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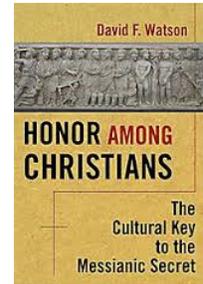
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Honor Among Christians: The Cultural Key to the Messianic Secret

David F. Watson

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010

This book might be better remembered if it had been titled, “Honour Among Thieves” because its thesis follows the conventional wisdom that Ancient Mediterranean society was posited upon a competition for the scarce resource of honour. What is new and worthwhile here is how the author fruitfully brings to bear the methods and main insights in sociological research into the shame/honour dynamic upon the on-going discussion of the Messianic secret approach to Mark.



The price of the book is well worth the new insights that emerge as Watson combines the language of secrecy with the language of shame in his exegesis of selected teachings and actions of Jesus recorded in the first ten chapters of Mark's gospel. Beware: all the usual methodological caveats apply. Watson is uncritical of the over-confidence sociological researchers have in the ability of their tools to accurately reproduce the details of the first-century Mediterranean worldview. Though he offers a feeble reference to the historical criticism of the gospel genre, Watson nonetheless buttresses this confidence by using concepts from oral history studies to justify his acceptance of Mark's work as reliable source-text for his sociological analysis. Literary theorists who follow Ricoeur may find this a naive and unnecessary attempt to recover the world behind the text but might be willing to accept the results as a sensitive proposal of the world projected from the text into our own (see especially pp 64-72). As such Watson's work is extremely useful to the preacher and the pastor trying to situate Jesus in the shame-honour dynamic in our own culture and our own time.

I find Watson's most enduring contribution precisely in the way he assists the text of Mark to perform the work of revising the shame-honour dynamic in light of the secrecy of Jesus' messiahship, not only for the first century as he claims, but for the late twentieth where I and the hospital patients and rural parishes I serve seem to live. “Honour Among Thieves” as an alternate title thus accurately captures Watson's conception of Jesus as the Messiah who subverts and revises the competition for honour and the avoidance of shame by virtue of “messiahship by crucifixion.”

“How Jesus Hides His Messiahship in Plain Sight Today” might also be a suitable alternate subtitle. It is a really good book to work through during “Year B” of the Lectionary, worth putting alongside Ched Myer's, *Binding The Strong Man* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988). Myer's focus on social justice in Jesus' ministry compliments Watson's perspective on social transformation, giving us through the lenses of sociological exegesis a binocular view of our own reality and evangelical task today. The methodological approaches Watson introduces are not a bad update to Myer's work either. His explanations made these methodologies accessible, and his applications yielded insights that were immediately useful. Though Watson completely bypasses the contribution Christianity has made to the current worldview, he offer a “hide and seek” route by which Christians might present the claims of Jesus in the competition for honour and the avoidance of shame in our world today.

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