Chapter 2.7: “Honor/Shame Dynamic #7: Patronage”

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Honor/Shame Dynamic #7: Patronage

Why is this important?

- Helps explain the unequal status of persons in Bible societies as described in the *patron-client* relationship.
- Demonstrates that first-century Christians would have understood the gift of their salvation in light of the widespread social practice of patronage.
- Links the practice of patronage with the Abrahamic covenant by showing how being a *patron who blesses others* is likened to God’s promise to Abraham that he and his descendants would be *co-benefactors with God in blessing all the families of the earth*.

Definition

‘*Patronage* was the distinctive relationship in ancient Roman society between the ... ‘patron’ and his ‘client.’ The relationship was hierarchical, but obligations were mutual. The [patron] was the protector, sponsor, and benefactor of the client.... Although typically the client was of inferior social class, a patron and client might
even hold the same social rank, but the former would possess greater wealth, power, or prestige that enabled him to help or do favors for the client.  

J. E. Lendon’s *Empire of Honour* is a scholarly book about the vital significance of honor and shame in the social and political life of the Roman Empire. Lendon writes about patronage as an intrinsic, essential practice.

The emperor was the patron, the benefactor, of his every subject. The subjects, in turn, paid him back for his benefactions with their loyalty; this was the basis of his power. Thus, the empire was a single enormous spider’s web of reciprocal favours.  

To understand the significance of patronage, it is essential to grasp the enormous social inequality that existed in Palestine during the time of Christ. Society consisted of a very small number of people at the top—while the vast majority of people lived with much lower status and power, and had a constant struggle to survive.  

Observe the diagram below and the chart on the next page.

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3. It is notable that Jesus’ opposition came from high-status leaders occupying religious and political positions of power. Richard Rohrbaugh writes: “Given the prominent role of social conflict in Mark’s narrative, we are not surprised to find that all of Jesus’ opponents come from this group or its retainers. … Recognition that Jesus’ opponents come from a single social strata and act in genuine solidarity with each other is sufficient to demonstrate that the conflict is social as well as theological.” Richard Rohrbaugh, “The Social Location of the Markan Audience,” in *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 147.
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Figure 2.16: Urban elite, retainers, urban non-elite, peasants, and expendables in the Gospel of Mark

5. Adapted from Rohrbaugh, “The Social Location of the Markan Audience,” 147–52.
Writing about a likely audience for the Gospel of Mark, Richard Rohrbaugh comments on the specific and unequal layers of social status in Jesus’ time.\(^6\)

Figure 2.15 shows a dramatic inequality in Palestine at the time of Christ. Below are just a few observations from Rohrbaugh.

- “As in most agrarian societies, between 1 and 3 percent of the population owned the majority of the arable land in Galilee, southern Syria, and Transjordan at the time Mark wrote.”\(^7\)
- “... rural people, artisans, slaves, and women were mostly non-literate. Not only could very few people read or write, but also many could not use numbers either.”\(^8\)
- “... the urban elite made up about 2% of the total population.”\(^9\)
- “In ever-increasing numbers during the first century, landless peasants worked the lands of the wealthy, to whom they paid significant portions of the produce for the opportunity.”\(^10\)
- “Rents for tenants could go as high as two-thirds of a crop, though rabbinic sources more commonly mentioned figures ranging from one-fourth to one-half.”\(^11\)
- “Many such landless people drifted to the cities and towns, which were in frequent need of new labor, not because of expanding opportunity but rather because of extremely high death rates among the urban non-elite.”\(^12\)
- “About 60% of those who survived their first year of life were dead by age sixteen, and in few families would both parents still be living when the youngest child reached puberty.”\(^13\)
- “For most lower-class people who did make it to adulthood, health would have been atrocious. By age 30, the majority suffered from internal parasites, rotting teeth, and bad eyesight.”\(^14\)
- “… violence was also a regular part of village experience ... fraud, robbery, forced imprisonment for labor, beatings, inheritance disputes, enforceable removal of rents are all reflected in the village life in Mark’s Gospel.”\(^15\)

Can you begin to see the extreme vulnerability that people endured in first-century Palestine, and why, as a result, patronage would have been widely practiced?

