

Engaging Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes by Jackson Wu

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ABSTRACT

The book *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* is worth reading and critically engaging for cultural, exegetical, and theological reasons. With one eye in Romans and another in his experience and research in an east Asian culture, Jackson Wu seeks to expose to view honor-shame and communal dynamics visible in Paul's letter but to which many Western readers are relatively blind. This article describes and engages Wu's method and agenda, highlighting its benefits and noting some cautions, before then exploring some exegetical and theological weak spots.

Jackson Wu has given the church an engaging, insightful, and thought-provoking book: *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission*.¹ It is well worth reading and discussing—with critical glasses on, of course.

1. Wu's Method—Promising, but Potentially Problematic

The approach Wu takes is a promising one. He expands our cultural perspective as we seek to understand the message of Romans. By providing the interpretive lens of someone living in an Eastern (read “east Asian”) context (pp. 1–5), Wu opens his readers' eyes to the communal, relational world of honor and shame present throughout Romans. He affords us the opportunity to see what is there—details in the text we're prone to overlook because of our own cultural near-sightedness.

¹ Jackson Wu, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019). “Jackson Wu” is a pseudonym, see pp. 24–25.

But Wu sets himself to a tricky task. On the surface, his project seems unfounded because he intentionally reads Romans through eyes that are foreign to God's original inspiration. Would it not be best to read Romans through *ancient Mediterranean* eyes? Indeed, for neither Paul nor his Jewish and Gentile Roman Christian audience were "Eastern" (just as they were not "Western").

Imagine a scenario where you are a husband misunderstanding your wife because you view her words through *your* eyes, filters, and biases. (Difficult to imagine, we know.) She points this out: "But that's not what I mean." As a solution, you offer to consider what she is saying through her sibling's eyes. Why not through her *own* eyes?! It sounds absurd. Yet in a way, this is Wu's approach. He imports a foreign perspective—though culturally "nearer" in certain aspects—onto the biblical text. Yet Wu is self-aware in this endeavor and has a thoughtful reason.

Wu's strategy is worthwhile, if it is *not* an ultimate end to read a non-Eastern text with Eastern eyes. But Wu presents it as an additional *tool* to enhance our view of the text. Part of the worth of Wu's project is that it exposes with a pop that *we already read with foreign eyes*, probably more than we realize. Adding a different set of eyes, even if also foreign, will likely illuminate something important that we have been downplaying or completely missing. This particular project is especially worthwhile if the additional viewpoint (Eastern) truly has *significant overlap* with the ancient Mediterranean milieu in places that our current view (Western) lacks.

Many Westerners read with a largely covert individualism and a predominantly abstract legal approach to wrongs (guilt-innocence). Wu adds another overt set of lenses: Eastern communalism with a predominantly dynamic relational approach to wrongs (honor-shame). He writes clearly that he does *not* throw out the former, as if there were no individual, legal, or guilt-innocence elements in Romans. (As an aside, the West has *some* assumptions precisely *because* of the impact of the biblical text for centuries; it would be culturally and historically simplistic to think *everything* is imported one-directionally.) Wu asks that we consider what we might see in Romans if we switch prescriptions, as it were—perhaps to *bi-focals*. "Eastern perspectives are not necessarily superior," Wu writes, "just as not all Western views are mistaken. Any monocultural lens is myopic" (p. 2). "Reading with Eastern eyes," Wu adds, "we can make observations that would not be possible if we *only* used a conventional Western perspective" (p. 25, emphasis added). Wu is clear:

The goal is *not* to force an East Asian context into the Bible. We want to understand the Bible on its own terms. But while having the biblical text, we do not have direct access to the world of its writers. Therefore, we compare similar cultural contexts that we can more easily understand. This positions us to approximate concerns or themes that were important to the Bible's original readers. (p. 13)

As a brief (though not unimportant) aside, we think Wu overly downplays the potency of the access we *do* have to the world of the biblical writers—through the volumes of writing, artwork, etc., of the times. Interestingly, Wu places great value in the cultural insights about shame and honor in

the ancient world by Prof. John Barclay (see below), but Barclay has such helpful insights precisely because he is immersed in both the biblical texts *and* the other primary sources in their time and place in history. We may not have “direct” access to the ancient Mediterranean world—“direct” here probably means real-time interaction with living people from that culture—but we have more access (quantitatively) and more important access (qualitatively) to the ancient Mediterranean world of the biblical authors than Wu lets on.

