



**Jackson W.**

***Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission***

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Sometimes our reading of scripture is “overshadowed by a mountain of tradition” (5), as this book suggests, and our blind spots may benefit from a new lens. That is what *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* offers readers steeped in Western interpretive tradition. Jackson W. (pseudonym) has lived and worked in East Asia for nearly two decades teaching Chinese pastors at a theological seminary. Although not Chinese himself, a major focus of his publishing has been intercultural hermeneutics. Author of *Saving God's Face* (2013) and *The Gospel for All Nations* (2015), Jackson W. has a PhD in Applied Theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and maintains a blog at [www.jacksonwu.org](http://www.jacksonwu.org).

This book is not a commentary per se but is “a modest scholarly contribution” to consider “how East Asian culture can help us interpret Romans,” with special emphasis on honor and shame cultural realities (3). Jackson W.’s conviction is that people in contemporary East Asian cultures and those in the ancient biblical world have many commonalities. Thus, “we have good reason to expect reading Romans with Eastern eyes will yield fresh insights today” (3). Jackson W. does not suggest East Asian cultures are superior or more ideal. He simply contends that there are resemblances between them and ancient biblical cultures, making the vantage point of the former distinctively poised to offer exegetical insights often overlooked.

Chapter 1 describes traits that generally characterize East Asian values: past-time orientation, respect for hierarchy, interdependence, group orientation (collectivism), face, modesty, and harmony with others. Although East Asian cultures are neither static nor uniform, diversity of thinking does not nullify the value of broad description. Second, Jackson W. contends that the preponderance of people in East Asia and in the ancient Near East live in “honor-shame cultures.” In such contexts, ascribed honor has a governing social influence, whereas achieved honor is more valued in individualistic cultures. The author proposes that an honor-shame cultural perspective has three distinguishing emphases: tradition (stability and practice), relationships (collectivism and social identity), and hierarchy (position and authority). These provide a shared basis for social order. Since “we all read the Bible through some sort of lens” (25), the author contends that an “Eastern perspective” offers insights otherwise unrealized by many Western readers.

Chapter 2 addresses Rom 1 and 15 with an eye to how Paul’s mission frames his message. It argues that Paul’s opening and closing segments reflect “indirect” communication characteristic of high-context cultures that value the preservation of face. Paul carefully uses language around “Jew” and “Greek” to acknowledge historic and local tensions but also to minimize collective identities conventionally based in ethnic distinctions in view of the gospel. Here Jackson W. implies that a major reason Paul wrote Romans was to address tensions in the community at Rome theologically but also with subtlety and tact.

Chapter 3 contends that Paul’s primary way of understanding sin in Rom 1–3 is through notions of honor and shame. Jackson W. suggests that Paul’s language of “the glory of God” deals fundamentally with God’s honor (or face). Thus, human sin dishonors God (see Rom 2:23–24), which “makes God lose ‘face’” (45). The chapter closes with application of this notion of sin to forms of honor and status-seeking in various cultures today.

Chapter 4 explores how Paul redefines collective identities in Rom 2–3, rooting them not in ethno-cultural groups but in God’s saving act of justification. “God does not disregard collective identity; [God] reorients it” (61). Jackson W. emphasizes that salvation, as Paul conceives it, is not an individualistic experience but a collective one, grounded not in cultural conventions but in Christ.

Chapter 5 discusses Rom 3:21–31 as the primary example of Christ “saving God’s face.” Whereas human unfaithfulness and presumption dishonor God, Christ has saved God’s honor by showing God’s righteousness, thereby “upend[ing] conventional notions of honor-shame” (81). By contrasting God’s faithfulness and human unfaithfulness, “Paul magnifies divine honor and our shame” (78). For Jackson W., God’s honor is Paul’s central concern in Rom 3, defined not by abstract theological concepts but by historic faithfulness to God’s people.

Chapter 6 emphasizes justification (especially in Rom 4) as a social reality. Justification creates a new community whose ascribed honor is not rooted in conventional social distinctions. Jackson

W. contends that traditional Western readings focus on Rom 4 as answering “how is one justified,” whereas Paul’s primary focus is “who (communally) is justified.” Justification restores the believer’s honor and removes shame. Faith, then, is not a prerequisite for justification but is proof of it. Justification by faith—not ethnicity, tradition, or social status—defines a new collective identity in Christ.

Chapter 7 emphasizes how, in Rom 4–8, Christ exemplifies filial piety and family honor, serving as the collective embodiment of Abraham’s offspring. Thus those “in Christ” are declared members of God’s people who “give filial honor to the Father” (107). Jackson W. appreciates readings of the phrase *pistis tou Christou* that emphasize Christ’s faithfulness, since he sees Paul spotlighting Christ’s faithful life, not human faith, as what brings justification.