Patronage was a [prevalent] social framework in the ancient Mediterranean basin. Patrons were people with power who could provide goods and services not available to their clients. In return, clients provided

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7. Ibid., 146.
8. Ibid., 144.
9. Ibid., 145.
10. Ibid., 153.
11. Ibid., 153.
12. Ibid., 153.
13. Ibid., 154.
15. Ibid., 154.
loyalty and honor to the patrons. Social inequality characterized these patronal relationships, and exploitation was a common feature of such relationships.\textsuperscript{16}

In the West, we usually look at patronage as a morally inferior practice. It is viewed as being unethical, or perhaps a necessary evil. For example, if someone gets a job, promotion, or advancement on the basis of something other than his or her achievement, qualifications, and merits, then we believe this to be wrong, especially if it is at our expense.

But in ancient Greece and Rome, patronage was neither socially wrong nor exceptional:

The world … of the New Testament … was one in which personal patronage was an essential means of acquiring access to goods, protection, or opportunities for employment and advancement. Not only was it essential—it was expected and publicized! The giving and receiving of favors was, according to a first-century participant, the “practice that constitutes the chief bond of human society.”\textsuperscript{17}

A patron was considered the benefactor, the blesser—the one who conferred blessing and grace on the one in need. The client was the blessee—the one receiving the gift, the blessing, the grace.

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\textsuperscript{16} Neyrey and Stewart, 47.

\textsuperscript{17} deSilva, citing (Seneca, Ben. 1.4.2), 96. His two chapters on patronage are titled “Patronage & Reciprocity” and “Patronage & Grace in the New Testament.” DeSilva describes in detail how the practice of patronage in the Roman Empire informed the early church’s understanding of the gift of God’s grace in Christ.
The practice of patronage was widespread. According to deSilva, “Jesus and his first disciples moved among and within patronage and friendship networks, for patronage was as much at home on Palestinian soil as in Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, Africa, and Rome.”

The patron-client relationship was characterized by three things: “1) It revolved around the reciprocal exchange of goods and services, 2) the relationship was personal and of some duration, and 3) it was not an equal relationship but rather was between parties of differing status.”

**Patronage in the Bible**

Patrons and benefactors are specifically mentioned in Scripture. Luke speaks of the centurion who built a synagogue for the Jews.

Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death. ... When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him ... “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:2–5).

Jesus speaks of the higher social status and authority of benefactors when teaching about servanthood in God’s kingdom:

And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors” (Luke 22:25).

Patronage is also found in Paul’s letter to the Romans where he names a wealthy Christian woman named Phoebe as his patron:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well (Rom 16:1–2).

Finally, patronage is clearly implied in Luke 1:1 and Acts 1:1. Luke acknowledges Theophilus in the opening verse of each book. “To produce the Gospel and Acts, Luke needed the equivalent in today’s currency of perhaps as much as four thousand US dollars for each text. It is no surprise he needed a benefactor.”

**Patronage and grace**

According to deSilva, first-century believers understood that “God’s grace (charis) would not have been of a different kind than the grace with which they were...

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18. deSilva, 121.
20. Richards estimates the cost of hiring a scribe to write Romans (identified as “Tertius” in Rom 16:22), as the equivalent of $2,275. See E. Randolph Richards, “Reading, Writing, and Manuscripts,” in eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 361. Jewett writes, “It would have required weeks of intensive work during which Tertius must have been made available on a full-time basis. This expense is most easily explained by the detail Paul reveals in 16:2, that Phoebe ‘became a patroness to many and to myself as well.’ This is the only time in Paul’s letters that he acknowledges having received funding from a patron ...” See Jewett, *Romans*, 22–23.
21. Richards, in Green and McDonald, 364.
already familiar; it would have been understood as different only in quality and degree." So the social practice of patronage and benefaction would have related to the love and grace of God. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Even the giving of God’s Son would have been seen in the light of patronage. A highly honored, magnificent Benefactor is providing a great blessing—the gift of his own Son to many people.