That said, this correction should not be seen to sideline the benefit of what Wu adds. Real-time interaction with living people, full of conversations and relational rhythms, is a very helpful addition. Wu is convinced—and we think convincing—that bringing Eastern experiences of communalism and relational honor-shame to bear on our reading of Romans can help draw our attention to what has been there all along. Many of us have been relatively blind to its presence and importance, and Wu’s is a promising endeavor. Wu writes:

By reading Romans with Eastern eyes, we are taking advantage of a contemporary cultural perspective that resembles those of ancient biblical cultures. In the process, we will see how many recurring themes complement traditional interpretations, which sometimes overemphasize the individual and guilt at the expense of the church, honor, and shame. (p. 4)

We would want to nuance Wu’s overly blunt wording by adding that contemporary Eastern cultural perspectives about which he writes *more closely* resemble—not simply “resemble”—ancient biblical cultures *in certain important elements* than do Western cultures. These important elements, these “recurring themes” that Wu sees, involve honor-shame and communal dynamics, which he claims “complement” traditional interpretations. This should mean they are neither identical nor in conflict. Wu often demonstrates complementarity well. Sometimes, however, Wu’s vision seems to us less than 20/20.

2. Wu’s Agenda(s)

2.1 Wu’s Primary Agenda: Honor-Shame and Collectivism in Romans

Wu’s primary agenda is to highlight honor-shame and collectivist aspects of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. Such dimensions are present and profound in Paul and his audience—much more than most Westerners realize or admit. Western Christians, especially in Reformed evangelicalism, tend to spot justification, individualism, and guilt-innocence elements within Paul’s letters (and other biblical texts) from a mile away. We fear many even view them as the only aspects worth considering, whether practically or theoretically.

Wu reveals how the majority of Christians in God’s world resonate most quickly and deeply with the collectivist and honor-shame dynamics present in Romans. Their lives function with a more

profound emphasis on relationships than on American-style individual rights and self-determination. As J. Barclay, one of Wu's most quoted New Testament scholars, writes about Paul's world:

The multiple criteria for honor—wealth, ancestry, age, education, legal status, physique, character, and virtuous action—made the quest for honor ubiquitous across the social scale, while the very diversity of these marks of value ensured that strength in one dimension could be challenged by criticism of weakness in another. And challenge was, indeed, the very essence of this culture. Honor was derived from comparison, from placing oneself (or being placed by others) higher on some hierarchical scale, in which one person's superiority means that another is comparatively demeaned.²

Many of the problems Paul addressed in his letters—not least to Rome and Corinth—involved communal divisions and tensions. His approach to addressing these contained both subtle and overt shame-honor tactics along the many lines Barclay highlights (above). Wu does well to expose such communal values and the honor-shame patterns of thought all over Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. This is Wu's main agenda and contribution. We would do well to give it sincere attention.

2.2 Wu's Secondary Agenda (or Repeated Theme): The Redefinitions of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP)

Wu has a secondary agenda. "Agenda" may not be quite the right word; perhaps merely an oft-repeated byproduct of his theological understanding of Romans. Wu promulgates the understanding of justification found in the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). And he does so in a way that makes it appear as though it were inextricably tied to Paul's communalism and honor-shame thought processes. This recurs enough in the book and is interwoven enough with Wu's main thesis to engage here. In fact, engaging it alongside his primary agenda should be instructive for readers of various persuasions.

Finding the NPP redefinition of justification—N.T. Wright's, in particular—throughout Wu's reading of Romans will likely hinder the positive influence his primary objective could have within some circles. Many readers will be predisposed to a Western cultural reading and will be, for exegetical and theological reasons, opposed to the NPP. Many of these readers will unthinkingly pinch their nose at the helpful cultural corrective at the first whiff of the NPP. We think this would be a shame.

This, of course, will not be an issue for all readers. Many will love Wu's blending of his cultural insights with a NPP reading. Many of these readers will unthinkingly assume that these two themes must go together. So, a few words about the NPP and communalism will be of service. Are they inextricably linked?

² John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 433–34; quoted in Wu, *Reading Romans*, 14.

A major impetus for what became the NPP was Krister Stendahl's 1963 article, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West."³ By its very title, it seems to resonate with Wu's primary agenda in this book. According to Stendahl, Western Reformers were supposedly more introspective and individualistic than Paul or his audiences, and we have inherited this Westernized (polluted) understanding of Paul and lost the corporate nature of Paul's thinking within his world.

