
Death	redeems	付債 (fù zhài)	“pay a debt”	Uses two common salvation metaphors. Jesus <i>pays</i> and thus <i>bears</i> our debt. 付債 sounds like 负债, to bear a debt.
Resurrection	resurrects	复活 (fù huó)	“resurrect”	Jesus defeats all his enemies, the last being death (1 Cor 15:25–26).
Return	restores	复国 (fù guó)	“restore a kingdom”	“Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Cor 15:24).

This gospel story of Jesus Christ can only be understood within the larger narrative of the Bible.

### How Did Jesus Reveal/Serve God?

Jesus reveals the glory of God. He sovereignly cast out demons, healed diseases, raised the dead, and rebuked those who dominated the weak. He even exerted power over nature. However, to everyone’s surprise, he did not use armed force to overthrow Israel’s political enemies. In fact, Christ turned his attention on those who were insiders. He exposes the Jewish leaders’ real face.

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<sup>50</sup> In Chinese, these four parts each use the *fū*-sound as a way to alliterate the gospel (福音, *fuyin*). Each word represents Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and return respectively. The first of these four parts, 服侍 (*fúshì*), does not translate directly into English and has been adjusted accordingly.

<sup>51</sup> The last section 复国 will be discussed at the end of the essay rather than here.

They cared more about perceptions and power more than they did the poor. Money was their real idol. Jesus said people cannot serve both God and money.

By contrast, Jesus does not show partiality. He taught that people misunderstood God's covenant. His promises are according to faith not family background. Jesus redefines family. On one occasion, Jesus said, "And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.' And he answered them, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3:32–35). Abraham's true offspring do not trust in social connections. Their allegiance is to God. His words should affect people's hearts—not simply outward appearances. Jesus draws all people to himself (cf. John 12:32). God aims to rescue humanity, not merely a local clan.

Christ came to establish righteousness. Because Israel historically had suffered humiliation, many Jews wanted God to vindicate them.<sup>53</sup> Some were willing to shed blood to make the Romans pay for their injustice.<sup>54</sup> Sadly, people misunderstood Jesus' intention. Jesus sought to vindicate his Father. Whether a so-called insider or outsider, all people dishonor God. Jesus was willing to suffer in order to reveal God's glory. Among Abraham's offspring, Jesus was unique. Like a faithful firstborn son, he wipes away family shame. How does he do this?

### Jesus Pays the Human Debt

Eventually, social leaders turned against Jesus. Worldly powers could not force Jesus to deny God his Father. They conspired to torture and kill him on a cross. Although Jesus was perfectly filial, his own countrymen rejected him. This was all God's plan. All nations commit treason

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Isa 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12.

<sup>53</sup> "犹太人要神为他们洗冤."

<sup>54</sup> "讨还血债."

against the King of heaven and earth. They deserve judgment. God promised to use Abraham's offspring Israel to bless these nations, but Israel fell under a curse. He demands compensation, yet no one can pay the debt.

One begins to see the significance of Christ's death. Shamefully, God's enemies allowed his corpse to hang on a cross. According to Israel's law, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal 3:13, citing Deut 21:23). By becoming a curse, Israel's Christ bears their shame. Therefore, as Israel's king, he represents them and removes the curse. Jesus sacrifices himself on behalf of his people. In this way, Jesus is our recompense. We owe the Father-King honor and our life. Christ pays back in full our debts—our honor debt and our life death. Jesus represents humanity—perfectly glorifying God and removing human shame. Christ saves God's face.

### Why Did Jesus Resurrect?

As a man, Jesus is also able to represent humanity. He perfectly honored God our Father. Therefore, three days after his burial, God removed the curse by raising Jesus from the dead. Not merely his spirit, but Jesus' physical body came out of the grave. The world regarded Jesus as a criminal. However, through the resurrection, God the Father vindicates his Son, making him the king of all kings. Jesus' Father overturns the honor-shame standards of the world. In Christ, God defeats all his enemies, whether governments, spirits, even death. God reclaims his rightful place.

What does this mean for the world? God has glorified his Son; in the same way, Christ gives his glory to his people (John 17:22). Previously, we were lacked face. We were weak and oppressed. Various social powers, love of face, shameful desires, sickness, and fear enslaved us. Now, however, Jesus reconciles God and his people. In short, Jesus serves as a mediator. No matter one's background, position, achievement, network, or other identity, anyone can come

under Jesus' name. Accordingly, God keeps his covenant and defends his own name. Because the one true God reveals his glory, all nations will be blessed. He deserves worship.