There was a distinct honor code about how to give and receive. The benefactor was to be wise, not self-serving. Their gifts were to be given only to honorable people—and thus, examples of excellent stewardship. Reciprocally, the client was to show proper gratitude and honor to the benefactor or patron.

According to the ancient writer Seneca, the reciprocal relationship between patron and client was to be characterized by “three graces”:

Some would have it appear that there is one grace for bestowing a benefit, one for receiving it, and the third for returning it; others hold that there are three classes of benefactors—those who receive benefits, those who return them, and those who receive and return them at the same time.

Seneca compared these three “graces” of giving, receiving, and returning favor to three sisters who dance “hand in hand … in a ring which returns upon itself.” Speaking of the word grace or charis, deSilva says it “encapsulated the entire ethos of the relationship.”

**Blessing, honor, patronage**

Our office conducted an analysis of the word bless and its derivatives in the Bible. I wanted to discover how frequently the occurrence of blessing was directed from God to humanity, from humanity to God, or from humanity to humanity. We counted each occurrence in the Bible of the words blessed, bless, and blessing. Then we categorized them accordingly.

Our results show that a little less than two-thirds of the occurrences (62 percent) are of God blessing humanity. A little more than one-third of the occurrences (38 percent) are of humanity blessing others. Of these, blessing God was 20 percent, blessing other persons or peoples, 18 percent.

It is important to recognize that the word blessing overlaps in a significant way with honor (Gen 12:1–3; Rev 5:12–13). In fact, Neyrey argues that in the Beatitudes (Mat 5:3–12), the Greek word for blessed, makarios, is better translated as honored, citing a number of scholars.

Sometimes the Beatitudes are referred to by scholars as the “makarisms.” Neyrey writes:

Reading the makarisms in terms of honor and shame is compatible with current research on them. Commentators regularly point to parallels to the makarisms in both Jewish and Greek literature. ... And the pivotal value

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22. deSilva, 122.
23. As quoted in deSilva, 106.
24. Ibid., 105.
25. We used the *Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV).*
of both Greek and Hebrew culture was honor. Moreover, some allege that typical makarisms have a close relationship to morality and ethics, which means that the praise or “blessing” constitutes a public acknowledgment of the worth and value of commonly held values and expected behavior. This, of course, is the basic meaning of honor, namely, public acknowledgment of worth grounded on local expectations of value.26

So Neyrey recommends a more culturally appropriate translation. For example: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” becomes “Honored are the poor in spirit” … “Blessed are those who mourn” becomes “Honored are those who mourn” … “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” becomes “Honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” … and, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely” becomes “Honored are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely” (Mat 5:3, 4, 6, 11). Neyrey sums up the point of the Beatitudes:

[T]rue honor comes from living up to Jesus’ new code and receiving the “reward” of praise of the heavenly Father. Jesus, then, changed the way the honor game was played and redefined the source of honor, namely, acknowledgment by God, not neighbor. As a result, by conforming to

the image of the Master, disciples are shamed in the eyes of their peers and become least and last before their neighbors. But Jesus honors them himself with a grant of reputation and respect that far surpasses what could be hoped for in the public arena of the village.  

Therefore, in the context of the dynamics of patron-client relationships in the ancient world, we can draw some conclusions about patronage and blessing:

- **When God blesses humanity**, God may be understood as the divine Patron who gives grace to humanity as the client.
- **When humanity blesses God**, they are fulfilling the role of the loyal client, returning honor to God in public worship and praise.
- **When humanity blesses humanity**, the one blessing is the patron, and the one being blessed is the client.

One might ask, *Why is this detail about patronage, blessing, and honor important at all?* Here’s why: Key passages of the Bible—passages related to God’s purpose to bless the peoples of the earth—are conceptually framed in the language of patronage and blessing. And it becomes even more important when you realize that in many cultures of the Majority World, the ancient values of patronage, blessing, and honor are very much alive and well!

For example, in a trip to Thailand, the indigenous Christian leader with whom our agency partners told me that everyone in Thai society is involved in patronage. Everyone is both client and patron to someone. A father is a patron to a child. A sponsor is a patron to a sports team. A foundation is a patron to an orphan. An uncle is a patron to a niece or nephew. And God is patron to the believer. Patronage is deeply woven into the fabric of Southeast Asian culture.

