

BOOK REVIEW

Wenhua Shi, *Paul's Message of the Cross as Body Language* (WUNT, 2.254; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). xvi + 316 pp. Pbk. \$122.50 USD.

This monograph is a revised version of Shi's doctoral thesis written at Durham University. Echoing the thoughts of Andrew Clarke, Shi attempts to balance an often imbalanced examination of Paul's letters, both theologically and sociologically. The situation at Corinth was one of 'serious crisis', one in which Paul found himself personally involved. Such a crisis was dictated, according to Shi, by the Greco-Roman social *ethos* that revolved especially around the perception of honour, status, prestige and power. Paul's language concerning the crucifixion of Jesus was central to his message in that it served as an antithesis to each of these categories. Because of this, several pagan writers called the Christian message about the cross *μωρία* (folly), since it promoted faith, which was contrary to the social *ethos* of Paul's time.

Subsequently, proper rhetoric was essential within society's honour/shame categories. Arguing for the prominence of rhetorical training for Greco-Roman males, Shi seeks to demonstrate that the cultural expectations of Paul's masculinity hinged on his ability to speak well. The criticisms highlighted in 2 Cor. 10.10 not only echo the critiques of his audience in terms of his presentation, but they also reveal a gender component regarding his speaking. A deficiency in speaking meant that one could be thought of as *mollior* (meaning 'effeminate' or 'soft'), which subsequently meant that the speaker was weak and unable to rule others or have proper self-control.

Therefore, Shi attempts to examine Paul's use of body language as a means to drastically invert key elements of his current social *ethos*. This includes crucifixion, which was seen as shameful on a great number of levels, as well as Paul's rhetorical presentation of his gospel message.

The book is divided into three parts. The first (chs. 1–3) discusses crucifixion in the ancient world and perception of ‘noble death’ in Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions, and offers an exegetical reading of 1 Cor. 1.18-31. The second section (chs. 4–5) discusses rhetoric as a symbolic representation of masculinity, followed by an exegesis of 1 Cor. 2.1-5 and 2 Cor. 10.10. The third section (chs. 6–8) discusses the concept of ‘hardship’ as a symbol of virtue and shame in Greco-Roman culture, followed by an exegesis of 1 Cor. 4.8-13 and 2 Cor. 11.23-33.

Shi’s analysis of 1 Cor. 1.18-31 highlights Paul’s paradoxical language with regards to Christ’s crucifixion. Mentioning σοφία a number of times in this section, Paul attempts to subvert the social *ethos* of the Corinthians—wisdom, power, rhetoric, eloquence—with ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ. This message not only disarmed the social *ethos*, but also rendered it as μωρία (*foolishness*, or *moronic*). Shi points out that in a status-conscious community like Corinth, to equate oneself with a lowly status, one that was undoubtedly shameful with regards to crucifixion, would have rendered that person’s status equal to that of a slave or criminal. This was intentional since, according to Shi, Paul would have been quite familiar with the shame associated with crucifixion in the ancient world. Not only this, but Paul also created a paradox of sorts by suggesting that God, in Christ, would have submitted himself to such a shameful fate—unlike the prestigious deaths of various characters in Greco-Roman literature. The effect of such a proclamation was that it devalued human σοφία with the result that Paul could say ‘the one who boasts, let him boast in the Lord’.

Rhetoric in Greco-Roman culture centered around the concept of persuasion. Words were equated with δύναμις, and speech was often described as λόγου δύναμις. A large number of Greek and Roman writers had much to say about the art of rhetoric including Aristotle, Theophrastus, Cicero and Quintilian, to name a few. This leads Shi to suggest that rhetoric was central to education (παιδεία) in Greece and Rome. Such education focused on speech, but also on body language. For Quintilian, training a good speaker also meant to train a good actor, one who had mastery over his body language. Thus, presentation with regards to the head, face and eyes, neck and shoulders, hands, feet, gestures and clothing were all considered when judging a speech. By improperly using any of these, one would not only fail to persuade, but the speaker’s masculinity would also be called into question.

Also central to Paul's message of the cross is the theme of hardship. With regards to hardship, Shi equates Paul's message with that of other Hellenistic philosophies of the first century (ch. 6). For example, Stoicism provided a similar view of hardship in that it promoted a lifestyle of harmony with nature (φύσις), which God had ordered and still controls. Therefore, Stoicism was highly ethical in its approach to suffering hardship because the Stoic would accept both the good and the evil that might befall him. Living according to nature (κατὰ φύσιν) was considered to be a worshipful attitude towards God. Eventually, Stoics such as Seneca regarded evil not as the occurrence of a situation deemed 'evil', but rather evil was how a person responded to hardship (cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 71.26-27). This led the Stoics to see hardship as a gift from God, which was a rather common belief in the ancient world. Cicero saw the endurance of hardship as courage, and equated such courage with manliness. Shi sees this theme being represented in Jewish literature as well by the Maccabean tradition. Therefore, to use the human spirit and mind to control the body during hardship was paramount—such a person was master of themselves (αὐτοδέσποτος).

