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# Persecution is no blessing: Matthew 5:10–12 as a 'practical theodicy'

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About 30 years ago, Hanson argued on linguistic, literary-critical, and cultural grounds, that the term μακάριος in the *macarisms* should be translated as 'how honourable!' rather than 'blessed'. His proposal has had little impact on translations or commentaries to date, despite the issue's linguistic, cultural, and theological relevance. In this article, I examine the honour discourse in Matthew 5:10–12 and in Matthew 10:1–42, where the topic of persecution is addressed. This investigation serves a dual purpose: to strengthen Hanson's argument from a rhetorical perspective and to illustrate the theological and social relevance of his proposal. The results also confirm F.P. Viljoen's statement that the *macarisms* 'function as a practical theodicy'.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to the interpretation of the term μακάριος in Matthew 5:3–12 and its theological implications. This is relevant with regard to the impact of the Beatitudes in shame-based societies.

**Keywords:** beatitudes; *macarisms*; honour discourse; shame; suffering; persecution.

## Introduction

In 1994, Hanson published an article in which he argues for translating the term μακάριος, as found in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12), as 'how honourable!'. Analogously, he proposes translating the term οὐαί as used in the woes or reproaches (Mt 23:13–36), as 'how shameful!' (Hanson 1994). Although this issue is relevant from linguistic, cultural, and theological perspectives – and despite an increased awareness of the presence of honour discourse in the New Testament, this translation proposal has had little impact on Bible translations to date. In translations published after 1994, there are little evidence of a shift in perspective. The term μακάριος continues to be rendered as 'blessed' (e.g. ESV 2001) or 'happy' (the Afrikaanse Bybelvertaling 2020 and the Dutch NBV 2021 translate it as *gelukkig*). While Hanson's article is frequently cited by commentators, they persist in translating μακάριος as 'blessed' (e.g. Carter 2000; Culpepper 2021; Uytanlet & Kwa 2017; Wilson 2022), 'happy' (e.g. France 2007), or 'good fortune to' (e.g. Nolland 2005).

> This article contributes to the interpretation of the term μακάριος in Matthew 5:3–12 and its theological and social implications. As will be shown, this has relevance for understanding the impact of the Beatitudes in shame-based societies. The discussion proceeds as follows: first, I briefly summarise Hanson's interpretation of the *macarisms*; second, I present an argument for his interpretation from an honour discourse perspective; third, I highlight the theological implications and social relevance of Hanson's proposal; and finally, I conclude with an evaluation and summary observations.

## Hanson on the distinctive character of *macarisms*

Customarily, the term μακάριος [*makarios*] in the Beatitudes is interpreted as Jesus's pronouncement of divine blessing, sometimes with an eschatological note of promise (Hanson 1994:81). Therefore, Hanson examines the *macarisms* as a formula in relation to blessings. Although both are positive affirmations and often praise the same attributes of success, such as descendants, wealth, and domination over enemies (e.g. Ps 144:12–15), there is nevertheless a fundamental distinction to be made. In the Old Testament, blessings have the character of 'formal pronouncements by someone in authority' – an authorised cultic representative of Yahweh, who is understood to be the source of the blessing. The social settings of blessings are rituals. Blessings function as 'words of power' that bring the desired result to fruition (e.g. Nm 6:22–27; Hanson 1994:85–87). *Macarisms*, however:

> […] are fundamentally different from blessings in a variety of ways. (1) *Makarisms* are not 'words of power'. (2) They are not limited to pronouncements by God or cultic mediators. (3) They only refer to humans, and never to God or non-human objects. (4) They do not have their setting in ritual. And (5) one does not pray for a *makarism*, or refer to oneself with a *makarism*. (Hanson 1994:89, referring to Janzen 1965:223–224)

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the collection titled 'Francois P. Viljoen Festschrift,' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Albert Johannes Coetsee.

