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0521849098 - Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum

Joseph H. Hellerman

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this monograph is to situate the New Testament materials relating to Roman Philippi in their proper socio-historical setting. I have suspected for some time that the author of Philippians 2 intentionally structured his portrayal of Jesus with Roman social values and practices directly in view. I am now convinced that Rome's *cursus honorum*, the formalized sequence of public offices that marked out the prescribed social pilgrimage for aspiring senatorial aristocrats in Rome (and which was replicated in miniature in municipalities and in voluntary associations), forms the background against which Paul has framed his picture of Jesus in the great Christ hymn in Philippians 2.

The layout of my project is quite straightforward. The first two chapters survey the social landscape of the broader Roman world. Chapter one describes the various status groups in the empire, and then reviews the ways in which the Roman elite class sought intentionally to preserve their highly stratified social environment. Chapter two discusses the importance of personal and familial honor to Roman social sensibilities and proceeds to examine Rome's *cursus honorum* and the replication of *cursus* ideology in elite and non-elite settings across the empire. The second major portion of the monograph, consisting of the third and fourth chapters, seeks to situate Roman preoccupation with honor and public esteem in the colony at Philippi. I suggest that concern for honor and status, along with expressions of personal achievement presented in *cursus* form in the colony's inscriptions, characterized Philippi in ways currently unattested elsewhere in the Greek East. The military origins of the colony, the ruler cult, and the replication of Roman social values in non-elite settings in the colony receive particular attention.

The final chapters are dedicated to a reexamination of the familiar biblical materials relating to Philippi. Chapter five treats briefly the Philippian narrative in Acts 16, along with selected portions of Paul's letter to the Jesus community in the colony. Chapter six focuses solely upon the great Christological masterpiece in Philippians 2. I maintain that Paul, in his

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portrayal of Jesus in verses 6–8, has taken Rome’s *cursus* ideology and turned it on its head, so to speak, as he presents Christ descending a *cursus pudorum* (“a succession or race of ignominies”) from equality with God, to the status of a slave, to the physical and social death of public crucifixion. In stark contrast to the values of the dominant culture, moreover, Paul’s Christ surrenders his status willingly, and, most astoundingly, he ultimately receives the highest of honors at the hands of God himself, who thereby legitimates Christ’s decidedly anti-Roman approach to power and status (vv. 9–11). The presentation, I suggest, was intended by Paul (the likely author of the “hymn”) to encourage persons in the church who possessed some degree of honor or status in the broader social world of the colony to utilize their status, after the analogy of Jesus, in the service of others.

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ROMAN SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Rank must be preserved.

Cicero (*Pro Plancio* 15)

The first section of this work examines social relations in the ancient world, with special attention to the social verticality that was so central to Roman sensibilities. Chapter one adopts a static, snapshot approach to Roman social organization. I will survey the various status groupings of the empire, as the ancients understood them, and then illustrate the ways in which the social hierarchy found expression in public life. The second chapter takes a more dynamic approach to the topic. Particular attention will be directed to the incessant preoccupation with the preservation and acquisition of honor characteristic of Roman elite social praxis and to the replication of these honor-related values and types of behavior at every level of society.

Social stratification in the Roman world

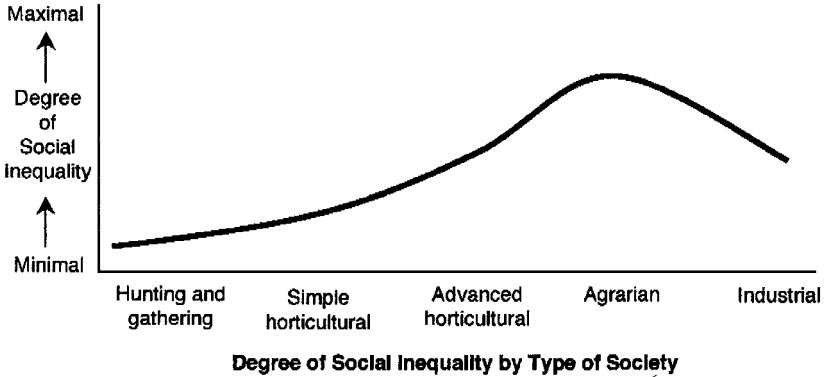
James Littlejohn has defined social stratification as “the name under which sociologists study inequality in society, i.e., the unequal distribution of goods and services, rights and obligations, power and prestige.”¹ Gerhard Lenski, in his seminal treatment of the subject, similarly described social stratification as “the distributive process in human societies – the process by which scarce values are distributed.”² Social stratification is inherent in the human species. The forms and degrees of inequality vary considerably, however, from one society to another. Lenski has been particularly helpful in clarifying these cultural distinctions through the construction of a fivefold typology of human societies based on ecology and technology.³ Lenski’s five types of societies are listed in the chart below, along with their corresponding degrees of social inequality.

