



# THE PARDON OF THE SINFUL WOMAN: LUKE 7:36-50

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This paper will analyze Luke 7:36-50, “The Pardon of the Sinful Woman” using the social-scientific method. It will focus primarily on the codes of behavior within the cultural system of Jesus’ day and within his social sphere. The paper will examine what specific codes of behavior were in play within this pericope and how these codes of behavior were adhered to or broken. The cultural constraints of honor and shame will be examined and how these constraints would have influenced the perception of a first-century Mediterranean listener or reader of this pericope in Luke. I will also evaluate the concluding statements in the pericope in terms of what message Luke hypothetically is sending to his hearers/readers by retelling this narrative in his gospel.

Within Luke’s world I am primarily interested in discovering who his audience is and what they would have thought with respect to hearing his gospel. How would Luke’s audience have perceived it within the context of their own social groups? Who were the people and what kind of response would they have to this story? Based on their society and culture, how would Luke’s message in this story convince or at least open them up to follow “The Way” or, would this gospel story put them off?

Social-scientific criticism, upon which this paper is based, is a method of investigating biblical texts in order to discern the social, cultural and political contexts with which people in a certain age and lived, acted, and thought. Social-scientific criticism “studies the text as both a reflection of and a response to the social and cultural settings in which the text was produced”; it also “studies the intended consequences of the communication process.”<sup>1</sup> Social-scientific criticism is a sub-discipline of other methods of criticism and complements them.

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<sup>1</sup> John Hall Elliott, *Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1995) 8.

Using social-scientific criticism gives a perspective on the people who lived in the first century in the eastern Mediterranean area. This critical method provides an understanding of the values and the plurality of cultures that surrounded Jesus within his own society and culture. In the first-century Mediterranean culture the world was occupied by Romans, Hellenists as well as Jews and other people who lived around the Mediterranean Sea. By analyzing the culture from a social-scientific perspective an insight is provided in what people thought was important and what the rules of behavior were in their society. Specifically, to be analyzed will be the social role of meals and the significance of the honor and shame values.

The primary goal of social-scientific criticism is to discern the meaning of what the original author meant and what his/her audience perceived in their own environment and culture. The present Western culture differs significantly from the first-century Mediterranean culture in terms of social and cultural norms. The Mediterranean cultures were collectivist in the first century (and are still, to some extent). This means that the social-familial group to which an individual belonged was predominant. The culture was not based on achievements of an individual. Within this Mediterranean collectivist culture there was still a strong emphasis on social dominance. This also exists in Western cultures today. The same dominance mechanisms in Western individuals today exist and existed between groups in the first century.<sup>2</sup> However, the society was based more on groups and societies rather than individual personalities. There were strong interrelationships and interdependencies between the social groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Colin Patterson, "The World of Honor and Shame in the New Testament: Alien or Familiar?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 49:1 (2019) 8.

Elliott make the distinction between classifying information as either “emic” data, that is data that is provided by the original people, and “etic” data, that is from the perspective of the researcher of the culture.<sup>3</sup> When examining biblical texts, such as the pericope under analysis here, inferences can be made as to the meaning of the implied author and the perception of the implied reader of the text. However, the information is being analyzed through filters of different modern authors. The exegetical critic must be aware of their own culture and mindset to objectively evaluate the biblical texts under analysis. However, one cannot be completely open-minded as one brings their own thoughts, culture and experiences into the analysis.

Luke’s audience was not in Palestine but in an urban setting—most likely a city to the north, possibly Antioch in Syria or Ephesus in Asia Minor. Both cities were under the domination of Rome in the first century and they were influenced primarily by the Hellenistic culture. Luke describes the social, political and religious settings in a way that implies that there were Christians, Jews and non-Jews. If the city in which Luke wrote was also a seaport, there was also the likelihood that there were migrants in the community. There was a distinct social divide between the elites and non-elites who comprised the bulk of the population. The elites were given social status through patronage or birth. Being wealthy did not automatically confer elite status on an individual. The non-elites were merchants and artisans who formed guilds. Below them were people in low-class occupations, such as tanners and prostitutes, and beneath them were beggars and outcasts.<sup>4</sup> There were tensions among the religious groups as well as

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<sup>3</sup> Elliott, *Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Halvor Moxnes, “The Social Context of Luke’s Community,” *Interpretation* 48:4 (1994) 380.

among the social classes. As was evident in Luke, Jesus pays special attention to the disparity between rich and poor.