Let’s now further explore the honor/shame dynamic of patronage in the story of Abraham.

**Patronage and Abraham**

The concept of *patronage* helps us understand the role of Abraham in God’s story. Abraham experienced patronage in at least two ways:

1. **as a “client” who was blessed/honored by the “benefactor” Melchizedek (Gen 14:17–20), and,**
2. **as an honored “patron,” chosen by and representing God, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1–3).**

Let’s first explore how Abraham experienced patronage as a *client*. Here is the dynamic:

**Abraham experienced patronage as a “client” who was blessed by the “benefactor” Melchizedek.**

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27. Ibid., 164–65.
28. God changed Abram’s name to Abraham in Genesis 17:5. God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah in Genesis 17:15. For the sake of clarity, we will use the names Abraham and Sarah throughout this book—except when Abram or Sarai is in the Scripture quotation.
29. It can also be said that Abraham “experienced patronage” when God called and blessed him (Gen 12:1–3); God could be considered the patron, and Abraham the client.
The unequal nature of the patron-client relationship may be observed in the relationship between Melchizedek and Abraham. It is recorded in Genesis 14 in which Abraham rescued his brother Lot, who had been taken captive by an alliance of kings that conquered Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 14:1–16).

Abraham executed a daring and successful rescue of Lot—along with a victory over King Chedorlaomer and his allies. In honor of Abraham's victory, an unusual figure—a person named Melchizedek—showed up to bless Abraham. (Remember this is while Abraham and his wife Sarah were still barren, without their promised offspring.)

After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him a tenth of everything (Gen 14:17–20).

More is said about the mysterious Melchizedek in Psalm 110, in which Christ's conquering kingship is prophesied (Ps 110:1–2, 4–6). And the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 110:4 to describe Jesus Christ as a “priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 7:17).

But for the purpose of this chapter, I want you to see the nature of the unequal relationship—the difference in honor-status—between Melchizedek and Abraham. Curiously, it receives a significant comment in Hebrews 7.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior (Heb 7:1–7).

It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. This is a statement about relative honor-status. Melchizedek symbolizes the benefactor, the one with greater honor, because he blessed Abraham, father of our faith. No mortal human is accorded greater honor than Abraham, but Melchizedek is greater!

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30. Abraham's little army consisted of “his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them” (Gen 14:14).
It is clear Abraham experienced patronage as a “client” who was blessed by the “benefactor” Melchizedek, resulting in the elevation of his honor-status. Let’s now explore a second way by which Abraham experienced patronage. Here’s the dynamic:

Abraham became an honored “benefactor” through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.\textsuperscript{31}

To see this clearly, it is worth reviewing God’s Call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3.

Now the \textsc{Lord} said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”\textsuperscript{32}

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\textsuperscript{31} The reader may rightly ask: Why use the Roman Empire’s practice of patronage and apply it to Abraham, who lived some two thousand years before Christ? Abraham would have known nothing of the practice of Roman patronage. Zeba Crook offers helpful insights about ancient cultures like that of Abraham’s: “The idea or image of a god calling or commissioning a human and establishing a relationship of unequal status … can be found in cultures without the patronage system, for example, ancient Israelite society.” Crook demonstrates how Jewish authors around the time of Christ (such as Josephus) used the Greco-Roman concept of patron-client relations in their writings. They often described God’s relationship with their own ancient leaders, such as Moses and David, using terms of client-patronage and benefaction. Crook states that “certain Jews found the Greco-Roman framework of divine patronage and benefaction a fruitful way of talking about their own God. … God called Abram, offering him a benefaction from the outset (to be a father of a great nation), and he appeared to him frequently,” Crook, 99–100.