In other words, μακάριος and its Hebrew equivalent אַשְׁרֵי [*'ašrê*] are typically used in contexts of intra-human affirmations. According to Hanson, they can only be fully understood against their socio-cultural Mediterranean background, in which reality was shaped by the core values of honour and shame, and by associated patterns of social interaction such as challenge and riposte that reflect the competition for honour. Basically, according to Hanson (1994), *macarisms* are value judgements:

> [ … ] made by an individual, or the community at large, on either a real or an ideal person. It is the social imputation of esteem to an individual or group for manifesting desirable behavior and commitments. (p. 91)

Thus, rather than functioning as 'words of power' that effectuate God's blessing, they operate as statements from a bystander's perspective about certain behaviours or states of affairs. Moreover, '*makarisms* constitute a positive challenge, affirming the honor of another, calling for a subsequent positive response' (Hanson 1994:84).

Hanson substantiates his interpretation of *macarisms* with linguistic, form-critical and literary-critical arguments. He investigates biblical and extra-biblical parallels. Furthermore, in these sources he highlights the antipodal relationship between *macarisms* and reproaches – a relationship further confirmed by the fact that, in the Gospel of Matthew, *macarisms* and reproaches form an *inclusio* around Jesus's public teaching.

Hanson (1994) explains this as follows:

> While Luke juxtaposes four *makarisms* (6:20–23) and four reproaches (6:24–26) in the same speech, Matthew has employed his two series as brackets around Jesus' public teaching. Thus, honor and shame provide the polar oppositions which open and close the public ministry. These two units thus provide two sets of value judgments in Jesus' mouth which constitute the positive and negative values of the 'kingdom'. (p. 103)

As far as I can determine, there has been little direct criticism of Hanson's interpretation of the *macarisms*. More generally, however, the way in which biblical scholars of that period applied insights from cultural anthropology, particularly in the wake of Bruce Malina's seminal publication (Malina 1981), has not escaped critique (Flanders 2020; Lawrence 2003:7–36; Meggitt 1998). Firstly, their methodology was said to be overly model based, with the evidence no longer interrogating the model, thereby risking deterministic results. Secondly, because these anthropological models originate in contemporary culture, there is also a risk of anachronism. Thirdly, critics argued that the approach treated 'the' Mediterranean culture of the first century too monolithically, without attending to any differences in social interaction. These criticisms highlight the need for more nuanced and context-sensitive applications of social-scientific models to avoid generalisation and oversimplification. However, the awareness that sensitivity to an honour-shame discourse in New Testament texts is indispensable has only increased. Despite this increased awareness, Hanson's proposal seems to have had no impact on translations to date. It has, however, received explicit support from Neyrey (1998) and DeSilva (1999).

## An argument from honour discourse related to persecution

In what follows, I present an argument for Hanson's interpretation from an honour discourse perspective. In doing so, I follow a line of inquiry pursued by Neyrey (1998) and DeSilva (1999), focusing specifically on the honour discourse associated with the theme of suffering from persecution.[1]

Some preliminary remarks are in order here. Firstly, both the Beatitudes and Matthew 10 primarily contain sayings attributed to Jesus. For the purposes of this contribution, however, I will focus on the honour discourse in Matthew, without distinguishing between Jesus's words and Matthean redaction.[2] Of course, as a follow-up study, it might be fruitful to examine this distinction more closely to determine whether differences emerge between Jesus's pre-Easter and Matthew's post-Easter honour discourse regarding the theme of suffering.

Secondly, when considering the concrete experiences of suffering, the question immediately arises as to whether the discourse reflects the experiences of a Matthean community (see e.g. France 2007; Viljoen, 2016a) or whether it addresses a more general audience. Further questions also emerge concerning the precise location of the audience in relation to Jewish communities. Given that: (1) Matthew provides scant information about concrete experiences of suffering; (2) the terminology for suffering corresponds to that found in other New Testament writings; (3) the thesis that the Gospels were written for specific audiences has been challenged by Richard Bauckham (1998) and others; and (4) 'the fluidity of the Matthean setting challenges the accuracy of any terms we use to describe it' (Culpepper 2021:3), I set aside the question of Matthew's audience. In short, I leave aside the various complex discussions concerning the historical setting by focusing instead exclusively on the Matthean version of Jesus's words.