After Stendahl raised the cultural flag, the major launch to what has become the NPP was E.P. Sanders' 1977 work, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.⁴ Sanders attempted to redefine what Jews believed about covenant, law obedience, and salvation. He then redefined what Paul *must* have meant as his solution to the (over-simplified) Jewish view of the plight. (Many today criticize Sanders' flattening of Judaism, and in *Paul and the Gift*, J. Barclay criticizes Sanders' flattening of "grace" as well within Jewish documents.) In attempting these two new perspectives, Sanders also made dominant the language of "getting in" and "staying in" God's covenant people. While these are biblical concepts, it did subtly shift the major language about Paul, Judaism, and salvation to a more communal idea.

J. Dunn became one of the most dominant shapers of the NPP throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁵ Among other topics, Dunn's work attempted to redefine "works of the law": they were not actually about an individual's legal obedience or moral effort regarding God's commands or will; the "works of the law" were "badges" of community identity that define "us" (Jews) against "them" (Gentiles). Circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws helped Jews distinguish their own community as God's people from Gentiles. (Interestingly, Dunn is now critical of some of Sanders' conclusions, and Barclay denies Dunn's redefinition of "works of the law" as social badges.)

Finally, though along a strikingly similar fundamental line, the most popular proponent of (one version of) the NPP is N.T. Wright.⁶ (He likes "fresh perspective" better.) He has attempted to redefine "justification" so that it is "all about being declared to be a member of God's people."⁷ (Again, Barclay is critical of Wright's redefinition. Don't forget that Barclay is one of Wu's favorite scholars to quote for insights about honor-shame and other cultural dynamics.)

Wright's definition of "justification" as a declaration of covenant membership is different from the traditional definition in Reformed circles, in which justification is about being declared by God

³ Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56.3 (July 1963): 199–215.

⁴ Ed P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁵ See James Dunn's collection of essays: Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: A Collection of Essays*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁶ For example, see N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Part I and II* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013) and *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁷ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 856.

to be morally right—i.e., righteous, innocent—before God in Christ. This status is due to God doing two things for us in union with Christ: (1) God removes our moral problem, which is sin—i.e. he does *not credit* the guilt of sin (forgiveness) to us; (2) God adds the corresponding remedy to us, which is righteousness—he *credits* faith as “righteousness,” which is a morally right standing before God. This righteousness is itself built on and intimately united to Christ’s moral obedience (as Rom. 5 adds). Justified people are certainly made members of God’s people. But Wright’s redefinition of justification—and Wu’s adoption of it—makes justification itself God’s declaration that they are members.

Wright’s shift of justification to the social and communal realm certainly resonates with Wu’s agenda of trying to highlight communal aspects of Paul’s writing to which Western hyper-individualists are constantly blind. In fact, the NPP as a whole as we have sketched it above (with its contributions from Stendahl, Sanders, Dunn, and Wright) certainly seems to be a fitting bedfellow for Wu’s main agenda. But it is *not* a necessary one. One can easily and naturally recognize Paul’s communal/relational thinking (as J. Barclay has done) without swallowing various NPP redefinitions (as Barclay has resisted and criticized).

Here is the critical point for all sorts of readers of Wu: Paul did write with highly relational, communal categories, and honor and shame are major ways Paul conceived of sin and God’s plan and work in salvation and reconciliation. Amen! And we can recognize *all* of that—and we must more than we currently do—without redefining “justification,” “righteousness,” etc. We will see this more below.

3. A Deeper Glimpse of Wu’s Cultural and Theological Insight

Wu helpfully considers how Paul uses persuasion with cultural sensitivity to frame his letter. Paul uses “high context communication,” which is a relationally based method of “saying” much more than direct words utter. Paul does this in order to raise missionary support while subtly but clearly confronting cultural issues in the Roman church (e.g., Jew/Greek pride and prejudice). In other words, Paul functions *within* the Greco-Roman and Jewish manners of relating in the realm of honor-shame. He “doesn’t do away with honor-shame”; far from it: “he reorients” the Roman Christians’ sense of what is honorable (glorious) and shameful, drawing attention to Christ (p.35). Paul’s intent is that the Roman Christians’ view of “other people and their sense of mission stem from a *new* honor-shame perspective” (p. 37, emphasis added).

Wu also successfully demonstrates that honor is actually critical to Paul’s theology, not peripheral. For example, in Romans 1:29–32, “Shame is both the *cause* of God’s anger and the *consequence* of disregarding him” (p. 44). And in Romans 2:23–24 and 3:23, “Honor and shame are central to understanding the evil of ‘sin’” (p. 47).