\textsuperscript{32} Christopher Wright argues that the Hebrew word for “families” (\textit{mišpāhā}) is better translated as “kinship groups.” Wright says, “In Israelite tribal structure [\textit{mišpāhā}] was the clan, the subgroup within the tribe. It can sometimes imply whole peoples, considered as related by kinship (as in Amos 3:1–2).” See Christopher J. H. Wright, \textit{The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 200.
I submit that contained in these verses is the concept of *patronage*. Here's why: God is promising that Abraham's honor will increase in an immense way: "I will ... make your name great." Contrast this with the intentions of the peoples in Genesis 11 to build the Tower of Babel: "Let us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). Christopher Wright contrasts the motivation of the Babel builders with God's promise to Abraham:

[T]he builders of the city and tower wanted to “make a name” for themselves—that is, achieve their own renown and establish a permanent memorial to their cleverness or a citadel for their power. God put a stop to that ambition. To Abraham, however, God says, “I will make your name great” (v. 2). The echo is undoubtedly deliberate.33

And there is a purpose for this colossal accrual of name-greatness (honor). It is “so that you will be a blessing.” *And to what extent will Abraham be a blessing?* The greatness of Abraham's being-a-blessing will correspond to the greatness of the global God who is making this promise. Abraham will be a blessing to all the families of the earth!

In fact, God is promising Abraham that the honor of his family and his descendants will be so great, that “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Abraham will be the co-progenitor with God, the co-benefactor with God for the whole world. Literally all the earth's families (or ethnic groups) will be blessed through Abraham.

Abraham could not have dreamed up such a vision. It would have been news too good to be true, news of *such grandeur*, a promise too wonderful, a pledge too large and expansive, a dream of name-greatness and honor only God could conceive. The very source of Abraham's family and the very source of Abraham's immense honor accrual could only be God himself.

Let's review. Abraham experienced patronage in two ways:

1. as a “client” who was blessed/honored by the “benefactor” Melchizedek, and
2. as an honored “patron,” chosen by and representing God, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Now let's fast forward to the New Testament and the writings of Paul.

**Abraham, the gospel, and patronage**

The purpose of this last segment of this chapter is to show how *patronage*—as expressed in the relationship between God and Abraham—is built into the gospel.34 This segment is in three parts.

- We will explore the broad biblical witness about how *Abraham* relates to the *gospel*.

33. Ibid., 202. Christopher Wright's excellent chapter 6 is about Abraham, blessing and mission. It is titled, “God's Elect People: Chosen for Blessing” (191–221). However, Wright makes no comment concerning this significant fact: In an honor/shame society like that of the ancient Middle East, "name greatness" would have been a significant motivational factor for Abraham to leave his country, kindred, and father's house as he obeyed God. Wright largely ignores the honor/shame dynamics of the passage.

34. I am grateful to Jackson Wu for several insightful suggestions for some of the material in this final segment of the chapter.
• We will look at the staggering honorific rewards for Abraham's obedience to God’s promise.
• We will discover how the honor/shame dynamic of patronage—expressed in the relationship between God, Abraham, and the nations—is a part of the gospel.

Abraham and the gospel

Let’s begin by considering these words in Galatians 3:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Gal 3:7–9). (Emphasis mine.)

Without a doubt the context of this passage is the justification by faith of believers from all the nations/people groups. In the book of Galatians, one of Paul’s strategies is to use the doctrine of justification to expose the ethnocentric values of the Jews. According to Jackson Wu, “The doctrine of justification explains who can be justified by explaining how one is justified. ‘All nations’ is the specific locus of the Abrahamic covenant. Faith simply explains how God undermines ethnic exclusivism and so keeps his promise.”

The faith of the Gentiles, like the faith of Abraham, was the sole basis of their being counted righteous before God—no need to comply with all the Jewish laws, most notably circumcision (Gal 2:7–9; 6:15). Moreover, for the Jews, there was now no basis for boasting that they were favored by God according to their law-keeping. Paul struck at the heart of the problem of ethnocentrism and boasting near the end of his letter to the Galatians: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal 6:15).