If we are willing to repent and give allegiance to Jesus as Lord, then our King will grant us pardon. More than that, all who follow Jesus come under God the Father's family name. In this way, Jesus continues the family line of Abraham.<sup>55</sup> As God's children, we no longer boast about people we know, our social standing, our ethnic identity, or traditions. Instead, we "[boast] in the hope of the glory God" and this "hope does not put us to shame" (Rom 5:2, 5).<sup>56</sup>

### Honored through Shame [以辱为荣]

How does all this change our lives? In short, we can say *yi ru wei rong* (以辱为荣).<sup>57</sup> The phrase can be translated two ways: first, "to regard shame as honor"; second, "to use shame for honor." What the world sees as shameful, God sees as honorable. Thus, the world sees the Jesus' cross and the suffering of Christians as disgraceful humiliation. Yet, God uses these means precisely to reveal his glory. God intentionally used an unfaithful nation, Israel, to show his own faithfulness.

God views honor-shame through a different lens than that of any culture. The nations worship created things, but these idols are worthless. What the world sees as honorable, God regards as shameful. Many think "getting face" and "getting a name" are desirable; however, God regards such pride as lamentable. Accordingly, Paul is able to say "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14). Christians should expect God to use circumstances and methods of ministry that are painful, seem foolish, and draw the condescending sneer of culture. He wants

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<sup>55</sup> Thus, we could say Jesus 传宗接代 (*chuán zōng jiē dài*).

<sup>56</sup> In Greek, Rom 5:2 uses the typical word used for "boast" [*καυχάομαι*], as in Rom 2:17, 23; 5: 3, 11. Cf. 3:27; 15:17.

to expose the superficiality of the world in order that people would “count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8).

The gospel announces that the one true God has made Jesus Christ King of Kings. This message demands a change in fundamental loyalties in order to be saved from his judgment. The nations must forsake false gods. Following Jesus requires a change. Everyone lives in the midst of some community. Accordingly, we must exchange our old sense of belonging and gain a new sense of identity. Paul puts it this way, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Being an outcast to one group means being included in another. Jesus makes a promise: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:29–30).

Loving Christ means we join God’s royal family. Those who identify with Jesus become our brothers and sisters. Family is not simply about sharing a bloodline. This new way of seeing the world brings new desires and leads to a new way of living. Christ’s followers are willing sacrifice our own interests for others. They do not idolize face. Instead, they strive to “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10). Humility gives freedom and joy. We will care more about honor that endures (*lian*) than that which passes with the clouds (*mianzi*). We now delight in God’s honor and joyfully envisage Christ’s return.

### Avenging Shame and Restoring God’s Kingdom [雪耻复国]<sup>58</sup>

After Jesus’ resurrection, he ascended to his Father but promised to return. He will set the world

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<sup>57</sup> Conveniently, this sentence construction (以 A 为 B) can carry two meanings. First, it could mean to *regard A as B*. In this case, to regard what is shameful as glorious. Second, it means to *use A as B*. Thus, God can use what is “shameful” as something “glorious.”

<sup>58</sup> This section completes the fourth part of the Jesus story (服事, 付债, 复活, 复国).

right. God will not forever tolerate human corruption, idolatry, shame, and faithlessness. Once and for all, he will avenge the insults of those who rebel against Christ and reject his people. In this way, the Father will completely rescue his children. This is why Paul tells us, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom 10:11; citing Isa 28:16).

When Jesus returns, he will resurrect and renew our physical bodies. In death, our body “is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power” (1 Cor 15:43). In fact, the entire creation longs for God to restore humanity’s glory. His children and all creation will be liberated. God will create a new heaven and a new earth. There will be true peace and harmony. Creation once again worships the Creator. This vision of the future reshapes how God’s people today live in the world. Because of our firm hope, we should “consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). Therefore, Christ’s followers are not indifferent towards evil in the world. Because they delight in righteousness, they expose and confront all that is shameful. Because they believe Christ’s promise, they do not tire in doing good, knowing “their labor in the Lord is not in vain” (cf. Gal 6:9; 1 Cor 15:58).

When God consummates his kingdom, our king will gather his family around him.<sup>59</sup> We will rejoice as those eating and drinking at a reunion feast (团圆饭). Our Father will finally establish a “universal brotherhood” (世界大同). We will celebrate the king’s victory over his enemies. The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind will be among his honored guests. Our

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<sup>59</sup> For this paragraph, cf. Matt 22:1–14; Mark 12:1–9; Luke 14:7–14.

host invites all nations to eat at his feast. His people will joyfully proclaim Jesus as host of the feast. In Chinese, “耶稣做主席,” which translates, “Jesus is Chairman.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Echoes of Culture within Scripture?**

What shall we say then? Does contextualization nullify biblical exegesis? Not at all. Indeed if it were not for contextualization, there would be no biblical theology. All theology is contextual theology.<sup>61</sup> All theology is revealed, expressed, and interpreted within a cultural context. God does not change, but the way that he speaks in history has varied. The writer of Hebrews makes this same point, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1:1–2).

