

BOOK REVIEW

Richard Liong-Seng Phua. *Idolatry and Authority: A Study of 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1 in the Light of the Jewish Diaspora* (LNTS, 299; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005). xi + 236 pp. Hdbk. \$130.00.

In *Idolatry and Authority*, Richard Phua does exactly as his subtitle indicates: he gathers together some information about the Jewish Diaspora, and then attempts to demonstrate that this information helps us to better understand 1 Cor. 8.1–11.1. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of this exercise is concerned with the nature of idolatry, but there is a significant segment that involves Paul's apostolic authority. Specifically, Phua argues that Jews of the first century held many diverse opinions about idolatry, and that this diversity allows us to view the situation behind 1 Cor. 8.1–11.1 as a conflict between three Jewish groups. Phua also maintains that Paul is seeking to stabilize this diversity by making an authoritative pronouncement about what does and does not constitute idolatry.

As we might expect, Phua begins by surveying the work of previous scholarship, looking mostly at what people have said about the 'strong' and 'weak' groups that Paul is allegedly addressing. Many diverse interpretations have been published in recent years, but Phua quite capably condenses them into manageable summaries. Of course, it goes without saying that the survey is selective, and that the points of convergence and divergence that Phua finds salient and noteworthy are determined by his particular angle of approach. Each major interpretation is discussed almost exclusively in terms of how it situates the 'strong' and the 'weak' in Paul's social world. This is because Phua's main goal is to show that 'all parties in 1 Corinthians 8–10 have been identified as 'Jewish' in different ways and to varying degrees' (p. 26).

Although most readers will move on from Phua's opening survey convinced that he has adequately framed his research, I found myself rather disappointed. The reason for this is simple: I am not convinced that Paul is addressing two groups with differing opinions about the

eating of idol food. This is not the place to publish my own arguments, but in the spirit of critical evaluation I will make two observations. First, although Phua correctly dismisses the idea that the 'weak' are a purely hypothetical group of people, he does not take enough time to consider the real issue here. Are the 'weak' a self-declared faction with a public presence, or is Paul just talking in general terms about people who think and act a certain way? If we concede that the latter is a viable possibility, then it becomes perfectly reasonable to accept that the 'weak' are real people without accepting that they are a recognizable party involved in a public controversy. Second, Phua dismisses out of hand the possibility that the 'weak' are unbelievers. He assumes that the 'weak' are among Paul's addressees, and he presumes to accept Paul's characterization of them as evidence for beliefs they themselves hold. Readers who are in general agreement with the way that modern scholarship has framed Paul's discussion are unlikely to stumble over Phua's handling of these issues. To my mind, however, Phua proceeds with assumptions that render his eventual conclusions unpersuasive.

It is in the middle chapters of *Idolatry and Authority* that Phua provides his most substantive work, and it is the material in these sections that will likely prove to be the book's most helpful contribution. Chapter 2 employs the work of Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit in order to define idolatry in a comprehensive way. The result is a contemporary scheme that characterizes idolatry from a multifaceted perspective and refuses to accept a single, clearly-defined notion of idolatry. According to this scheme, idolatry should be described as having several 'intellectually separable' definitions that appear in various combinations at various times and places throughout the history of Judaism (p. 35). Interestingly, as Phua helpfully demonstrates, these intellectually separate definitions of idolatry are all present in 'the foundational Diaspora text of the LXX' (p. 48).

As Phua rightly observes, having such a complex and subtle perspective on idolatry allows the modern scholar to evaluate (and even predict) points of inter-Jewish conflict. It highlights certain behaviours that could conceivably have been deemed idolatrous by some Jews in history but not by others. Along this vein, Chapter 3 aims to prove that Jewish groups were liable to choose from among the intellectually separable definitions (p. 50). This is accomplished through a survey of Diaspora literature that is broken down into five components: Wisdom of Solomon, Philo, Josephus, *Joseph and Aseneth*

and the *Sybilline Oracles*. After examining the relevant texts, Phua concludes that ‘there appear to be some common emphases among all the Jewish authors; but there are also differences in emphasis’ (p. 88). This is subsequently treated as evidence for the conclusion that ‘there are possible loopholes that are liable to exploitation’ (p. 90). Unfortunately, Phua makes no attempt to show how a text’s silence on a certain dimension of idolatry reveals the actual beliefs of its author or its readers. Is it not equally plausible to interpret silence as silence? Perhaps this is why the word *liable* appears repeatedly at key points in the chapter, as in the quotation above.

