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Book Review

Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters

By Te-Li Lau

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Since the 1980s, by building upon social anthropologists' works, biblical scholars have employed the framework of "honor and shame" to study the culture of the ancient Mediterranean region. The New Testament socio-scientific group has approached the concept of shame from cultural and anthropological models of honor-shame that consider the Apostle Paul's use of shame as a means for social control. However, Lau argues that these authors merely define "shame vis-à-vis honor and understanding both as social values," and they do "not focus on the shame experience, nor...understand shame as a moral emotion" (10). That is, the socio-scientific honor-shame model has explained how a community maintains social control, but it does not focus on how an individual such as Paul brings about moral reformation in his converts via the practice of psychology (9).

In light of this, in his book *Defending Shame*, Lau examines "Paul's use of shame for Christian formation within his Jewish and Greco-Roman context and compares it with various contemporary perspectives" (10). The book's purpose is to respond to today's culture that possesses a "deep antagonism to shame." Lau raises the question of how we should appropriate the use of shame. Does it have a particular positive value? (5)

To answer this, Lau surveys Paul's use of shame in various letters and stresses its pedagogical function. In contrast to Bruce Malina's conception of shame, which only focuses on its social impact, Lau considers shame a moral and social emotion. Also, another significant difference between the socio-scientific honor-shame model and Lau's is that Lau considers the positive impact of the emotion of shame, and he explores its ethical significance. In order to do that, by engaging with the modern idea of emotion from psychologist Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Lau argues that "what is essential and constitutive of the emotional experience is the appraisal or evaluative component" (15). Then, in defining shame, Lau argues that "the constitutive element is negative self-evaluation, the awareness of being seen to fall short of some perceived standard or ideal. The presence of another may be the catalyst, but the evaluation constitutive of shame still depends on the self" (16). He further draws on the insights from modern psychology to differentiate shame from humiliation, embarrassment, and guilt in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the emotion of shame. Based on the analysis with the comparative work of modern psychology, Lau builds on a taxonomy of shame that focuses on its different functions, including 1) the occurrent experience of shame, 2) dispositional shame, 3) retrospective shame, 4) prospective shame, 5) act of shaming. He then applies this taxonomy to various texts in Paul's letters and discerns the specific function of shame that Paul uses to shape the community's identity formation.

In the subsequent chapters of the book, Lau provides a detailed analysis of how shame's moral relevance is demonstrated in different ancient literatures. He has studied the notion of shame in Greco-Roman philosophical context (chapter 2) and Jewish literature (chapter 3). Lau also has provided an exegetical analysis of the use of shame in various Pauline letters (chapters 4-6). By doing this, Lau locates his study of Paul "within the moral psychology of [Paul's] day" and studies how Paul appealed to shame as a moral emotion to "internally to reform individual mind and conscience" (7)

One notable feature of his book is that Lau has differentiated two notions of shame, namely, "a rhetoric of shame that tears down and a rhetoric of shame that builds up" (184). Lau explains that the rhetoric of shame that tears down is the Greco-Roman rhetoric that aims at exalting oneself at the expense of others. The rhetoric of shame that builds up is to challenge the people to see their errors in light of the message of the cross. For example, in his exegesis of 1 Corinthians, Lau argues that in 4:14, Paul adopts the latter function of shame while disowning the former function. For Lau, Paul is shaming the Corinthian community, which functions as a

“pedagogical tool to transform the mind of his readers into the mind of Christ” (164). In order to support his argument of shaming, Lau further argues that the construction “not to shame but to admonish” (οὐ...ἀλλά) does not imply that shaming and admonition are polar opposites. Lau argues that the construction can also mean “not so much...as” in the way that the first element “is not entirely negated but toned down” (111). Following his analysis of the Greek usage of the construction, Lau argues that Paul’s purpose is to repudiate any function of shame that does not support the task of admonition. In this regard, Lau’s article has enlarged scholars’ understanding of the conception of shame, for which shame can be used positively to help change people’s moral behavior.

To conclude, by building upon a modern psychological understanding of shame, Lau has broadened the concept of shame and has set his work radically different from Malina’s honor-shame model, which merely defines shame vis-à-vis honor. It is also important to note that although Lau builds on the modern psychological understanding of shame, his study is not anachronistic. In fact, his understanding of shame aligns with the Greco-Roman philosophical theory of emotion. Lau has also offered a comprehensive study by focusing on the various texts in the Greco-Roman context, Jewish literature, and Pauline letters. His study does not merely focus on a few shame lexemes but on the larger concept of shame by considering various shame-related word groups.