### Persecution in Matthew

Only a few passages in Matthew refer to the suffering of Jesus's followers (5:10–12; 10:16–39; 13:21; 24:6–14; see also 23:34). These texts primarily contain warnings about future suffering that awaits them. In general, this concerns opposition and persecution (διώκω – 5:10, 11, 12; 10:23; 23:34; διωγμός – 13:21). The exact origin of the opposition is not entirely clear. Undoubtedly, there is a Jewish component (DeSilva 1999; France 2007; Keener 2009; Nolland 2005; Viljoen 2021). This is for example evident from the specific reference to flogging in the synagogues (10:17; 23:34), as well as from the tense relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospel. Some commentaries also refer to a pagan component (France 2007; Gnilka 1986; Nolland 2005;

1.See also on 1 Peter, Klinker-De Klerck (forthcoming 2026); on Philippians, Klinker-De Klerck (forthcoming n.d.).

2.This also implies that I will not compare Matthew's *macarisms* to the Lukan version. For a historical-critical overview of *macarisms* in the Gospels, see the comprehensive excursus in Davies and Allison (1988:431–442).

cf. Viljoen 2013:5) but do not elaborate on this.[3] Viewed culturally, through the lens of shame, Neyrey interprets the persecution mentioned in 5:10–12 as referring to 'banning' by one's own family, rather than formal expulsion from the synagogues. He (Neyrey 1998:168–169, 174–176) sees this interpretation supported by the theme of divided families, which features prominently in chapter 10.

Regardless of its origin, the cause of the opposition is essentially the believers' new identity in Christ stated explicitly in 5:11; 10:18, 39 (ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ) and 10:22; 24:9 (διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου), and indirectly in 5:10 (ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης)[4] and 13:21 (διὰ τὸν λόγον). Their suffering is therefore identity-bound.

The wide range of vocabulary related to suffering shows that the opposition takes the following specific forms: hostility (μισέω – 10:22), verbal attack (ὀνειδίζω; εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν – 5:11), conflict within families (παραδίδωμι; ἐπανίστημι – 10:21; μάχαιρα; διχάζω – 10:34, 35), arrest and interrogation (παραδίδωμι εἰς συνέδρια – 10:17, 19; ἄγω ἐπὶ ἡγεμόνας δὲ καὶ βασιλεῖς – 10:18), torture (μαστιγόω – 10:17), and execution (παραδίδωμι εἰς θάνατον – 10:21; ἀποκτείνω – 10:28). Most of this vocabulary appears in Matthew's second discourse (10:1–11:1). In addition, the conclusion of Jesus's reproaches to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (23:29–39), and a passage from the eschatological discourse (24:3–14), contain the same or similar vocabulary. In Matthew 23, however, the connection with the disciples' suffering is only indirect, and in Matthew 24 their suffering is mentioned only briefly in the context of the Parousia and the greater disasters that will occur at that time.

Therefore, in what follows, I will examine the persecution *macarism* in Matthew 5:10–12 against the background of the honour discourse in Matthew 10 in which the topic of persecution is prominently featured. The central question is: To what extent, and in what way, does Matthew address shame in relation to persecution?

## Honour discourse in Matthew 10:1–42

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends his 12 apostles to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (NRSV) with the message that the Kingdom of heaven has come near. The entire chapter makes it clear that the reception of both them and their message remains uncertain. Although Jesus's words are primarily addressed to the 12, the implied audience is broader, as indicated in verses 16–39 (Neyrey 1998:185). After a brief introduction, Jesus's discourse is structured into three main sections (vv. 5–15; vv. 16–23; vv. 24–42), each concluding with an 'Amen, I say to you' statement.