Christopher Wright nicely summarizes the significance of Galatians 3:8 concerning the gospel and Abraham. Recalling that God’s promise to Abraham of global blessing was proclaimed five times in Genesis (Gen 12:1–3; 17:1–8; 18:18; 22:17–18; 26:3–5), Wright says:

Finally, we stand amazed at the universal thrust (repeated five times) of the Abrahamic promise—that ultimately people of all nations will find blessing through Abraham. And we confess, with Paul, that it is of the essence of the biblical gospel, first announced to Abraham, that God has indeed made such a blessing for all nations available through the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the seed of Abraham. In Christ alone, through the gospel of his death and resurrection, stands the hope of blessing for all nations.

35. Wu, 270.
36. Ibid., 274–75. Wu writes, “As Rom 4:14, 17 suggest, God’s promise is at stake since he promised Abraham “all nations,” not simply one, namely Israel. At the heart of the Abrahamic covenant is the justification of Gentiles (cf. Gal 3:8). Ethnicity plays a central role in Paul’s gospel. Paul particularly aims to nullify the Jewish boast, regardless of how one defines ‘works.’”
37. Christopher Wright, 221.
The full-orbed gospel

What is a full-orbed biblical view of the gospel? Here are some highlights. You will observe in the following bullet points that I am making the biblical overlap in a selection of Scriptures between the gospel and God’s original promise to Abraham.

- **Galatians 3:8.** The gospel was “preached” or announced to Abraham. The gospel’s multi-generational trajectory across two millennia (from Abraham to the time of Christ) is essentially the story-mission of God’s covenant with Abraham’s family, Israel. The good news, the gospel to Abraham, was that the one-and-only covenant-keeping God would extend his blessing to all the peoples of the earth—and use his family to accomplish this purpose. *Abraham was chosen with universal intent.* Yes, the promise seemed like it was virtually forgotten. But the long Abrahamic family drama was punctuated with prophetic hints of the promise being realized (1 Ki 8:60; Ps 67:3-4; Is 66:18–24; Dan 7:14; Mal 1:11). One day, all the peoples will worship Abraham’s God, the only true and living God, the King of all creation.

- **The Gospel According to Matthew (Mat 1:1).** The gospel’s King is Jesus Christ, and he has arrived! Jesus embodies the *regal* identity of the “son of David” (Mat 1:1; cf. 1 Ki 2–8; Is 9:7; Rom 1:3). He also embodies the *sacrificial* identity of the “son of Abraham” (Mat 1:1; cf. Gen 22:1–18; Gal 3:16). The gospel is altogether wrapped up in the fulfillment of God’s promise to his people Israel. N. T. Wright puts it this way: “‘The gospel’ is the story of Jesus of Nazareth told as the climax of the long story of Israel, which in turn is the story of how the one true God is rescuing the world.”

- **Luke 4:18.** God’s eternal kingdom was inaugurated on earth through Christ’s life and ministry. He lived out and proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom (Luke 4:18–20, 43; 8:1; 9:1–6). Jesus declared himself as the fulfillment of the “good news” (4:18) which was promised in Isaiah 61:1–2.

- **1 Corinthians 15:1.** The “gospel” (1 Cor 15:1) that Paul summarized is “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (vv. 3–4). The phrase *in accordance with the Scriptures* refers to the same “Scripture” that “preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Gal 3:8).

- **Romans 1:1.** The Lord of “the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1) is Jesus Christ. He is the one-and-only resurrected King and Ruler of all. He calls for “the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (v. 5)—in fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3). This fulfillment of the promise through the gospel is the means by which God’s glory and honor are vindicated (John 12:28; Rom 4:16).

- **Romans 1:16.** The gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The gospel’s power is fueled in part by God’s ancient promise to Abraham that all the kinship groups of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3).

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38. N.T. Wright’s comments are in the introduction to McKnight, 12.
• **Romans 4:16.** The gospel is the dynamic that propels the fulfillment of God’s all-nations promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3). The promise “depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace [herein is the gospel] and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Rom 4:16).

• **Matthew 24:14.** Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mat 24:14). This grand culmination will be a cosmic echo of God’s promise to honor Abraham by using Abraham’s offspring to bless all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:3).

• **Revelation 14:6–7.** Finally, the “eternal gospel” will have been proclaimed to “every nation and tribe and language and people” so that they will “fear God and give him glory … and worship him who made heaven and earth” (Rev 14:6–7). Their worship will reverberate throughout eternity—recalling God’s original promise to Abraham that all the kinship groups of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3).

