

Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). Pp. x + 233. \$27.99.

Te-Li Lau's impressive study on the use of shame within Paul's letters fills a lacuna in NT studies. L. advances scholarly conversation from merely looking at the Bible's cultural background. Instead, he moves us to reflect on how this background shaped Paul's message and its import for contemporary readers. L. primarily writes for an academic audience, though non-specialists will find much value in his work. L. specifically examines Paul's use of shame for the sake of moral formation. Therefore, L. considers various issues, including the relationship between shame and conscience as well as the potential value of certain shaming techniques.

The first chapter establishes key definitions. Given the diverse scholarship across disciplines, this is an important starting point. It guards against reductionist conceptions of shame and helps readers discern significant nuances. His discussion is careful and methodical. L. synthesizes a range of scholarly views, focusing on the intersection of psychological shame and shame as discussed by anthropologists. He distinguishes the "occurrent experience of shame" from "dispositional shame." Likewise, he separates "retrospective shame" from "prospective shame." These key distinctions enable L. to formulate a model for understanding the ethical function of shame in Paul's writing.

Chapters two and three examine ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish perspectives on shame respectively. L.'s study is no mere prolegomena. Drawing from a broad spectrum of writers, L. demonstrates how shame served as a remedy for various social maladies within the ancient world. One goal of education was to instill a proper sense of shame as a part of a student's socialization. L. claims that certain Greek terms for shame have distinct connotations; this suggestion is promising and deserves further reflection. In speaking of Jewish backgrounds, L. says, "If we internalize Yahweh's perspective, then our sense of shame effectively functions as

our conscience” (p. 86). He adds, “According to Jewish texts, the earthy analogue to the divine court of opinion is the Israelite community” (p. 88). It is in this third chapter that we begin to see how retrospective and prospective shame work in practice.

The next three chapters are the heart of L.’s proposal. He examines Paul’s use of retrospective shame (chap. 4) and prospective shame (chap. 5) before developing a generalized model of Paul’s use of shame (chap. 6). Chapter four focuses on Galatians and 1 Corinthians. For Paul, L. says, “shaming rhetoric must serve the higher goal of admonition” (p. 111). On this point, L. deftly argues that Paul’s choice in shame terminology affects our interpretation of his message and its effect on Paul’s original readers.

L. turns his attention to Philippians and Philemon in chap. 5. He explains the subtle ways that Paul crafts his letter to present a divine perspective of honor and shame. L. says, “the development of a sense of honor *is* the development of a sense of shame” (p. 136). Importantly, the chapter demonstrates the critical role of community (i.e., the church) in fostering a healthy sense of shame. Readers do well not to underestimate the significance of this point.

Chapter six is not a summary but a synthesis that draws implications from the previous study. L. does so while showing how Paul uses honor and shame language in other portions of his corpus. L. says, “The goal of Paul’s shaming rhetoric is Christic formation” (p. 161). Throughout the chapter, he underscores the role of the church. He says, “Paul envisions the community of faith as the earthy counterpart to the divine court of opinion. Its role is to maintain the plausibility structure that undergirds the gospel worldview, instilling, perpetuating, and reinforcing in each of its members the set of values that are established by God” (p. 152). A healthy use of shame reminds people that true honor is found in Christ.

The book's final section looks at contemporary contributions (chap. 7) and challenges (chap. 8). L. constructs a framework for thinking about how to apply Paul's message and methods to a contemporary context. This is significant, since few resources exist that help readers explicitly use Paul's approach to shame in our own lives. Chapter seven focuses on John Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory and a traditional Confucian view of shame. In chap. 8, L. highlights dangerous uses of shame. He also shows some of the limitations of guilt as a moral emotion.

L.'s study is integrated and interdisciplinary. Paradoxically, it is a dense, slow read; yet, its prose are fluid and forthright. For some readers, this work will seem to overcomplicate the concept of shame. In truth, the richness of the book reflects the reality of shame in actual social settings. Shame's influence is subtle but significant. Any serious scholar of Paul and the NT will want to read this book and bring it into conversation with the countless commentaries that overlook the formative power of shame in Paul's letters.

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