The description of the suffering awaiting the disciples is mainly found in the second section, showing an intensification (Nolland 2005:424–426). Jesus warns his disciples that he is sending them out like sheep among wolves (v. 16). They can expect punitive floggings in the synagogues at the hands of the councils of the local Jewish communities (v. 17). They will be dragged before governors and kings (v. 18) – sometimes even after betrayal by their own families – which could result in severe penalties, including the death penalty (v. 21). Jesus's disciples will be hated literally 'by all' (v. 22). Neyrey (1998) and DeSilva (1999) have emphasised the dimension of social disgrace and shame in the suffering of Jesus's disciples. From a sociological perspective, such persecution functions as a form of shaming – a deviancy-control technique used by majority groups to 'rehabilitate' minority groups (DeSilva 1999:7). At first sight, the importance of shame in this context may not be always apparent, because the values of honour and shame can be compared to a cultural grammar which is 'hardly visible in conversations at the surface level, but actively works behind the scenes to structure meaning and purpose' (Georges & Baker 2016:82).

The discourse in Matthew 10 reframes this shame of persecution by presenting it as honourable. The text contains explicit honour terminology.[5] Firstly, the chapter begins with Jesus granting his 12 disciples ἐξουσία [power, authority] (v. 1) to cast out unclean spirits and to cure disease and sickness – an immediate indication of their high status. Secondly, another term of honour in this chapter, the word ἄξιος [worthy], appears seven times (vv. 10, 11, 13 [twice], 37 [twice], and 38). A household or a person may be 'worthy of Jesus' – or not – depending on whether they receive the apostles and their message (v. 14). Receiving the 12 is equivalent to receiving Jesus and, in turn, the One who sent him (v. 40). Worthiness also depends on whether a person is willing to value loyalty to Jesus above loyalty to one's family (v. 37). In cultures guided by the dynamics of honour and shame, second-guessing the opinion of family members involves deep shame. Thus, Matthew 10:37 expresses an 'incomparably high allegiance' to Jesus (Keener 2009:535). Bearing this shame was undoubtedly intrinsic of what it meant 'to take up one's cross' and following Jesus (v. 38) – the cross itself being a symbol of extreme shame (Green & Baker 2000:19–23). Paradoxically, this shame of the cross leads to honour, that is, to be worthy of Jesus, as verse 38 implies.

As the above already shows, honour discourse is conveyed not only through explicit terms such as ἐξουσία or ἄξιος but also through imagery and rhetorical strategies 'developed by groups to insulate their own members from the opinion of outsiders and maintain their commitment to the group's definition of honorable behavior' (DeSilva 1999:1; cf. Carter 2000:9–14; Viljoen 2013:2). To detect this discourse in ancient texts, DeSilva (1999:1–28) developed a heuristic tool by mapping these strategies, identifying two main ways in which they appear: (1) through language that marks the boundaries of the group and its alternate court of reputation; and (2) through language that affirms the group's honour (or the honour of particular members) before that alternate court of reputation (DeSilva 1999:26–28).

3.Carter (2000:30–43) devotes considerable attention to the Roman imperial presence as a backdrop to the Gospel of Matthew next to tensions with the synagogue.

4.On righteousness as an identity-marker in Matthew, see Viljoen (2013).

5.For vocabulary and imagery related to honour and shame, see Elliott (2007:80–86), DeSilva (2008:27–35), and relevant domains in Louw-Nida (1988), such as 88: 'Moral and ethical qualities and related behaviour'.