It is worth reflecting on that last statement. What makes sin so heinous? Some Western theologians will answer that sin deserves eternal punishment because it breaks the will and word of an infinite God. This is true. It is also highly abstract and disconnected from relational categories. Therefore, it can be helpful in a *complementary* way to say that sin is heinous because it shamefully defames the eternal King who alone deserves the highest honor. The latter statement may resonate more quickly and fully in collectivist cultures that deeply value relationship, hierarchy, and honor-shame. And don't miss how Paul packs the language and concepts of shame, honor, and glory (as well as guilt, law, and punishment) into his description of Gentile and Jewish sin throughout Romans 1–3.

Third, from Romans 8:18–21, Wu explores how the earth is groaning for the revelation of the sons of God in glory. Glory, which fits within the paradigm of honor-shame more than guilt-innocence, is the *telos* of redemption. And Paul conceives of attaining said “glory” in a climactic relational context: the relationship of the collective “sons of God” (Christians) and the entire cosmos! In fact, this relationship between humans and creation functions within the relationship between humans and the Creator when believers “fulfill God’s purpose of filling the earth with his glory through image-bearers who reflect his character and kingship in their exercise of God-like authority and responsibility over the new creation.”⁸

As a final point of strength to mention here—though there are plenty more—Wu’s chapter 10 on Romans 9–11 is very insightful. He argues that our justification is connected to the justification/vindication of God’s honor. This harkens back to many other places in Wu’s exposition of Romans. For example, in Romans 1 “God clearly reveals *his glory* to humanity. However, ... ‘they did not *honor* him as God or give thanks to him” (Wu, p. 42, quoting Rom. 1:21). And in Romans 3, “more is at stake than ethnic pride and personal salvation. *God’s own honor* is threatened” (p. 69, emphasis added). One might even call Romans the story of glory and honor, both referring to God’s own honor and glory and that which he invites believers into through relationship with his Son.

4. Exegetical and Theological Weak Spots

Following other proponents of the NPP, Wu defines terms such as righteousness, justification, and “works of law” in ways that seem deficient and inconsistent with Paul’s use. For instance, Wu writes that “justification reckons people *members of God’s kingdom*” and that in justification itself Paul “stresses collective *identity*” (p. 86). Justification is supposedly “all about being *declared to be a member of God’s people*” (p. 106, quoting N.T. Wright). Wu repeats this definition throughout his

⁸ Donald Berry, *Glory in Romans and the Unified Purpose of God in Redemptive History* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 193; quoted in Wu, *Reading Romans*, 23.

book. However, Paul himself writes that the blessedness of justification, which David wrote about, involves God “*forgiving*” his lawless deeds, “*covering*” *his sins*, and “*not counting*” *his sin* (Rom. 4:7–8, quoting Ps. 32:1–2).

This is an exegetical and theological weak spot in Wu, which he inherits from Wright. Exegetically, while Wu glosses “*justification*” with ideas of collective identity and membership, Paul himself glosses “*justification*” with ideas of God doing something with a person’s sin (not counting or crediting it, forgiving it) and of God doing something with a person’s faith (counting or crediting it as righteousness). These simply are not the same ways of glossing justification. This disruption between Wu’s and Paul’s language and categories forms a significant exegetical weak spot in *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* that recurs often and is intimately imbedded in Wu’s otherwise wonderful cultural insights.

Theologically, it is not as though Wu (along with Wright) is wrong that Paul addresses membership and collective identity. Certainly not! Paul *does* stress the collective identity of Christ-followers. Paul *does* stress becoming members of God’s people. In fact, what this shared membership and collective identity in Christ means for the Christian life together is a huge part of Romans! But that is not what God does in “*justification*,” according to Paul. They are related, but not at all the same thing (see below). And to pack good theology into the wrong texts with weak exegesis is to give yourself a theological weak spot that is especially damaging in the long run.

4.1 A Narrow View of the OT Lawcourt Narrows Wu’s Vision on Paul’s Idea of Justification

One of the foundational cracks in Wu’s false idea of justification is N.T. Wright’s half-view of the Old Testament (OT) lawcourt. This half-view significantly affects how he understands how “*justification*” works within it. According to Wright (and Wu):

- God is the judge;
- Israel is the defendant, being accused or abused by its enemies;
- Israel’s enemies (usually Gentiles) are the plaintiff, accusing and abusing Israel.