The above highlights represent the trajectory of the good news—the divinely powerful eternal gospel of Jesus Christ. The blessing-for-all-nations gospel was “preached” to Abraham; this is the primary meaning of Galatians 3:8.

We have observed that the global promise of God to ancient Abraham is tethered to the universal scope of the global gospel. We’ll expand on this below as we explore how the honor/shame dynamic of patronage relates to the gospel.

**Staggering honorific rewards for Abraham’s obedience**

We have observed that according to Galatians 3:8, when the Scripture “preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham,” the gospel—the good news—is that “in you shall all the nations be blessed.”

God’s global promise and command to Abraham to “Go … and be a blessing” is certainly something that Abraham needed to dutifully heed and obey. Christians rightly embrace the need for “obedience of faith … among all the nations” (Rom 1:5) toward the gospel (10:16).

**Obedience to the gospel:** yes, it is required of Christians today. Likewise, it was required of Abraham in God’s call, God’s global promise and command. But would Abraham have understood God’s global promise—along with all the necessary sacrificial obedience—as also good news for himself?

Let’s keep digging; there is more gold to mine in this vein. The promise to Abraham was, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (Gal 3:8). Let’s emphasize what this would have meant to Abraham … “In you” … *in YOU!* … “shall all the nations

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39. Christopher Wright summarizes Genesis 12:1–3 as “Go … and be a blessing.” See Christopher Wright, 208.
be blessed.” There is immense honor implicit in God’s promise-command. That’s what I want to focus on here.

Let’s also recall the other honorific elements of God’s call on Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. Abraham’s obedience required him to leave the very source of his honor: country, kindred, and father’s house (Gen 12:1). But consider the manifold honorific rewards:

- God will give Abraham a new land, ensuring a new source of land-based honor.
- God will make of Abraham “a great nation,” ensuring that Abraham will have an heir with many descendants.
- God “will bless” Abraham, promising that Abraham will enjoy God’s divine favor.
- God will make Abraham’s “name great,” ensuring Abraham’s renown in the larger community.
- God commands Abraham, “you will be a blessing,” promising him that he will acquire the honor of being a patron who will, in turn, bless many others.
- God will “bless those who bless” Abraham, ensuring Abraham’s favor in his community.
- God will protect Abraham’s honor: “and him who dishonors you I will curse.”
- God promises Abraham: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

What did all this mean to Abraham? Yes, God required obedience from Abraham. But how can we miss the immense, lasting honor promised by God to the previously pagan but now obedient and faith-full Abraham? How can we miss the staggering good news this must have been to Abraham?

God the Patron, Abraham the co-patron

Let’s now consider the honor/shame dynamic of patronage. It is represented here in two forms.

First, God is the great Patron who confers an astounding scope of blessings on Abraham. Second, as stated in the fifth bullet above, God promised that Abraham will be a blessing. God promised Abraham that he will receive the honor of being a patron, and that together with God, Abraham and his family will have the honor of blessing many others; in fact, the blessing is to go to all the peoples of the earth.

I submit that, based on the concept of patronage woven into the ancient cultural context and life of Abraham, the good news to Abraham was this truth:

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40. Zechariah 8:13 confirms the principle that being a blessing is a great honor: “And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing…” (emphasis mine). Zechariah sets up a contrast between shame and honor. The profound shame of being “a byword of cursing among the nations” is contrasted with an immense honor. What is that great honor? It is God’s promise, “and you shall be a blessing.” Interestingly, the nexus between (1) the shame of God’s people among the nations and (2) the honor of God’s people blessing the nations is God’s sovereign work of salvation—“so will I save you.”

41. The great honor that Abraham gained by his faith-obedience toward God is also expressed in Romans 4:13. Remarkably, Abraham is called “heir of the world,” a title of breathtaking honor.
God, as the ultimate source of all honor and glory is sovereignly including Abraham in the honor-laden role of co-benefactor—to bless all nations through his family.\textsuperscript{42}

Restated here, then, is the good news—\textit{the gospel}—to Abraham:

God will bless all nations. And God will do this through Abraham and his spiritual family, giving him and us the honor of being co-patrons, co-benefactors with God to be a blessing to all the other peoples of the earth.