**Through language that marks the boundaries of the group and its alternate court of reputation:** Applying DeSilva's framework to detect the honour discourse in relation to the theme of persecution in Matthew 10, it becomes clear how the court of reputation and group boundaries of Jesus-followers are defined. Regarding the court of reputation, God's approval is the goal. Jesus tells his disciples three times not to fear those who persecute them (φοβέομαι – vv. 26, 28, 31) but to fear – also in the sense of 'reverence' – 'him who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (v. 28; NRSV). Furthermore, Jesus's centrality in Matthew 10, along with his connection to the Father, reinforces this. Receiving the apostles means receiving Jesus, and receiving Jesus also means receiving the One who sent him (v. 40). In other words, acknowledging Jesus before others lead in being acknowledged by him before the Father (vv. 32–33). It is therefore not surprising that receptiveness to and loyalty towards Jesus marks the boundaries of the group. For example, the disciples must distance themselves publicly from those not being worthy of Jesus by shaking the dust from their feet (v. 14) – a symbolic act of 'the breaking off of communion and the forfeiting of responsibility' (Davies & Allison 1991:178; cf. a similar gesture in Neh 5:13 and Acts 18:6). This new identity in Christ will take shape through conflict with the natural group or family (vv. 21, 37). Instead, kinship language reinforces the disciples' identity: God is not only the Father of Jesus, but also of his followers (vv. 20, 29).[6] In line with this, Jesus' followers are not only referred to as disciples (vv. 1, 24, 25) but also, indirectly, as 'his housemates' (v. 25). Another strategy to mark boundaries between groups is affirming the character of group members and their leaders, while contrasted with outsiders. The characterisation of the disciples as 'sheep' against their persecutors as 'wolves' (v. 16) serves as an example. Yet apart from portraying outsiders as hostile, there is little polemic in Matthew 10.

**Through language that affirms the group's honour (or the honour of particular members) before that alternate court of reputation:** The honour of Jesus's followers before the alternate court of reputation, that is God and Jesus, is affirmed in multiple ways. As already mentioned above, they received powerful authority [ἐξουσία] to cast out unclean spirits and to cure disease and sickness. Moreover, they can be assured of God's help in their difficulties, for they receive the Spirit from their heavenly Father (vv. 19–22, 32–33), who upholds them in their painful testimony before the authorities. God's divine assurance of care for them is also evident in the knowledge that 'the hairs of their heads are counted' (v. 30). Finally, with a typical *kal v'chomer* [argument *a fortiori*], Jesus underscores their great value to God (v. 31). A special way to establish the honour of a group is by 'reinterpreting the group's experience of dishonour or disapproval at society's hands, defusing the dominant culture's deviancy-control techniques or even turning them to advantage vis-à-vis group honor and commitment' (DeSilva 1999:27). This strategy is clearly visible in Matthew 10 in the fact that the shameful situation of oppression is portrayed as 'belonging' to following Jesus and thus as a path to true honour. As already mentioned above, Jesus leaves no ambiguity, 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me' (vv. 37–38). In short, whoever acknowledges Jesus in this costly and shameful way before others, can expect recognition from him before the heavenly Father (v. 32). The 'deviancy-control technique' of their oppressors is turned to the disciples' advantage in the honour-battle. Moreover, even greater honour is yet to come. Those who persevere till the end will be saved (σῴζω; v. 22). Those who lose their life for Jesus's sake will find it (εὑρήσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ; v.39). Finally, returning to the theme of worthiness through hospitality towards the apostles, Jesus concludes: 'whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple' (NRSV), can be certain of their reward (μισθός; vv. 41–42).

To conclude, suffering – including its shameful dimension – is a central theme in Matthew 10. In fact, shame may be more than a mere dimension; it can itself be considered as a form of suffering. 'Shame causes someone "to lose face", taking away their identity and value' (Georges & Baker 2016:42). Employing DeSilva's heuristic tool, the honour discourse emerges not only in its terminology but also in the rhetorical strategies it employs. It pervades the chapter and is interwoven with the theme of persecution, functioning as a powerful tool to strengthen the disciples' self-esteem in the difficult circumstances they are expected to encounter. This is achieved, among other ways, by transforming the deviancy-control technique of persecution into an advantage for the disciples. Matthew 10 presents a 'divine reversal' (DeSilva 2008:86–155; Elliott 2007:74–75) regarding the shameful status of the disciple's persecution: contrary to what their persecutors intend them to feel and believe, suffering for the sake of Jesus is truly an honourable calling.