Phua continues in Chapter 4 with an attempt to show that ‘different Jews could behave in a manner they do not consider idolatrous but which is considered idolatrous by others’ (p. 91). Here we are treated to actual literary and archaeological evidence that some Jews in the ancient world did not recognize all of the dimensions of idolatry that Phua has isolated and identified within the LXX. Phua’s data includes the LXX translation of Exod. 22.27a, the *Letter of Aristeeas*, the use of the term *Theos Hypsistos* among Jews and Christians, the writings of an Egyptian Jew named Artapanus, and evidence for the participation of Jews in pagan cults. Not all of this evidence is equally convincing (the discussion of *Theos Hypsistos* suffers from a frightful linguistic naïveté), but taken together it substantiates Phua’s main argument. Jews in the Diaspora were often forced to re-evaluate the meaning of idolatry, and certain individuals and groups seem to have held minority views on the issue. These people sometimes engaged in social practices that most of their fellow Jews would have deemed idolatrous.

Chapter 5 is the ‘so what’ section of Phua’s work. Accepting his argument that there were diverse understandings of idolatry among Diaspora Jews, how are we better able to understand 1 Cor. 8.1–11.1? I confess that I am somewhat at a loss here. Phua says many things about the text of Paul’s letter that are insightful and interesting, but he never demonstrates the usefulness of drawing in the Diaspora material. At best, he shows that there are a few places in 1 Cor. 8.1–11.1 where we can draw parallels between the three parties that are allegedly debating idolatry (Paul, the ‘weak’, and the ‘strong’) and other Jewish groups in antiquity. This is interesting, but it has no impact on how we read the text unless it can also be shown that these parallels significantly shift our understanding of Paul’s first-century context and warrant a new reconstruction of the situation underlying his letter. This Phua has not

shown. Nothing the 'strong' believe needs to be attributed to a source other than Paul; conversely, it is unnecessary to attribute ignorance to any source at all. Phua's work does not in any way challenge the general consensus that Paul is writing to Gentile converts who have embraced many Jewish teachings but do not yet have a view of idolatry as comprehensive as that shared by the majority of Jews and Christians.

In his final chapter Phua deals with 1 Corinthians 9. This passage is in many ways the crucial testing ground of all interpretations, and I read Phua's discussion with interest in order to discover how he would handle its difficulties. Essentially he argues that Paul is simultaneously defending his apostleship, which has been challenged on account of his failure to accept material support, and exemplifying the humble self-sacrifice he expects from the 'strong'. I find this approach superior to that of those who attempt to minimize one or the other of these twin purposes, and I must applaud Phua for several important observations that appear in the course of his exegesis. Unfortunately, Chapter 6 concludes that 'in 1 Corinthians 9, [Paul] seeks to show [the strong] the authority on which decisions for the Corinthian community may be based' (p. 197). This conclusion is explicitly grounded in Phua's conviction that Paul has cast aside the Law as a final authority in ethical matters (cf. p. 202). Here, I fear, Phua has lost sight of Paul's true purpose in 1 Cor. 8.1–11.1. Is the entire passage not his response? What is 1 Corinthians 8, if not an attempt to bring the gospel to bear on the question at hand? What is 1 Corinthians 10, if not an attempt to bring the Scriptures to bear on the question at hand? Arguably, Paul functions as an example of *someone who faithfully follows the gospel and the Scriptures*. How then can it be said that his apostolic authority is decisive?

I have already voiced a number of significant criticisms, but I must continue with two more. First, Phua's core thesis raises a possibility that is never adequately argued. Yes, it is possible that all three parties involved in 1 Corinthians 8–10 'could all be Jewish' (p. 26), but to *conclude* this requires a process of argumentation that evaluates the alternative possibilities and demonstrates that this one is superior. Such argumentation never appears. Perhaps this is why Phua's thesis is set up in Chapter 1 as attempt to prove that his hypothesis is 'plausible' (p. 26). Secondly, even if Phua's hypothesis were to be successfully argued, it contributes nothing to our understanding of the Corinthian situation. This is because by 'Jewish' Phua means nothing more than

‘possessing an ideology influenced by the Jewish scripture’. This is suggested already on p. 1, and it is underscored in the book’s penultimate paragraph: ‘It would be beneficial for a clear separation between Judaism and ethnicity to be made’ (p. 208). Strangely, therefore, Phua’s novel thesis that the parties ‘could all be Jewish’ coheres entirely with the vast majority of interpretations, rendering it rather uninteresting. It *would* be interesting if it explicitly challenged the minority view that the ‘weak’ are in fact Gentile unbelievers (the only proposed group that does not qualify as ‘Jewish’ in Phua’s sense of the term), but as I have already pointed out, this view is completely neglected.

Let it not be thought that I wish to entirely dismiss Phua’s labour. There is a great deal of information contained in *Idolatry and Authority*, and it is only the need for brevity that has hindered me from highlighting the many insightful and well-needed observations that are scattered throughout its pages. As a concluding affirmation, let me suggest that this book will be of interest to scholars who are looking to better understand how Diaspora Jews attempted to practice Judaism within a non-Jewish context.

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