Mind you, that lawcourt scenario *is* in the OT. (Read that again if you need to.) Within this OT lawcourt scenario, God judges who is right and who is wrong and he “*justifies*” Israel as his covenant people by declaring them, not their enemies, to be in the right. Wright illustrates this OT lawcourt scenario eloquently in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (and his other books) at many points. For instance, regarding Habakkuk 1:13 (which is not too far before Paul’s oft-quoted Hab. 2:4), Wright writes:

God is supposed to be the judge, and if the case came to court he would—he must!—find in favour of us, the beleaguered and oppressed, and hence against the treacherous and wicked... [The prophet] wants

justice; he wants justification—that is, he wants the case to be decided in Israel’s favour... Israel’s covenant God is under obligation to settle the case *Israel’s way*.⁹

For the most part, this is a great description—of *some* OT lawcourt passages. Wright rightly sees this lawcourt scenario in many OT passages, and Wu accepts and reaffirms this viewpoint often: e.g., “God’s judgment consists in saving his people through the condemnation of his enemies” (Wu, p. 71). Such a perspective *would* be helpful—if Paul were actually using that OT lawcourt scenario.

The problem for Wu (and Wright) is that Paul actually uses another, different scenario that is also common in OT psalms and prophets:

- God is the judge;
- Israel is the defendant, being accused of sin;
- God is the plaintiff, accusing Israel of sin.

In this second lawcourt scenario, it is God who accuses Israel of sin. This is a *very* different lawcourt scene than the first. When Israel has been the wicked ones, and when God accuses them of sin, is God responding as Judge to Israel as “beleaguered and oppressed” by enemies, as those wrongly accused and abused? Certainly not! And this key difference in two sets of OT lawcourt scenes has a very different set of implications for what it means to be justified by the judge/king.

For example, even though Romans is clear that the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome are in significant tension with each other—and this is more crucial to recognize for the entire letter than many traditional interpreters have realized—one of the ways Paul seeks to help with this major social tension is to “charge” that “Jews and Gentiles alike” are all “under sin” (Rom. 3:9). Paul’s “charged you before” is his way of summarizing what he has been doing in Romans 1–3. Paul’s own summary of his rhetorical and theological point in Romans 1–3 should put us in the realm of the second OT lawcourt scenario above—this is about being accused by God of sinning, not about being accused or attacked by enemies and needing defense. (If you are beginning to wonder if this is a false dichotomy since sin can be treated as an oppressive enemy, see below.)

Look at Paul’s subsequent string of “as it is written” psalms in Rom. 3:10–18: his biblical proof that “all are under sin” does *not* come from the Israel-as-oppressed psalms. Even though Paul certainly treats sin (and death) as an oppressive enemy elsewhere (see Wu, p. 80, with reference to Rom. 8:3 and 1 Cor. 15:25–26), that is *not* his nuance on sin here. The psalms Paul selects to illustrate what he means by being “under sin” are all about the shameful guilt, the moral corruption, the not doing good, the doing violence, and the lack of love for God of “those under the law”! In Paul’s particular

⁹ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 1468–69.

treatment of sin in Romans 1–5, then, where his language of justification and righteousness is packed in as the divine remedy, the great plight and social equalizer is that all people are rightly accused *by God of committing immoral sins*.

A reader should recognize that Wu (following Wright) is *half-right* about the OT setting of justification language—in general. Then a reader should abandon Wu's (Wright's) truncated reading of the OT lawcourt scenarios in Romans. Why? Because it is only generally true in the abstract but virtually completely inapplicable to what Paul is actually doing in Romans 1–5. Rather, recognizing the richer complexity of OT lawcourt scenarios available to Paul, and recognizing which of the two major OT lawcourt scenarios Paul actually invokes throughout Romans 1–5, the reader should finally realize that Wu (along with Wright) has launched in the wrong direction from only one foot—and thus significantly missed Paul's mark.

So, where exactly are we with Wu's *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*? About Romans 3–4 and justification in particular, Wu is right that the broader issues Paul addresses in Romans revolve around Jewish Christian vs. Gentile Christian relations in the Roman church. But Wu has misread and thus mis-seen one of Paul's major theological and rhetorical techniques for humbling everyone within their arrogant communal boasting in which they honor themselves and shame the others. That is, Paul helps the Roman Christians all recognize two things:

1. They and others are all shamefully guilty of personally sinning.
2. God graciously remedies this particular plight by granting honor and glory to both Jews and Gentiles who trust Christ as God declares them innocent in the face of their sin—"forgiven," "covered," with their sins and ungodliness not counted or credited against them—and as God "counts" or credits their faith "as righteousness" (as the opposite of sinfulness, as moral innocence), all in union with Christ.

And *both elements*—the plight and the solution as explained above—nestle naturally into Paul's scriptural heritage. They work within his relational cultural milieu. And they aid him in his overarching project of helping with the Jewish-Gentile Christian tensions in Rome so they can join his mission on a united front—united in Christ and with each other.