## Honour discourse in Matthew 5:10–12

The literature on the Matthean Beatitudes – also in relation to the Lukan version – is extensive.[7] Here, I focus specifically on the persecution-*macarism* in Matthew 5:10–12 considering the honour discourse established above in Matthew 10.

Matthew 5 contains nine *macarisms*, the last two of which clearly belong together, addressing the theme of persecution. Matthew 5:10 follows the syntax of the seven preceding series of Beatitudes, while Matthew 5:11–12 elaborates on the content of verse 10. Syntactically, with their transition to the second person plural, these verses form a transition to the next pericope. The structure of Matthew 5:3–12, building towards a climax in this extended persecution-*macarism*, shows that persecution is a key theme in the Beatitudes, just as it is in Matthew 10. Neyrey (1998:168) argues that these verses are climactic not only in length and position but also by virtue of their content, giving 'the reason why disciples become "poor", "hungry", and "mourning": they are driven out or banned from the household by their families because of loyalty to Jesus ("on my account")'. Some of the vocabulary in 5:10–12 parallels

6.On kinship terminology, see Crook (2020:105–107) and relevant domains in Louw-Nida (1988).

7.For an overview, see Nolland (2005).

that of chapter 10, particularly the more general verb διώκω [persecute] (vv. 10, 11, 12 // Mt. 10:23). There is also the possibility of slander (ὀνειδίζω; εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν καθ' ὑμῶν [ψευδόμενοι] in 5:11; cf. Mt. 10:25). The cause of the suffering is stated in 5:10 (ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης) and 5:11 (ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ), the latter paralleled literally in 10:18, 39 (cf. διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου in 10:22). Likewise, the term μισθός (10:41–42) is found in 5:12. Finally, the themes of the kingdom of heaven (5:10 // 10:7) and of the prophets (5:12 // 10:41) occur in both passages. Overall, the persecution-*macarism* shares enough parallel vocabulary and themes with Matthew 10 to link both texts closely.

Regarding possible honour discourse in Matthew 5:10–12, two observations may be made:

- These verses and the broader literary context of the *macarisms* show no explicit outsider polemic; there is neither clear establishment of boundaries nor is the alternate court of reputation explicitly identified. However, significant for the court of reputation is Matthew's portrayal of Jesus himself, seated on the mountain and teaching (5:1–2), as a mediator between God and humanity in the tradition of Moses (Culpepper 2021:84; Viljoen 2016b:4–5). Furthermore, some vocabulary in the *macarisms* recalls Isaiah 61's announcement of the Jubilee Year, 'Jesus's appropriation of Isaiah's words confirms and extends his role as the eschatological figure endowed with the Spirit (3:16) sent by God to proclaim the good news of the kingdom (4:23)' (Wilson 2022:133). With regard to boundary marking, the *macarisms* appear to promote certain attitudes or 'states of being' that define the ideal ethos and character of Jesus's disciples (Keener 2009:305; Quarles 2011:58; Viljoen 2008:217): being poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, showing mercy, purity of heart, being a peacemaker and finally, being persecuted.
- While there is no explicit outsider polemic, the honour of the disciples is nevertheless abundantly emphasised in the *macarisms*. Firstly, the outstanding promise 'αὐτῶν ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν' in verses 3 and 10 forms an *inclusio* around the other *macarisms*. The present tense ἐστιν communicates a robust assurance of royal honour already accessible. Secondly, this present tense contrasts with the six future tenses of the promises in the other *macarisms*, which all point to future honour for the disciples. Four of these are passive constructions that can be interpreted as so-called 'divine passives' (Culpepper 2021:90; Davies & Allison 1988:448), further enhancing the honourable status of the receivers. Specifically in relation to the theme of persecution, Jesus assures that – even now – the kingdom belongs to those persecuted for his sake (v. 10). Furthermore, this is not about just any kingdom, but specifically about the kingdom 'of heaven' [τῶν οὐρανῶν], transcending all earthly realms. Also, the future promise for the persecuted – their reward [μισθός] in verse 12 – will be not only great (the term πολύς possibly indicates value here) but also of the same heavenly quality. These promises clearly indicate a high status for believers, confirmed once again by the almost inconspicuous addition in verse 12: 'for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you'. This association with the prophets certainly adds to the disciples' honourable status.