The macro level of social and cultural interactions provides a model for the interactions among the “players” in this pericope. Within the context of the eastern Mediterranean culture of the first century all social interactions outside of kin relations were contests for honor. This quest for honor was derived from Greek culture at the time of Homer. Status was based on a system of patronage that established one’s place in the hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Most, 90% of the population under the Roman Empire, lived on a subsistence level. Food was scarce. In addition to bacterial and viral infections, the general population suffered from diseases caused by malnutrition. Like every other commodity with the social structure of that time and place, honor was a limited commodity.

There were specific social codes in the first-century Mediterranean world that were followed regarding honor and shame. As a patriarchal society honor resided with the male head of the household. The man was responsible for maintaining the honor of the family. His wife and children were subservient to him. Honor was based on two pillars. One pillar was what one thought of oneself and the other was what others within his social group thought of him.<sup>6</sup> Honor was assumed among kin. Outside of kin relationships there was always a contest for honor. This contest could only occur between equals. Men interacted outwardly. Men’s roles were outside the family. If a man worked in an occupation that took him away from home for long periods of time, for example shepherds or seafarers, his honor was questioned.

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<sup>5</sup> Moxnes, “The Social Context of Luke’s Community,” 382.

<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove, “A Woman’s Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the ‘Sinful Woman’ in Luke 7:36-50,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124:4 (2005) 682.

Because honor was perceived to be a limited quantity, every social interaction outside of the extended family was a contest of honor. There were specific rules to this game or contest of honor. It had to be a contest between equals. If an individual “lost” the contest, he “lost” honor. Within this contest, there first was a challenge question or comment. This was not necessarily hostile and could be posed in a friendly manner. Second, a response was required. This response could be an answer or posed in the form of another question. Third, the original challenger had to respond to this, otherwise he would lose his honor. This type of question and answer will be discussed in the pericope from Luke.

In addition, there were two types of honor for men: ascribed and acquired. Ascribed honor was either inherited through birth or given through patronage by someone with power. A man could acquire honor through his achievement and the way in which he interacted socially with other men. For example, it can be assumed the Pharisee in this pericope had ascribed honor. Jesus had acquired honor within the context of the meal at the Pharisee’s home. From the initial interaction and the fact that Jesus was a guest at the Pharisee’s home, the two men were equals. Within Luke’s larger gospel story, Jesus had ascribed honor, in that he had God’s patronage.

Women had a different role. Married women particularly were expected to remain in the household and attend to maintaining it. Nonetheless women would have a strong position in the household and frequently tended to the money and accounts. A woman’s virtues were modesty and reticence. Shame for a woman in this society was considered a positive virtue. By violating the social norms of being withdrawn and inward, shame was

brought to the family. A woman was considered “shameless” if she violated these rules and brought disgrace upon the family.

In first-century Mediterranean society there were specific honor/shame values that were followed. In this pericope, Luke illustrated the values and cultural rules that were broken. Jesus does not condemn the woman and the Pharisee who break the rules and violate the honor/shame values, but he compliments the woman and does not rebuke the Pharisee. In the process Jesus transforms the social structure and thereby initiates the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> Within this context, “kingdom” does not represent a geographical space.

The pericope of Luke 7:36-50 began with a meal to which Jesus had been invited at a Pharisee’s home. At a meal such as this, only men were present to dine. Women, if they were present at all, would only be expected to serve the men. In this pericope, a woman, uninvited, entered the scene with an alabaster jar of ointment. Her behavior would have been disturbing to the male guests. She stood behind Jesus’ feet and weeping, washed his feet with her tears. “Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment” (Luke 7:38b).

Not only was the woman’s presence unconventional but her behavior was beyond the pale of any action that could be construed as acceptable in the social and cultural world of the first-century eastern Mediterranean. Traditionally, in the narrative, this woman was considered a sinner, possibly even a prostitute. There was nothing in the pericope to indicate what her “sin” was. She was called a “sinful woman in the city”

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<sup>7</sup> Halvor Moxnes, “Kingdom Takes Place: Transformations of Place and Power in the Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Luke,” in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible: Essays by the Context Group in Honor of Bruce J. Malina* (ed. John J. Pilch; Boston: Brill, 2001) 178.

(Luke 7:37a). Based on the social norms that women were to remain in the household and not infringe on men's territory, her "sin" could simply have been that she violated the social conventions. Using the phrase "in the city" implied something more than just violating social conventions. Hence the inference that she could have been a prostitute. However, why this woman was considered a sinner was not defined. The implication is that she was "shameless."

