



Shen, Michael Li-Tak.

*Canaan to Corinth: Paul's Doctrine of God and the Issue of Food Offered to Idols in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1*

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Michael Li-Tak Shen is former Principal of the Singapore Bible College where he currently teaches New Testament and Pastoral Ministries. *Canaan to Corinth: Paul's Doctrine of God and the Issue of Food Offered to Idols in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1* is a revised version of his 2003 Dallas Theological Seminary doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Thomas Constable, Elliot Johnson, and David Lowery.

For most Christians in the Western world Paul's teaching about idol food is almost irrelevant. I've heard this section of Scripture appealed to dozens of times in sermons but the idol food is inevitably switched out for the stumbling block *du jour* in order to teach some basic principle as opposed to the specific point the Apostle made in his answer to the Corinthians' inquiry. Shen writes as someone to whom Paul's response is not irrelevant; he writes as a Christian living and working in Southeast Asia where the issue of food sacrificed to idols is as real and prevalent today as it was to the Corinthians in the first century. This makes his conclusion that Paul did not condone the known eating of idol food under any circumstances all the more relevant.

Using the Biblical-theological method of interpretation laid out in his opening chapter Shen examines Paul's use of the OT in 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21 in order to establish the centrality of his doctrine of God (i.e., God as ontologically one, holy, and jealous) for his dealing with the Corinthians (chapter 2). This is the foundation for Paul's prohibitions against idolatry, i.e., the "wrongful exchange of the Creator for things in creation" (xiii, 80, 137, 169, 201), which "finds

expression in three inter-related types: (1) *idols* (exchange God for gods), (2) *indulgences* (exchange God for pleasures and possessions, and (3) *ideologies* (exchange God's truth for man's ideas)." (80) Paul used Moses' experience with Israel's idolatry in Canaan as the paradigm for his dealing with the Corinthians and their idolatry in the eating of idol food (chapter 3). Chapter 4 is spent examining the (historically reliable) "Apostolic Decree" of Acts 15, which Shen contends is rooted in creation theology and is upheld rather than opposed by Paul. The penultimate chapter (chapter 5) contains the majority of Shen's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 where he persuasively argues that Paul employs a "modified chiasmus" that is outlined as follows:

- A Idol Food: Follow not knowledge but conscience (8:1-13)
- B Paul's example against the Corinthians: Self-denial (9:1-23)
- B' Paul's example against Israel: Self-control (9:24-10:13)
- A' Idol Food: Follow conscience (10:14-11:1) (140)

The final chapter offers a summary of each chapter along with some reflections (found in the chapter's end notes) on the importance and impact of Paul's teaching for the modern church.

Shen's work contains many strengths and relatively few weaknesses in comparison. To start, Shen demonstrates a keen familiarity with the subject matter in both his exegesis and interaction with secondary literature on the subject. The Biblical-theological hermeneutic employed nicely complements the works of scholars like John Fotopoulos, Peter Gooch, and Alex Cheung who use rhetorical, sociological-historical, and historical-grammatical methods respectively. The Biblical-theological method in comparison allows for a much more robust account of Paul's use of the OT. Another positive feature is Shen's overall exegesis of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1. He shows the Corinthians' knowledge to be "defective in attitude" (141-42), "deficient in content" (142-46), and "detrimental in application." (146-49) While most commentators note an ABA' pattern they are split over the role that 1 Corinthians 9 plays in the passage. Shen's "modified [ABB'A'] chiasmus" has persuaded this reviewer that this section is most likely not a "digression" (contra Fitzmyer, Witherington, et al.) and does in fact fit squarely into Paul's prohibition against eating idol food; his argument that Paul renounces his apostolic rights, not to demonstrate that eating idol food is permissible, but rather in order to preserve the "integrity of the gospel in the church" (149) is convincing. Another noteworthy strength of Shen's volume is the constant review and reaffirmation of his conclusions. The overall argument of each chapter is nicely summarized at the end of the chapter and the beginning of the next chapter as well as being summarized once more in the book's final chapter. Much more could be said but I'll limit my praise to these points.

The perceived deficiencies in this volume are due more to matters of style and layout than argument. For example, Shen starts off slow in the first three chapters, particularly chapters 2 and 3, where the prose reads more like glorified notes than anything else. This problem

disappears by chapter 4 where Shen seems to have found his rhythm but this evinces an inconsistency in the overall style of the book. The decision to use chapter endnotes also detracted from the work. The problem with this approach is that a lot of Shen's exegesis is contained in the endnotes and to have to break from the main text in order to flip to the inconveniently placed chapter endnotes makes for an unpleasant stop-and-go reading experience, especially in the final chapter where Shen offers his reflections on this study for the modern church. The final weakness is one of argument, or more specifically, misplaced emphasis. Shen correctly highlights Paul's concern for God's uniqueness (62-63, 79, cf. 203, n. 4). This is, of course, Paul's basis for calling the Corinthians to exclusive devotion to God and Christ over and against idols (see Shen's discussion on 62-64), but at certain points in his argument Shen emphasizes ontological oneness from Paul's 'one God' language, e.g., he speaks of "the ontological reality of [God's] being 'one'" (79, 198) and of "God being one (εἷς θεός) and the Lord being one (εἷς κύριος), and their ontological unity and equality." (143) While I don't wish to deny the ontological reality of God's oneness, I do wonder whether or not Paul was as concerned with this as modern interpreters are (Richard Bauckham's work would suggest that he wasn't).

*From Canaan to Corinth* is a welcome contribution to NT studies in general and the study of Paul's argument against idol food in particular. A detailed bibliography, author, Scripture, and subject indices complete this volume. Shen's conclusions are not innovative by any means (Gooch and Cheung end up in basically the same place), but the process by which he reaches them is well worth engagement in addition to the work of those who have written before him. For this reason I have no reservations about recommending *From Canaan to Corinth* to interested readers.