Turning again to Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Paul seems to argue that God's power is shown through human weakness. This is contrary to the human virtue that was attained despite hardship, as promoted by some Hellenistic philosophers. Such passages as 1 Cor. 4.8-13 and 2 Cor. 11.23-33 outline the Corinthians' false presuppositions with regard to hardship—presuppositions that lead to divisions, false impressions about Paul and unrealistically high regard for themselves. Paul claims to be nothing more than a 'fool' of Christ, drastically inverting the social *ethos*. This paradoxical testimony sets Paul apart from those disciples that may have been boasting about their hardships as symbols of their virtue. It was impossible, therefore, for the Corinthians to conceive that a leader could have real authority and exercise it in weakness. This was a complete and total subversion of the social *ethos*, according to Shi.

Shi's study attempts to do three things. It argues (1) that crucifixion in antiquity was seen as the most ignoble of deaths, and that Christ's death stood juxtaposed to Greco-Roman conceptions of noble death; (2) that Greco-Roman concepts of masculinity were very much associated with the delivery of rhetoric; and (3) that the concept of hardship in certain philosophical circles, especially Stoicism, differed from that of

Paul. The strength of a study like this one is found in its grasp of the first-century philosophy with which Paul and his listeners may have been well acquainted. One does not need to look further than the works of Cicero or Quintilian to discover the importance of rhetoric and body language with regards to how one might be perceived in speech. Seneca also provides an excellent example of how the Stoics developed their morality with regard to God's sovereign control of existence. Each of these examples provides a good basis for Shi's thesis, that Paul chooses to subvert the social *ethos* of the Corinthian community, which was highly influenced by the aforementioned philosophies. Such a strategy is quite remarkable, and Shi does an excellent job of developing such an argument. Paul's theology of the cross would have been rather shocking to hear, since he was advocating that God himself suffered in the most degenerate of ways.

My question is whether we can consider Christ's death as 'ignoble' in light of the evidence that Shi reports. It is true that crucifixion was considered to be the *summa supplicium* in the Empire, and there is ample evidence in literature to confirm this. However, ought we to agree with Shi that Christ's crucifixion subverts the motif of 'noble death'? Shi notes two examples of noble death: Socrates' noble suicide in the face of unjust liability and the deaths of Maccabean martyrs as a result of scrutinizing Greek power. Jesus' death is contrasted with these as being ignoble due to the fact that he was crucified. However, I am not convinced that Jesus' death, with its subsequent resurrection, is entirely ignoble—in fact, Jesus' death can be considered noble *due* to his resurrection. Socrates thought his death was a necessary means for freeing the soul from the body, and the Maccabean rebels believed that their resurrection was immanent upon death. If resurrection, or a freeing of the soul from the body, is the key feature in identifying a 'noble death', Jesus' death with its resurrection fits this category perfectly. Jesus alludes to his resurrection a number of times throughout the Gospels (Mt. 17.9, 23; 20.19; 26.32; Mk 14.28; Lk. 9.22; Jn 2.22). Paul also alludes to the resurrection being entirely essential to the gospel message (1 Cor. 15.14). Thus, it must be asked: does the means of Christ's death entirely dictate whether or not it was noble or ignoble?

With regards to rhetoric, I am not convinced of Shi's position on Paul's rhetorical ability. While her references to Quintilian and Cicero correctly point out the meticulous details regarding quality rhetoric, I

do not think that there is enough evidence to suggest that Paul was conscious of such details. It is also true that Paul claimed to know nothing 'among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 2.2), but does this suggest that Paul knew something about formal rhetoric and purposefully squandered the style of his formal addresses? Shi indicates that a number of scholars have suggested that understanding rhetoric has come to be an essential key for interpreting the Corinthian letters. However, Shi only gives mention to one study: Barrett's study on Cephas and Corinth. Not enough evidence is given to suggest that rhetoric is indeed the 'key' to understanding these letters. Instead, 1 Corinthians seems to suggest that Paul's lack of speaking ability gave way to God's power. Shi also claims that Paul was aiming to subvert the Corinthians' understanding of proper rhetoric. However, according to 1 Cor. 1.26, it seems that the Corinthians themselves were not of 'privileged position' and, therefore, may not have understood rhetoric any better than Paul. It seems that the same scrutiny that Shi gives to Paul's rhetorical education should also be extended to that of his audience.

Another potential problem with this study is in regards to its footnoting. Often times, Shi relies predominantly on one or two sources to make her argument with minimal documentation (e.g. see ch. 4 section 4.4). One would expect Shi to engage a wider range of perspectives on the issue and not just ones that coincide with the argument being made. As a result, anyone wishing to pursue this topic further is unable to follow Shi's argument as it relates to the broader field of research. Thus, as strong as the study may be, one of its major weaknesses lies in its failure to interact with a variety of sources that have contributed to the topic.

Despite these challenges, I would recommend this book to anyone studying the Corinthian letters. It provides interesting exegetical commentary in light of the social *ethos* that Shi argues was present at the time of Paul's writing. With regards to crucifixion, this book garners enough evidence to show that crucifixion was thought of as the most detestable means of death in the Roman Empire. Since crucifixion was reserved for slaves, Paul's proclamation of Christ's death on the cross would have without doubt been difficult for his listeners to accept. However, it remains to be seen whether Jesus' death was entirely ignoble, given his intended resurrection. The same logic that deems the deaths of Socrates and the Maccabees noble ought to be extended to

Christ, regardless of the means. Aside from this point, the study is a valuable starting point for the exploration of rhetoric, the influence of Hellenistic philosophy and the sociological milieu of the Corinthian church.

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