Personal sin is the corporate problem. Individual forgiveness and justification is God's relational remedy. Paul equalizes the entire community in shameful guilt under sin and then in honoring innocence in Christ. God's covenantally legal method of declaring guilty sinners innocent (the *how*) is integral to helping Jewish and Gentile Christians (the *who*) interact in a more honorable way in community.

4.2 Blurring the Lines Between “Who” is Justified and “How” God Justifies Them

Wu writes, “In Romans 4, as in Romans 3:27–30, faith and works define *who* is justified. The precise mechanics or means of justification are significant here inasmuch as they support Paul’s central thesis: *Gentiles* can be justified, not only Jews” (p. 88). We agree that the *who* is Paul’s bigger project. This is important. And yet recognizing this does not give us the right to blur and blend the means God uses to deal with people’s sin together with God’s profession that justified people are his people. But this is precisely what Wu does, even while verbally recognizing that *how* and *who* are not the same.

This is not a new issue. In NPP debates about justification, many have accused NPP proponents of blending *who* is justified with *how* they are justified. In fairness to Wu, he does state: “Although interrelated, the distinction between ‘who’ and ‘how’ is important” (p. 84). He also does well to raise this issue himself regarding his treatment of Romans 4 (p. 89). However, the rhetorical technique of seeking to beat the punch of a coming criticism by saying that “the distinction... is important” does not actually suffice if you then do go on to blend them—as we believe Wu does.

For example, Wu blurs the lines in Romans 3 by importing an ill-fitted comparison passage. Follow his logic. He claims that “Paul’s argument in Romans 9 echoes Romans 3” (p. 76). Romans 9:6–8 is clearly a “who” passage (though not about “justification,” we would observe, even though it does use “counted” or “reckoned”): “It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Rom. 9:8). Wu then shifts: “Once more” (calling attention back to Romans 3) “God’s reputation is tied to collective identity. If we misunderstand *who* belongs to God’s people, we might accuse God of unrighteousness. Therefore, Paul clarifies collective identity in Romans 9 just as he does in Romans 2–4” (p. 76).

One problem with this technique of jumping around is that the more time (and pages) you spend jumping to supposedly comparable passages the less time (pages) you have to dig into important details on any of them. And this happens here for Wu. He fails to address how *the how* in Rom. 3:25 is nestled among the *who* statements without being subsumed by them or transformed into a *who* statement. But because Wu’s exegesis is not particular enough here, jumping too quickly instead to a supposed parallel passage that *does* speak according to his *who* agenda, Wu misses how Paul does *not* actually connect the justification of God to the *who* in Romans 3:25–26, but rather to the *how*. Pay careful attention to Paul’s logic:

- 3:21–22: God’s righteousness goes to *whom*? To all who believe without [ethnic] distinction.
- 3:23: For *who* sinned (which is defined as falling short of God’s honor/glory)? All [ethnicities].
- 3:24a: And *who* are justified? The all (who believe).
- 3:24b: *How*? Through the redemption in Christ.

- 3:25a: *How?* God put Christ forward as a propitiation/atonement (dealing with sins).
- 3:25b: *Why* did God do this *how* (this propitiation)? To prove his righteousness (justify himself).
- 3:25c: *Why* did God need to justify himself through this particular *how* (his Son's atonement blood)?
- 3:25d: Because of his previous *how* with Israel: he had passed over (not dealt with) former sins.
- 3:26: Thus, God's righteousness is proved now (in the *how* of his Son's propitiation), so God can be "just" and the "justifier" of the *who*.
- 3:27: And because of both the *who* (the one who trusts, not works) and the *how* (God dealt with sin in Christ)—no *who* can boast.
- 3:28: For every *who* is justified *how?* *By* faith *apart from* works of law.
- 3:29: This *how* (which itself is based on the *how* that justified God) makes God the God of both *whos*—Jews and Gentiles.

Both *who* and *how* are obviously in Rom. 3:21–30 (as are some *whys*). But at the point(s) that Paul writes that God himself is justified (twice), do you see Paul connecting God's justification to the *who* or to the *how*? In Romans 3, Paul actually roots the justification of God in his *how*.

So, while Wu is right that Paul addresses a *who* in significant measure in Rom. 3:21–30, he proceeds to conflate the *scope* of justification—those *who* experience its blessedness or to *whom* it is applied—with the *content* of justification—what justification actually *is* and *how* it works. The problem with Wu's blurred conflation is that Paul does not conflate or blur the *how* and the *who*.