As in Matthew 10, a divine reversal is evident in Matthew 5:10–12: the shame of persecution and the low status of believers are turned to their advantage. It is, in fact, 'a badge of honor' (France 2007:211). Understanding the dynamics of honour discourse in these verses deepens the interpretation of the remarkable double call to rejoice amid suffering (v. 12: χαίρετε καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε).[8] Viljoen (2008:213) states that the two imperatives 'are more than simple duplication. Χαίρω denotes personal joy while ἀγαλλιάομαι denotes the outward demonstration of joy and pride and the exultation experienced in public worship'. From the perspective of the honour discourse, this double call refers not only to rejoicing over the promises but also the implied status reversal. The pain of shame is transformed into a sign of honour – both present and future.

### Conclusion

To what extent and in what way does Matthew address shame in the context of persecution? Both Matthew 5:10–12 and Matthew 10 present an honour discourse intertwined with the theme of persecution. The background of the more extensive honour discourse in chapter 10 sheds light on the same dynamics underlying the more concise persecution-*macarism*. This discourse explicitly addresses shame as a distinct form of suffering – the shame that inevitably accompanies the persecution faced by Jesus's followers. Paradoxically, bearing the shame of the cross leads to honour, that is, to be worthy of Jesus. The honour discourse reveals a divine reversal in which the disciples' suffering, resulting in low status, is valued as a badge of true honour before Jesus and God, indicating high status instead. This deliverance from shame is itself a cause for rejoicing.

The presence of this honour discourse in connection with persecution, combined with the importance of this theme in the *macarisms*, aligns well with the hypothesis that the term μακάριος is best understood primarily as an imputation of esteem to shamed and low-status followers of Jesus. Thus, Hanson's argument can be strengthened from a rhetorical perspective.

## Theological implications and their social relevance

The fact that Hanson's proposal has hardly been reflected in translations to date may represent a missed opportunity. Viewed from the perspective of suffering and persecution, the theological implications of his interpretation are significant.

Regardless of the interpretation and translation of the term μακάριος, it is evident that the promises in the second part of

8.Noteworthy here are the substantive and verbal parallels with 1 Peter 4:13–14, which also contains a *macarism* (χαίρετε; ἀγαλλιώμενοι; εἰ ὀνειδίζεσθε ἐν ὀνόματι Χριστοῦ, μακάριοι).

each *macarism* refer to blessings from God. The question, however, is how these blessings provide comfort. What is the nature of God's comfort for the followers of Jesus? Viewed through the lens of the honour discourse, and focusing specifically on persecution, a particular form of consolation emerges – one more in line with a 'social' form of theodicy.

In a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society conference in Columbia, Georges (2016) argued that, in contrast to the Western type of theodicy, where the problem of God's goodness and suffering is addressed in a typically philosophical and rational way, dealing primarily with 'bodily' evils (e.g. disasters, disease, war, death), Israel possessed a social form of theodicy, deeply interwoven with notions of honour and shame. The oppression of the chosen people by surrounding nations became a source of shame and challenged their belief in God's covenant faithfulness. Israel sought, first and foremost, the restoration of its honour.[9]

A similar dynamic appears to be at work in the honour discourse examined in Matthew. When shame is seen not merely as a dimension of suffering but as a form of suffering, social suffering comes to the fore. Alongside 'bodily' evils, God's consolation for the followers of Jesus addresses directly this specific problem of shame. Publicly, Jesus himself, as a significant figure in the alternate court and speaking in the name of his Father, affirms a status reversal. In doing so, he immediately transforms their shame into honour – *theirs is already the kingdom* – in a performative manner.[10] Sensitivity to the honour discourse thus offers a richer understanding of the versatility of God's comfort for his people, which is particularly relevant considering the many societies today where shame functions as a primary cultural value.