Chapter 8 discusses the “hope of glory” in Rom 5–8 as a transformative reality rooted in Christ’s resurrection. In contrast to more individualistic readings, which see justification and salvation as ends in themselves, an honor-shame cultural reading takes seriously the covenantal nature of salvation, which calls believers to reflect God’s glory here and now. Like a new exodus, justification is an act of bestowing honor and reconciliation, which leads to relationship and a transformed way of life here and now.

Chapter 9 argues, “When read with Eastern eyes, Romans 7 offers a more optimistic view of humanity than is often assumed [by Western readings]” (129). Jackson W. contends that the “I” in Rom 7 refers not to an individual but collectively to Israel. Paul is not asking whether humans are good or evil by nature (a focus of historic Western readings); he is rather appealing indirectly to Israel about the relative value of the law vis-à-vis sin. Jackson W. contends that traditional Western and Eastern (esp. Confucian) ideas about humanity’s good or evil may find more common ground in Rom 7 than is often assumed.

Chapter 10 uses Old Testament traditions to propose that Paul’s “put to shame” language in Rom 9–11 refers to the objective consequence of sin, not merely to a psychological response and fear. This objective consequence entails physical and psychological pain, including exclusion and alienation. When Paul says believers “will not be put to shame,” he means they are justified and will be saved. Being saved and not being put to shame are functional equivalents, both referring to the communal experience of God’s redeemed people.

Chapter 11 explores how honor and shame affect Christ-followers’ relationships with one another and outsiders, as seen in Rom 12–13. Jackson W. contends that the exhortations of Rom 12 offer “an alternative honor-shame perspective” tied to their collective identity in Christ (162). Further, he argues that Rom 13:1–7 does not show Paul as counterrevolutionary per se; rather, Paul uses subtlety to relativize the significance of governing authorities, who are accountable to God. Believers are obligated only to give “honor to whom honor is owed.” Jackson W. also argues that

Paul's emphasis on doing good to "receive approval" (13:3) taps into widespread practices of public benefaction—practices still prevalent in contemporary societies.

Chapter 12 discusses honor and shame emphases in Rom 14–16 that encourage unity amid controversy. Because Christ is Lord, mutual love is a priority and divisive controversy is a dishonor to God's name. Building on John Barclay's work, Jackson W. emphasizes that gifts (grace), in both ancient biblical and modern East Asian cultures, invite reciprocity. They are not "noncircular," expecting nothing in return. Instead, they invite deeper relationship. He sees this trait evident in the names in Rom 16, which suggests Paul's significant investment in relationships within the Roman community, in hopes of procuring support for a mission to Spain. A brief discussion guide, bibliography, and several indices conclude the book.

*Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* is a focused reading of major passages of Romans from the vantage point of an honor-shame cultural context. The book is a helpful corrective to traditional Western readings that view justification forensically, salvation individualistically, and anthropology negatively. Highlighting honor-shame realities in Paul's dealings with the Romans enlightens and expands consideration of major concepts in Romans in ways that make them more relational than abstract, for which Jackson W. deserves praise.

Positively, this book shows careful exegesis, informed dialogue with modern interpreters, and reflection on intercultural hermeneutics. Despite the focus of "Eastern Eyes," the book regularly includes insights from major Western interpreters such as John Barclay, Robert Jewett, James Dunn, and N. T. Wright, while at the same time drawing upon more focused studies like those by Haley Goranson Jacob and Mikko Sivonen. Within Romans interpretive debate, Jackson W.'s reading resonates most with the covenantal emphasis of the New Perspective on Paul and the transformative life emphases of participationist readings. In a way, the book emphasizes some of the same ideas but by an entirely different approach.

Jackson W. is appropriately modest about his goals, about the relative value of generalizing "Eastern" worldviews, and about his ability to represent such worldviews. Most chapters include insightful vignettes from contemporary interactions among Chinese and Western peoples that illustrate cultural realities in play. Finally, Jackson W. is reflective about the ways honor and shame play out in contemporary cultures today, not just in East Asia but also in other cultures, which enhances the applications he offers.

The book's focus on honor-shame is both a virtue and potential vice. The consistent scope of focus is virtue. By the end, its repetition can feel a tad predictable. Different than books with similar titles by Kenneth Bailey, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* is narrower in cultural scope. Further, while Jackson W. shows considerable nuance in describing East Asian perspectives and comparing them to biblical worldviews, a bit of critical reflection on their differences might enhance the study's

gravitas. Both cultural worlds are indeed more honor-shame based and collectivist than most Western societies today, but that is not to say there are no differences worth mentioning. While the book does a fine job engaging and incorporating general scholarship on Romans, it will appeal as much to scholars of intercultural hermeneutics as it will New Testament interpreters.

*Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* rightly prods Western readers to deeper awareness about how cultural backgrounds both cloud and clarify the things seen and assumed in scripture. Geared well for serious exegetes and scholars of intercultural hermeneutics and Romans, this book is a welcome promotion of East Asian interpretive readings and a helpful corrective to over-Westernized discussions of Romans. Students and interpreters of Romans will do well to consider this contribution in the years to come.