In addition, women at that time kept their hair bound up with cloth bands, combs, or pins. The hair could be plaited or braided.<sup>8</sup> A woman, particularly a woman of marriageable age, was required to keep her hair bound up in public. This would be modest of her to keep her hair bound. Prostitutes generally did not keep their hair bound in public. This woman at some point unbound her hair and used her hair to dry Jesus' feet from her tears. In Greco-Roman culture unbound hair does not necessarily mean that his woman was a sinner. Traditionally, unbound hair could have been a symbol of mourning and this woman was weeping profusely while she washed Jesus' feet with her tears. Luke used the word "weeping" to illustrate to depth of the woman's emotion. Unbound hair was also displayed when women were engaged in worship of the gods. Part of the ritual worship was to kiss the feet of the god's or goddess's statue. Despite her unbound hair, the woman's actions were not those of a prostitute. By kissing Jesus' feet, she was displaying humility and devotion. To kiss someone's feet was a display of devotion. In Matthew 28:9b the women at the tomb "embraced his feet and did him homage." Jesus interpreted her actions for what they were, a display of love and gratitude.

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<sup>8</sup> Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair," 678.



To a Hellenistic hearer of such a story, the woman's behavior could have seemed reasonable. She was weeping. Usually if a woman is weeping, she would not be doing anything sexually suggestive. Her unbound hair could have indicated mourning. When she kissed Jesus' feet, this could have been perceived as a symbol of worship. This action could particularly have resonated with non-Jewish Christians who were recently baptized. Pagan societies worshiped their gods by kissing and anointing the statues' feet. Jesus, in turn, did not reprimand her for her behavior.

In contrast with the woman, Simon the Pharisee questioned in his mind whether Jesus was really a prophet. Ironically, Jesus knew what Simon was thinking and proved Simon wrong. Jesus was a prophet. Jesus initiated an honor challenge by telling a parable.

In order to retain one's honor among men, in the social culture of the Mediterranean world a challenge question or statement was usually posed. Usually this was posed in a friendly matter and not with hostility. The verbal challenge had three parts: (1) the challenge question or statement; (2) a response or riposte by the man questioned was expected; and, (3) a response that allows for a public verdict.<sup>9</sup> This type of social interaction of challenge/riposte/verdict was a common method of interaction between men in the first-century Mediterranean world. What it did was create a dialog between equals to establish and maintain the equality and honor between them. If there is an additional question or response, then the dialog can continue.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991) 31.

Jesus began the dialog of challenge/riposte/verdict with a brief parable: Two men owe a creditor. One man owes “five hundred days wages” and the other man owes “fifty days wages.” The creditor forgave both debts because neither man was able to pay their debt. Jesus posed the challenge question: “Which one of them will love him more?” Simon, the Pharisee and host replied: “The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven”. Jesus’ response to this allowed the reader/listener to give a public verdict: “You have judged rightly” In a contest of honor between equals, these two men are equal.

The dialog, however, does not end there. Jesus once again posed a challenge question to which Simon did not reply. Jesus said, “Do you see this woman?” For the first-century reader or hearer to this story, this would be a significant loss of honor for Simon since he did not reply. Jesus continued with what Simon had neglected to do as a host. There were certain prescribed rituals when greeting guests prior to a meal. Jesus enumerated them: Simon did not wash his feet, kiss him when he entered or anoint his head. The fact that Simon did not do these things indicate that he did not consider Jesus an equal even though he invited Jesus to his house.

Luke’s table fellowship is a recurring theme in his Gospel. Table fellowship had significant religious and cultural meaning within the Greco-Roman world. The Old Testament is replete with stories of miraculous feedings. The first-century people “knew the meal as an image that came with a whole lexicon for talking about relationships, social ranking and etiquette.”<sup>10</sup> Simon had breached the table fellowship etiquette, but Jesus did not condemn him. In the story Simon remained silent and Luke added another

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<sup>10</sup> Kylie Crabbe, “A Sinner and a Pharisee: Challenge at Simon’s Table in Luke 7:36-50,” *Pacifica* 24:3 (2011) 249.

dimension. The woman's extravagant hospitality outweighed Simon's. The woman became the host. Jesus nevertheless did not condemn Simon, but Jesus' statement indicated that he extended an invitation to Simon transform himself.<sup>11</sup> Jesus said, "she has shown great love, but the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Luke 7:47b). Here, Jesus did not rebuke Simon directly but simply made a statement to indicate that the woman had shown great love whereas Simon had not.