In *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, Richard Hays suggests a way of understanding Paul’s method of interpretation that may help us to better do “exegetical contextualization.” How did Paul interpret the Old Testament? Hays answers,

*If we learned from Paul how to read Scripture, we would read as participants in the eschatological drama of redemption. . . . Through interpreting Scripture, we locate our present time in relation to the story of God’s dealing with humankind. Paul believed that his stance at the turn of the ages gave him a warrant for his radically revisionary readings because it gave him a privileged perspective from which to discern the thematic unity of time past and future.*<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The word for “host” is 主人 (zhǔ rén). “Banquet” is 宴席 (yàn xí). By using these together, a fitting pun is made whereby God, as host of the banquet, is called “主席,” which is the common name for “Chairman”—the title given to China’s supreme leader. Thus, the gospel is proclaimed in a way that recalls the apostle’s affirmation, “Jesus is Lord,” thus implying that Caesar is not.

<sup>61</sup> This idea has been echoed by many, including Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Rev. and expanded ed.; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 3; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 423. Dean Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2005), 298.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1989), 185. Emphasis in the original

We can adapt Hays' proposal for our purposes. First, if we learned from the biblical writers how to read Scripture, we would recall that the Bible was written for all humankind. Therefore, interpreting the Bible is not the exclusive privilege of any one particular culture or tradition.

Second, when God inspired Scripture, he spoke to authors who were located within a specific context. The New Testament writers frame their reading of the Old Testament so as to highlight its meaning amid their contemporary circumstances. Consider Mark 12: 1–12. Jesus' parable is a blatant retelling of Isaiah 5. He speaks of wicked tenants who want to take over a man's vineyard and so decide to kill his son. Jesus then cites Ps 118:22, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," making a Hebrew pun that connects the rejected "stone" (*'eb'n*, יָבֵן) back to the murdered "son" (*ben*, בֵּן). As a result, the Jewish leaders "perceived that he had told the parable against them" (v. 12).<sup>63</sup> Exegetical contextualization likewise tries to explain Scripture in a way that helps people hear echoes of their own culture in the Bible.

Third, we see the unity of the Church both past and present. Our own experience enables us to identify with people in Scripture who have similar successes and failures as us. The missionary groans with the prophets when no one receives the gospel message. Pastors feel Paul's anxiety for the church daily (2 Cor 11:28). The Chinese family with one child can sympathize with Abraham as he climbs up the mountain with Isaac in Gen 22.

Fourth, the one true God reveals himself in history. Therefore, in doing biblical theology, we must be careful not to take God's dealing with humanity and turn it into an abstraction.

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<sup>63</sup> Scot McKnight, "Sermon on Mark 12:1–12." Delivered at Willow Creek Community Church Midweek Service, 16 Feb 2012. [cited 4 Feb 2013]. Online: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/willow-creek-community-church/id468469977?mt=2>.

Christians must make radical claims that challenge social loyalties and relativize human idols. The gospel should revise the boastful ways that people talk about their past and future.

### **Finding China in the Middle of God's Kingdom**

Biblical theology is not safe. If we keep theology abstracted from culture, we might avoid the risk of syncretism. After all, our theology would be immune to the contamination of culture; however, it is precisely here that any such theology would also cease to be biblical. God has revealed himself authoritatively in the history. Having breathed the Bible into existence, the Holy Spirit now provides illumination so that we can interpret God's message according to its original meaning.

No doubt there are flaws in the way this essay has retold the biblical story. I do not claim divine inspiration on par with the Bible. At times, the narrative above seems to juxtapose the experience of China and Israel. Whatever the similarities, we should not confuse the two. In the scope of redemptive history, the Chinese remain Gentiles who are "grafted in" (Rom 11:17).

Nevertheless, those concerned with the Chinese church should consider the value of making this sort of comparison. Various issues are at stake. For example, we have to decide how and if certain words and concepts can be used to convey biblical truth. For the sake of explanation, could we at times use the ancient Chinese concept *liyi* (礼仪) to explain the significance of the word "law" within the Jew-Gentile disputes? *Liyi* is a distinctly Chinese notion. It typifies Chinese cultural tradition and theoretically separates a true Chinese person from a foreigner. In addition, there are moral issues to consider. What about ethnocentrism and nationalism? As evident in the account above, monotheism directly challenges any such boasting. What biblical insights about honor and shame can be applied to the typical Chinese person

whose sole concern is family and “face?” As these questions are answered, a great dragon will be released into the world for the sake of God’s kingdom. Let the reader understand.