Why am I spending so much time on this? Here’s why:

- **Spiritually, our “grandfather” is Abraham.** As Christians we are saved by grace through faith. As sons and daughters of God, our faith is our badge of membership in God’s ancient family: “... it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (Gal 3:7).

- **Abraham’s family is equivalent to God’s people.** In the New Testament and in our present-tense new covenant period of grace, Abraham’s family is equivalent to the Lord’s church. This all-ethnicities family of believers whose head is Jesus Christ has some of its original DNA in Abraham. This DNA is a missional, all-cultures, international DNA! The story is still moving

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42. I contend that the practice of \textit{blessing} is related to the practice of \textit{benefaction and patronage}. As blessing from a superior person conveyed honor to the weaker, lower-status person—so also patronage conveyed \textit{honor} to the weaker or lower-status person. The practice of blessing preceded Roman patronage, but both conveyed honor from the strong to the weak. The \textit{blessee} (the weaker, lower-status person) would give public recognition and praise to the \textit{blesser} (the strong, higher-status person). Patronage and benefaction may therefore be considered a derivative of the more basic and ancient practice of blessing.
forward to its glorious fulfillment of God’s original promise to Abraham—that all the families of the earth will be blessed!

- **If Abraham’s honor was raised by being a co-benefactor with God to the nations, then so is our honor raised as we bless the peoples of the earth.** God is sovereignly inviting and choosing people to recognize that they and their faith-family are co-benefactors with God to bless the rest of the families of the earth. This honorific good news is part of the gospel.

- **Would this resonate with unengaged, unreached peoples of the Majority World?** One wonders whether hearkening back to an ancient ancestor could provide a key to the discipling of the nations. The ‘hearkening-back’ to this one ancestor, Abraham … the plain honor/shame dynamics of the story … the richness and humor of Abraham’s life … the emotionally draining drama of the long anticipation—and then later—the sacrifice of his son Isaac … and the immense, global significance of family … could not these elements attract peoples to the offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ?

### A kingdom summary—dark side and bright side

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patronage—kingdom of this world vs. kingdom-reign of God</th>
<th>Kingdom of this world</th>
<th>Kingdom-reign of God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ideally, patronage consisted of three “graces”—giving, receiving, and returning favor, resulting in a rise in honor-status for both benefactor and client.</td>
<td>• The gift of salvation as expressed by John 3:16 was likely understood by the early church as an act of divine benefaction.</td>
<td>• God is sovereignly inviting and choosing people to recognize that they and their faith-family are co-benefactors with God to bless the rest of the families of the earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practically, patronage was often a means of controlling and abusing people of lower status, perpetuating poverty, causing dependency and making them obligated without hope of ever being released from their obligations.</td>
<td>• Being co-benefactors with God is part of the gospel; it is good news because it promises a rise in honor-status for God’s family of peoples and greater worship for God.</td>
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</tbody>
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*Figure 2.21: Patronage—kingdom of this world vs. kingdom-reign of God*

### Action points

- **Fast-forward:** To explore how the dynamic of patronage can shape a contextualized presentation of the gospel of Christ, turn to Section 3, Chapter 7.

- **Reflect:** To what extent do you and your church family view the mission of the church as a burden of responsibility? To what extent do you see it also as a massive joy (Ps 96), the eternal honor of being co-benefactors with God and ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20) to the nations?
• **Bible study:** “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Gal 3:8). What was the content or essence of God’s “gospel message” to Abraham?

• **Teaching:** Genesis 12:1–3 is one of the most foundational Old Testament passages for the mission of the church. Develop a teaching about the honorific blessings given by God to Abraham in these three brief, but loaded, verses.

• **Mission:** Do you serve among people who have high regard for *family, ancestors, and honor*? If so, how would you communicate the story of Abraham and its connection to the family of God in Galatians 3:7–9, 25–29?