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For present purposes it is important simply to note that the Roman empire constitutes a classic example of an agrarian society – the type of society reflecting the greatest degree of social inequality in the above model. Lenski elaborates:

One fact impresses itself on almost any observer of agrarian societies, especially on one who views them in a broadly comparative perspective. This is the fact of *marked social inequality*. Without exception, one finds pronounced differences in power, prestige, and honor associated with mature agrarian economies.⁴

Much has been written on class structure and social stratification in antiquity, and the problems associated with cross-cultural analysis undertaken across great barriers of time are well known. Fortunately for the present project, the Romans themselves were quite sensitive to the marked social inequality that characterized their relational universe, and ample source material has survived in both the literary and epigraphical records to illustrate the basic contours of Roman social organization.⁵

Before I examine Roman social life, however, some observations are in order regarding my methodology for employing ancient source material. Social historians tend to approach their sources somewhat differently than scholars who are interested in political or military history. Keith Hopkins reflects upon the preoccupation with historical reliability which has traditionally characterized historical inquiry:

Sober historians are interested primarily, sometimes exclusively, in the truth; they therefore usually ignore untrue stories. Indeed as one reads an ancient source, there is a temptation, rooted perhaps in modern scientific rationalism, to pass over these fabrications, roughly as most readers turn over a page which contains statistical tables, with barely a glance.⁶

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Hopkins, however, finds such an approach too restrictive. As a social historian, Hopkins rightly recognizes that untrue stories are often highly revealing, for such narratives speak volumes about the cultural values and social codes that inform the worldview of their authors. It is not hard to see why this is the case. Cultural values and ideals, preserved safely intact in the symbolic world of a people's collective imagination, are inevitably compromised in the complexities of daily life. As a result, although the historically accurate portions of a writer's narrative will inevitably reflect the author's cultural values, they will do so only imperfectly. When the ancient historian departs, however, from recounting the variegated realities of history and begins, instead, to increasingly embellish, fabricate, or editorialize his narrative, the details of history fade into the background somewhat, and the cultural values and social codes of the author and his contemporaries suddenly occupy a place of increasing prominence in the narrative. These values – “the perceptions and the beliefs of men,” as Hopkins refers to them – will often be more evident, therefore, in non-historical source material than in more historically accurate accounts.⁷ And it is the “perceptions and beliefs of men,” especially where social status and honor are concerned, that I am after in the present monograph.

An illustration will suffice. In the course of a discussion of the opprobrium of slavery and servile origin in the Roman mind (chapter six), I proceed to draw, by way of example, upon Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*. Suetonius informs us that Mark Antony taunted Octavian concerning his patriline, claiming that Octavian's great-grandfather was “a freedman and a rope-maker from the country about Thurii” (*Aug.* 2). A “sober historian” (to adopt Hopkins's phrase from the above citation) would perhaps want to consider the truth value of Suetonius' narrative at two levels: (1) Was Octavian's great-grandfather really “a freedman and a rope-maker from the country about Thurii”? (2) Did Antony ever actually taunt him with such a remark? Our political historian might conclude negatively on both counts but nevertheless proceed to see behind the fabrication some kernel of historical truth, namely, an increasing rift between Antony and Octavian post-Philippi (43 BCE). Such is the general trajectory of traditional historical methodology.

In the present connection, answers to the kinds of questions framed in the previous paragraph are quite irrelevant. As a social historian I am instead interested in why, for example, a taunt like Antony's would have been offensive to a fellow-member of the Roman elite. This generates a different set of questions. Some examples: (1) How would Antony's taunt have resonated in the social world of Suetonius' readers? (2) What was the social status of a “freedman and a rope-maker”?

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(3) How many generations must one be removed from a manumitted ancestor in order to escape the taint of servile origin? (Octavian is portrayed as three generations removed, and the taunt apparently still “works” in the author’s narrative.) The historical accuracy of Suetonius’ account is of little importance in formulating answers to these kinds of questions.

Precisely because narratives of questionable historical veracity so transparently depict the cultural values and social codes of their authors, the pages that follow are replete with citations from Roman writings that fabricate or, at least, elaborate upon the events they purport to relate. These very texts prove particularly useful for understanding the centrality of honor and social status in the symbolic universe of those who inhabited the early Roman empire.