Jesus then addressed the woman directly and told her that her sins were forgiven and that she should go in peace. The woman's actions illustrated her love and she was granted peace. When Jesus spoke directly to the woman this in itself was a breach of social norms since Jesus addressed the woman. To the other guests at Simon's table, the fact that Jesus spoke directly to the woman was not the issue for them. The issue for them was "who is this who even forgives sins." This statement would not have alarmed first-century Christian believers. However, people who were not yet baptized might have pondered the significance of this statement on forgiving sins. Throughout his gospel, Luke emphasized that Jesus was brought into the world with divine favor and within Luke's gospel he continued to have this favor throughout his life. Being favored by God was important to first-century eastern Mediterranean people because within their culture having patronage conferred status and was of utmost importance. Jesus as Messiah had ascribed status. Who would be more prominent to confer status than one's God?

The heart of this story is that Jesus was a revolutionary in his time. He consistently broke with traditions in order to lead by example of a new way of thinking and bring the kingdom of God to the earth. He ate with sinners and prostitutes. He was

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<sup>11</sup> Crabbe, "A Sinner and a Pharisee," 264.

kind to everyone and used his divine power to help anyone who he met who was in need. The woman in this story was in dire need. Somehow prior to this encounter with Jesus she was forgiven for the transgression that caused her to be separated from her society. She was so grateful that she willingly broke with the cultural and social norms, entered an important man's home while he was having a banquet and began to wash Jesus' feet. She was unconcerned about the other guests and what they would think. Jesus, for his part, rewarded her with kindness.

Even with Simon the Pharisee, Jesus was generous. Jesus did not rebuke Simon for neglecting to perform the simple rituals of greeting his guest in the proper way. One does not know if Simon greeted all his guests with the proper etiquette. Perhaps he failed on all counts. Maybe that is why Jesus was not too harsh on him.

Analysis of this pericope was an eye-opener for me. I did not think that there was so much cultural material that was different from Western culture. What surprised me the most was the concept of honor and shame in the first-century Mediterranean cultures. I believe that some people still live with that type of cultural mindset. In the news there are occasional stories about "honor killings." This is taking that concept to the extreme. For the most part in some Asian cultures the expression "losing face" describes how certain family groups feels when a member brings shame upon the family by an irresponsible action or even a crime.

In my primary ministry with RCIA I will need to determine whether people who are inquirers within the new RCIA group come from a culture that considers honor and shame as part of their family values. Usually these people are from cultures that put the family unit above the individual. Understanding that aspect of cultures and understanding

the first-century Mediterranean culture will help me to teach scripture with more empathy. I have been a sponsor several times and I will be more sensitive to their cultural traditions.

Most of the people in the RCIA groups that I work with are not well catechized. For some of the inquirers, it is the first time that they have opened a Bible. By working and analyzing a pericope in this way, I believe it will be helpful for me to understand the cultural perspectives in the gospels. Probably more important for me will be to understand what the inquirers see in this pericope and other parts of scripture. Given the analysis of this pericope I can better understand the message that Jesus was conveying in his interactions with both the woman and Simon the Pharisee. I think that it will be important for me to allow the RCIA inquirers to discern what they see in each gospel reading or readings that we review on a weekly basis.

Additionally, I am a lector for weekday Masses (when we have them). As a lay lector I do not read the gospel but the readings and the responsorial psalm. This analysis will be helpful for me to gain a better understanding of Acts since that is read in the weeks after Easter. Paul's letters also would provide me with rich material using social-scientific criticism. Paul's letters, particularly his social prescriptions with respect to women, seem anachronistic. I want to delve deeper into the cultural traditions of these parts of scripture to gain an understanding behind the ancient people who listened to and read these parts of scripture.

Through the use of social-scientific criticism on this pericope, this paper explored the different cultural norms that were in existence in the first-century Mediterranean culture. There is a vast divide between the individualistic thinking of today's Western

world and the world that existed two thousand years ago. Yet, some of that culture still resonates with the modern world. There are still strong family units, social dominance contests, and disparities between the rich and the poor. Yet the kingdom of God has transformed the world. Social-scientific criticism opens one's eyes to a greater appreciation and understanding of previous cultures and their values.

#### Note

- (1) Elliot uses the terms “emic” with reference to how natives would speak of their own culture and how they perceive it. He uses the example “phonemic” as one would use the term for speech sounds. He uses term “etic” with reference to how an external investigator would speak about a specific culture. The word “phonetic” was used as an example for the science of speech sounds.

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