Paul's interplay (not conflation) between *how* and *who* is replete in this part of Romans and in how Paul reads Scripture. While Rom. 4:9 will reintroduce a *who*, Rom. 4:3–8 is all about *how* blessing comes to God's covenant people:

- Abraham: *by* faith, not works, is counted as righteousness.
- Likewise, us: not *by* working but *by* trusting him who justifies the ungodly one, faith is also counted as righteousness.
- David: blessed *by* God counting righteousness apart from works, *by* God forgiving and covering sins, and *by* the Lord not counting sin. (These are all *how*, and these *hows* will have serious implications for *who*.)

All that Paul listed in Rom. 4:3–8 relate to God's method or mechanics—his glorious *how* which has serious implications for the *who*. It's about *how* God makes a person blessed.

Paul *then* turns in 4:9 to the *who* question: “Is this blessing then only *for* the circumcised, or also *for* the uncircumcised?” In 4:10–11a Paul brings back the *how*: “*How* then was it counted to him? Was it *before* or *after* he had been circumcised?” God’s wise mechanics, including timing (the *when* as part of the *how*), again have significant implications for the *who*: “The purpose was to make him the father of all *who* believe” (4:11b–12). Paul can answer both the *how* and the *who*, sometimes emphasizing one more than the other, without conflating the two. And Paul’s language of justification—both of humans and of God’s himself—is firmly found in the *how* category, and then necessarily applicable to the *whos*.

Despite verbally claiming that “the distinction between ‘who’ and ‘how’ is important” (p. 84), Wu misses many of Paul’s *hows* and blurs Paul’s *hows* into his *whos*. Wu even then explicitly erases the distinction by arguing that “it’s better to say that ‘scope’ is the ‘content’ of justification by faith” (p. 90). This statement may be fitting for Wu’s explanation of an Eastern perspective on the relationship between a king’s or judge’s pronouncement and the identity of the recipient (p. 90). But it is not how Paul operates in Romans, nor is it how the scriptures Paul cites portray justification itself within the king’s courtroom.

4.3 Correcting an Overemphasis on the Individual into an Overemphasis on the Collective

Sometimes it is difficult to tell when the biblical text is driving someone’s agenda and when it is the agenda forging the path. This is the case with Wu’s exegesis at many points. When preparing to turn to “Who is Justified?” in Romans 4, Wu cautions:

Here an individualistic perspective puts readers at a disadvantage. We should not ask, ‘How does justification concern me individually?’ but rather ‘What does justification say about us as a group?’ It is possible for Westerners to discern Paul’s group emphasis. To do so, however, it is necessary to become sensitive to the fact that identity derives from membership in a community. (p. 86)

Yet in Rom. 4:1–8, Paul describes justification in strikingly individualist terms. Wu seems to miss this. “Now to *the one who* works... And to *the one who* does not work but believes in him who justifies *the ungodly* [singular], *his* faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of *the one to whom* God counts righteousness” (Rom. 4:4–6). Interestingly, Paul then preserves David’s two plurals and then singular “those... whose... the man” when quoting Ps. 32:1–2 (Rom. 4:7–8). But even knowing what he was about to quote as proof, Paul still introduced it with individualist language.

What is more, Paul certainly *can* write about a collective plurality, and he often does:

- “*those who* practice such things deserve to die” (Rom. 1:32, twice);
- “God’s judgment rightly falls upon *those who* practice such things” (2:2, 3);

- “to *those who* by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life, but for *those who* are self-seeking...” (2:7–8);
- “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to *those who* are under the law” (3:19);
- “much more will *those who* receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” (5:17).
- Cf. Rom. 2:19; 6:13; 8:1, 5, 8, 28 (twice); 9:25 (quoting Hos. 2:23); etc. See Paul’s interesting use of the singular and then plural in 13:2. It may be instructive.

In Rom. 4:3–8 Paul presents a person (singular) standing in relation to God, either as an ungodly but believing (singular) person in Christ *or* as a (singular) worker who deserves wages. (Wages worked singularly in the ancient Mediterranean context.) Each *one* is judged accordingly. To *the one* who trusts, *he* or *she* has faith counted as righteousness—*he* or *she* is blessed. All this is singularly important. But in God’s grace there are *many* persons—from both Jews and Gentiles!—who experience this blessing, and *they* can be discussed as a collective unit of persons who have received God’s blessed forgiveness and covering of sins—God’s justification. The blessing of “the one who trusts Christ” is applicable to the circumcision and the uncircumcision as collections of people, and so Abraham is father of a plurality “of *all those who* believe” to “count righteousness *to them*” (4:11).