The great divide – elite and non-elite

At the broadest level of analysis it must be emphasized that the empire had no middle class like that which constitutes the majority of the population of the United States of America. With some risk of oversimplification, it is fair to identify the ancient world as a two-class society in which the small percentage of wealthy elite (2 percent would be a generous estimate) controlled both the means of production – land, in an agrarian economy – and the legal system. The great majority of the population, in contrast, consisted of humble non-elite free persons and slaves.⁸

Ancient source materials decidedly confirm the consensus of Roman social historians reflected in the previous paragraph. Writers consistently view their social world as consisting of two basic strata. Paul’s reflections in 1 Corinthians are familiar:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1:26–29)⁹

Lucian similarly groups persons into two distinct categories. The social chasm between the poor (οἱ πένητες) and the rich (οἱ πλούσιοι) is the difference between “an ant and a camel” (*Saturnalia* 19).¹⁰ In one of Lucian’s dialogues a non-elite person complains,

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We should be less distressed about [economic injustice], you may be sure, if we did not see the rich living in such bliss, who, though they have such gold, such silver in their safes, though they have all that clothing and own slaves and carriage-horses and tenements and farms, each and all in large numbers, not only have never shared them with us but never deign to notice ordinary people (τοὺς πολλούς). (*Saturnalia* 20)

Epictetus, for his part, likens the social distance between decurions (who constituted the upper stratum of the *polis*) and commoners to that between a general and a rank-and-file soldier (στρατιώτην . . . στρατηγός), or a magistrate and a private individual (ἄρχοντα . . . ἰδιώτην) (*Dissertationes* 3.24.99).

The Younger Pliny separates into two social classes those attending the races in the circus, as he bemoans the loyalty of the fans to their teams: “Such is the popularity and importance of a worthless team jersey – not just with the crowd (*vulgus*), which is worth less (*vilius*) than the jersey, but with certain serious individuals (*graves homines*)” (*Ep.* 9.6.3).¹¹ Tacitus, too, understands his world to consist, in the broadest sense, of “the rabble,” on the one hand, and “citizens of repute,” on the other (*Ann.* 3.36). Aelius Aristides argues for the preservation of this non-elite “rabble” precisely because of the service they provide in highlighting, by contrast, the social standing of Aristides’ fellow-members of the elite: “Those who think that they should be superior should calculate that if they willingly destroy their inferiors, they injure their own source of pride (φιλοτιμίᾳ) – for the existence of inferiors is an advantage to superiors since they will be able to point out those over whom they are superior” (*Or.* 24.34).¹² People in most societies find themselves quite intrigued by the phenomenon of two unrelated persons sharing a family resemblance. Roman writers who comment on this topic focus most intently upon elite and non-elite persons who happen to look alike. A two-strata view of social reality surfaces, again, in their writings (italicized to emphasize the contrast):

Vibius, of free descent, and Publicius, a freedman, bore such a resemblance to Pompeius Magnus that if they had exchanged conditions Pompey could have been greeted in their persons and they in Pompey’s. Certainly, wherever Vibius or Publicius went, they drew people’s eyes to themselves, as everybody noticed the appearance of the *great man* in these *nobodies* (*speciem amplissimi civis . . . personis mediocribus*). This trick of chance came to Pompey as though by inheritance. For his father too was thought to resemble Menogenes, his cook, so closely that,

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powerful in arms and bold of spirit as he was, he could not keep the fellow's *base name* (*sordidum . . . nomen*) away from himself. (Val. Max. 9.14.1–2)

Notice the manner in which the author includes both Vibius, a freeman, and Publicius, a former slave, under the single rubric “nobodies” (*personis mediocribus*). As we will see below, the strong tendencies toward inequality which so marked Roman relational sensibilities (reflected in the two-strata view of society outlined above) guaranteed a further proliferation of social distinctions *among* the elite and the non-elite, respectively. The resulting multiplication of strata generated, in turn, a profound social chasm between slave and free in the conceptual world of non-elite persons. Non-elite free persons, in particular, would have strongly resisted the lumping together of “Vibius, of free descent, and Publicius, a freedman,” into a single social group. Valerius Maximus, however, writes from on high, as a member of the Roman aristocracy, among whom all non-elite persons – slave or free – are simply regarded as “nobodies” when contrasted with the author’s fellow-members of the elite, such as Pompey and his father. Such was the power of the two-strata view of the social hierarchy in the conceptual universe of the Roman elite class.