## Evaluation and conclusion

As already stated above, interpreting Matthew 5:10–12 against the background of the honour discourse in Matthew 10 can strengthen Hanson's proposal from a rhetorical perspective. I therefore fully agree with Neyrey's statement (1998):

> In the *Makarisms* (5:3–12), Jesus begins the Sermon by undoing the shame which disciples suffered on his behalf. Those who have lost honor by becoming Jesus' disciples receive instead his unique grant of praise and respect. (p. 165)

At the same time, however, it also becomes evident that the *macarisms* in Matthew 5:3–12 are not solely evaluations functioning as statements from a bystander's perspective. Firstly, the unique position of Jesus, mediating between God and humanity, is clearly marked. Secondly, and related to this, the honour discourse in the *macarisms* – being public evaluative utterances by Jesus himself – has a performative function: shame is turned into honour '*as He* speaks'. Both these features are rather more characteristic of blessings than of *macarisms*, according to Hanson (1994:87–93). It seems that the *macarisms* in Matthew may embody aspects of both genres. In any case, Hanson's proposal rightly emphasises the honour dimension in this passage.

Although the theme of honour is neither reflected in translations of μακάριος nor explicitly thematised, recent commentaries have devoted more attention to honour and shame dynamics in their explanations (e.g. France 2007; Keener 2009; Quarles 2011; Wilson 2022; cf. Viljoen 2013:4, referring explicitly to Hanson). Returning then to the question of translation: What would be a good translation that accurately conveys the various layers of meaning in the *macarisms* of Matthew 5? Translations such as 'happy', while capturing the theme of rejoicing, could be misleading due to modern connotations associated with this word: 'Jesus was not referring to an emotion or feeling that is based on present circumstances, nor was he assuring that life will not be plagued with difficulties' (Quarles 2011:58). Should Hanson's translation, 'how honourable!', therefore be preferred over 'blessed are'? If so, the blessings would be primarily a public sign of the Jesus-followers' honourable status. Or should the promised blessings, which communicate an honourable status in the slipstream, take precedence? This may be a difficult, and perhaps even the wrong question. I think it is wise to use a translation that can convey both nuances of meaning simultaneously. DeSilva's translation, 'how favored' (1999:60), seems suitable here, as 'favor' communicates both God's special preference for the shamed Jesus-followers – indicating high status – and the 'material blessing' of such favour.

By highlighting the richness of God's comfort amid persecution, the findings of this study also corroborate Francois Viljoen's (2008:218) statement that the *macarisms* 'function as a practical theodicy'. I hope my contribution serves as a worthy tribute to this excellent colleague and scholar of Matthew. I conclude with an observation of Viljoen (2008) with which I wholeheartedly concur:

> The *macarisms* make a strong appeal to their readers. Many thousands of humble sufferers have risen above their troubles and sufferings by remembering the beatitudes of Matthew. They function as a practical theodicy. Although they do not explain the evil or the human suffering, they do put the difficulties of the present in perspective. There should be joy and jubilation in the community amid and beyond suffering. The reason for this joy is the expectation of the reversal of (current) circumstances that are hostile towards those who belong to the Kingdom of the heavens. (p. 218)

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### Author's contribution

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9.See Georges (2016) 'The real problem with evil and suffering', which is an excerpt from his paper '"Turn Our Shame into Glory!": Israel's Social Approach to Theodicy'.

10.This observation of a reversal may be an argument against Domeris' recent approach (2019), which, about Matthew, questions the system of honour and shame as such, and prefers the terminology of 'dignity code'. This would require further investigation, however.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's findings, and content.

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