Paul simply does *not* think in only collectivist terms; and *neither* does Paul simply think in only individualist terms. We should not ignore one or the other, for Paul does not. And merely *claiming* that both are important is not helpful enough. When we treat particular texts, we should not conflate what Paul says God does for individuals with how that impacts their sense of community acceptance and identity—even if we are trying to correct an over-emphasis. Wu thereby makes blurry exactly how Paul (1) clearly shapes the *who* (2) by clearly articulating God’s gracious *how*. Among all Wu’s strengths and benefits on display in this book, he regularly blurs what Paul sees clearly as distinct yet related.

5. Some Suggestions and Applications

Despite our concerns, we do believe there is much to glean from *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*. In addition to the general sense in which our eyes should be opened much wider to relational, collectivist, and honor-shame dimensions in Romans, here are a few final particular suggestions and applications.

For one, we can learn from the *evangelistic* emphasis Paul places on honor. How we word our gospel presentations needs to pay careful attention to Paul’s multifaceted thinking and communication of the gospel. As Wu sharply writes:

We are saved for glory, not merely from punishment. ... Some evangelistic presentations stress personal peace and otherworldly salvation rather than resurrection. They don't motivate steadfast suffering since they appeal most strongly to self-preservation, explaining salvation essentially as relief from suffering. We cannot boast in suffering when our fundamental hope is personal escape from pain. (p. 110)

Second, we can learn from Paul's *discipleship* method related to honor. As Wu writes, "We should not adopt the relativistic standards of a fame-shame culture, but we should not overlook the opportunity afforded to us in this context" (p. 49). Wu wisely calls our attention to this opportunity: to follow Paul's method wherein he does not ignore or disavow pervasive honor-shame dynamics in culture, but carefully reorients them according to God's glory and the cross. The Corinthian correspondence represents a significant case study for such discipleship material and method.

Finally, we should consider how individualistic Western Christians who lean heavily into the guilt-innocence perspective might think more holistically and biblically about sin and salvation. Sin is being guilty of breaking God's law. *And* sin is dishonoring God and others. God's salvation is an act of the Judge graciously declaring the guilty innocent and righteous in Christ. *And* a crucial element of God's salvation is an act of the King graciously granting shameful people glory and honor in Christ, reconciling them to God and others into one collective body and family.

While many will assent to the truth of these statements, the nagging question is often about the gospel's center. What is the *core*, with the rest the peel? Which is *the heart* with the other being the appendage? Which is *truly non-negotiable* in evangelism without compromising the essence of the gospel of Christ, and which is, while present in Paul and good to note, nonetheless negotiable?

These are major questions and important for further discussion. And Wu's book helps us think about them. Those of us in a Western evangelical context may clearly see the individual and guilt-innocence aspects of Paul's writing about sin and salvation. But how often do we glimpse what is on the other side: the communal, relational, and honor-shame dynamics which are *replete* in Romans? Do we recognize how they are *fundamental* to Paul's letter and the work of God in Christ?

True, Wu swings the pendulum well beyond the middle point between East and West. But, then again, Paul's ancient Mediterranean world was not exactly in the middle. So, Wu's pull is not wholly uncalled for.

With concern for a more balanced perspective and integrated approach, we would suggest the possible benefits of considering the *covenantal* nature of God's relationship with the world at various points in history: to Jews through the law with its righteous requirements for relationship with God and others (Rom. 2:17–25), to the Gentiles through creation with its righteous requirements for relationship with God and others (Rom. 1:18–32), to believing Jews and Gentiles through Christ's blood of the new covenant with his righteous requirements for relationship with God and others by the Spirit. By recognizing the cultural and theological perspective of covenant, by reading Romans as it were *with covenantal eyes*, we will see God's redemptive work as simultaneously individual and

collective, for that is how the covenant works. We will see God's work as simultaneously relational and judicial, for that is how the covenant works. We will see God's work addressing issues of both honor and innocence, guilt and shame, all under the hierarchy and kingship of the judge, king, and Father—for that is how God's covenant works. We believe enhancing the covenantal aspect of this discussion is a fruitful way forward.

Careful readers who don't blindly follow Wu's NPP interpretation of justification can greatly benefit from his primary objective. Even though we admit Wu will likely not see this the same way, the NPP arguments are peripheral and dispensable to his main thesis, not central and inherent. So, even those who disagree with the NPP (like us) have much to learn from reading Wu's work. This book sheds light and brings clarity to the tremendous amount of communal, relational, and honor-shame dynamics at play in the way Paul expresses the glories of Christ and his gospel within Romans. For that, we gladly commend this work to thoughtful readers.