Similar bifurcation into two social groups is to be found among Jewish writers. Sirach warns his readers,

Do not lift a weight beyond your strength, nor associate with a man mightier and richer than you. How can the clay pot associate with the iron kettle? The pot will strike against it, and will itself be broken. A rich man does wrong and he even adds reproaches; a poor man suffers wrong, and he must add apologies. (Sir. 13:2–3; cf. 8:1–2)

For Josephus, the fundamental groups of Jewish society are the king or royal house and priests, on the one hand, and the people as a whole (λαός) or, especially, the simple person (ιδιώτης), on the other. The former are characterized as “rich” (πλούσιος) and “powerful” (δυνατός), the latter as “weak” (ἀδύνατος/ἄσθενής) and “poor” (ἄπορος/ἐνδεής).¹³

It is important to recognize that our understanding of the ancient world is inevitably compromised by the fact that the great majority of our literary sources have been penned by elite males. Tacitus’ description of his peers as “citizens of repute,” along with his corresponding dismissal of the masses as “rabble,” could thus be interpreted as patently self-serving elite propaganda. Derogatory terms aside, however, the two-strata perspective on social reality reflected above clearly transcended the boundaries of

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social class. The non-elite writings we do possess similarly divide the empire's population into two major groups:

Also [the beast] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead. (Rev. 13:16)

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? (Jas. 2:5–6)

The author of James regrets the preferential treatment accorded to elites in early Christian communities (Jas. 2:1–4). By assigning elites places of honor in community meetings the poor are being “dishonored.” Even as he challenges the values of the dominant culture, however, our author, like his pagan contemporaries, intuitively draws upon a two-strata view of social relations in order to frame his critique. As we shall see below, moreover, the deference to social status which James so vehemently denounces constituted standard social praxis wherever Rome ruled.

The Stegemanns conclude the following concerning this twofold orientation of the ancient Mediterranean world:

At the top of the societies of the Roman empire there was apparently a small elite group that was distinguished in the consciousness of ancient authors by their noble origin, leadership in public office, wealth, and esteem. Thus this elite is to be understood as both a political (the powerful) and economic (the rich) elite and a prestige (the most esteemed) elite. Over against them are the masses of the population, who are defined by the lack of the social traits that mark the elite.¹⁴

Further stratification among the Roman elite

The pronounced verticality which characterized Roman social relations generated further stratification *among* elite and non-elite persons respectively. Non-elite distinctions between slave (including freedpersons) and free and, among the latter, citizen and non-citizen held sway. I will address these non-elite social groupings later in some detail. A brief look at further social stratification within the Roman elite will prove most useful in the present context.

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The elite class subdivided into three aristocratic orders: senators, equestrians, and local municipal decurions.¹⁵ Six hundred aristocrats filled the senate during the early imperial period. Each had to meet a minimum property qualification of one million sesterces, but the wealth of many senators far exceeded that amount. Senators who somehow lost their wealth could be removed from the order. At one point Claudius gave a speech “commending all who voluntarily renounced senatorial rank (*ordine senatorio*) owing to straitened circumstances (they no longer possessed 1,000,000 sesterces): those who, by remaining, added impudence to poverty were removed” (*Tac. Ann.* 12.52).¹⁶ Equestrians were required to possess individual wealth amounting to at least 400,000 sesterces (*equites* literally means “knights” – originally a military class consisting of individuals rich enough to own a horse for a military campaign). Scholars estimate that the equestrian order boasted some twenty thousand members. The final elite order was the *ordo decurionum*, constituting the leading citizens of cities in the Roman provinces. Some 150,000–200,000 decurions occupied magistracies and priesthoods in local municipalities and assumed a significant degree of financial responsibility for civic events and local construction projects.¹⁷ The presupposed minimum income for these town councilors varied, with Comum’s standard of 100,000 sesterces probably representing the upper limit (*Pliny, Ep.* 1.19).

The assumption on the part of ancient observers that the members of all three Roman orders formed a single social stratum, vis-à-vis non-elite “rabble,” has been amply demonstrated from the texts cited above. Within the elite group itself, however, a marked social cleavage existed between the dominant orders, which became painfully obvious at times. Horace relates the engaging story of a magistrate of Fundi, Aufidius Luscius, who turned out in all his regalia to greet an important entourage traveling past his town to Brundisium. As one of the most distinguished citizens of an important town – probably the largest fish in Fundi’s significant social pond – Aufidius presumably anticipated a degree of respect in the broader elite world as well. The esteemed entourage, which included a person of consular rank, apparently thought otherwise, for they howled with laughter as they passed the now humiliated civic father (*Hor. Sat.* 1.5.34–36).

Each of the three elite orders further subdivided into its own characteristic social hierarchy. Among senators, those who could claim consular ancestry, designated *nobiles*, stood out from newcomers to the senatorial class and consistently flaunted their social superiority. Cicero, for