

## ‘LITTLE CHILDREN, KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS’ (1 JOHN 5:21)<sup>1</sup>

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This study approaches 1 John from its ending. Commentators struggle to explain the introduction of the unexpected topic of idols as the very last word. Either the ‘idols’ are made to fit the Procrustean bed of the commentator’s theological understanding of 1 John, or they are used as evidence of redactional activity. The result is that little independent research is undertaken in order to gauge how the reference to idols makes a contribution to the argument. This study takes up that task.

The first chapter surveys interpretations of the ‘idols’ as either conceptual, literal, metaphorical, or literary. It is concluded that none does justice both to the semantic value of εἶδωλον, as found in Jewish (LXX) and Christian writings, and the connection of 5:21 to the rest of 1 John.

Chapter two is based on a study of all occurrences of the term εἶδωλον between 300 and 200 A.D. Büchsel’s statement that Polybus 31.3.13-15 ‘is the only established passage in which pagan Greek uses εἶδωλον for an idol’ (*TDNT* 2.376, n. 2) is shown to be incorrect. However, in Jewish hands the wide semantic range of εἶδωλον is reduced almost exclusively to a pejorative description of cultic objects and the pagan deities themselves (it is the latter, not the former, which is the Jewish innovation). Thus it became an important vehicle for expressing Jewish polemic society against idolatry. An investigation of this in the literature of Early Judaism reveals that it did not function as an apologetic aimed at Gentiles, but as a device for bolstering Jewish self-identity, by defining the boundaries between

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<sup>1</sup>Terry Griffith, ‘*Little Children, Keep Yourselves From Idols*’ (1 John 5:21): *The Form and Function of the Ending of the First Epistle of John* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, King’s College, University of London, 1996); supervisor: Dr. Judith Lieu.

Jewish and Gentile communities in contexts where loss of other Jewish identity markers was in view.

Chapter three contains a detailed exegesis of the antithesis between the ‘true God’ (5:20e) and the ‘idols’. The referent of the ‘true God’ is shown to be Jesus. The Jewish background of this antithesis is explored, as well as that of the term ζωή αἰώνιος (5:20e), the vocative τεκν[ί]α, and the avoidance theme φυλάσσειν ἀπό (5:21). It is noted that all the vocabulary of 5:20e-21 is also found in the conversion narrative of Aseneth in *Joseph and Aseneth* 7-8, 11. A study of *Joseph and Aseneth* shows that its main purpose is not *extra mures*. rather, it provides a definition of acceptable contact between Jews and Gentiles—that is, it defines the limits of the community. This provides a hermeneutical key for understanding why the ‘idols’ appear in 5:21.

Chapter four applies this insight to 1 John’s closural strategy which, it is argued, begins at 5:6. The consensus view that the reference to ‘water’ and ‘blood’ represents a polemical christological statement is challenged. Not only are the specific markers of ‘denial’ and ‘confession’ (found in 2:22 and 4:2-3) absent in 5:6, but also no other group is in view (*cf.* the ‘they’ of 4:5, or the ‘antichrists’ of 2:18; 4:3). Indeed the grammatical structure of 5:6 is mirrored exactly in 2:2 (οὐ . . . μόνον ἀλλά) where it serves a rhetorical function. Rather, it is argued that 5:6-8 functions as the sociological analogue of the community’s christological beliefs, in which ‘water’ (baptism), ‘blood’ (cleansing/eucharist) and ‘Spirit’ (reception of the Spirit) represent three symbols of the community’s life together that were vital for maintaining both its identity and its confession of Jesus as Christ (2:22; 5:1) and Son of God (4:15; 5:5).

The dualistic thought forms that dominate 5:6-21 also serve to enhance self-identity, either by bolstering assurance (5:11-13, 18-20, in which the positive aspect of the dualistic framework is highlighted), or by providing warnings (5:9-10, 14-17, 21, in which the negative aspect is emphasised). In particular, the ‘sin unto death’ (5:16) is defined as apostasy from the community that consigns one to the side of the idols. The use of the term ἁμαρτία in 1 John is investigated. In 1:6-2:2 the sins of the community are in view which are forgiven through Jesus (= ‘sin not unto death’). In 3:4-10,

however, sin is defined as ἡ ἀνομία, which in Jewish eschatological contexts refers not to lawlessness in general (in any case νόμος does not occur in 1 John), but to ultimate rebellion against God and apostasy (= ‘sin unto death’). Therefore, the issue of sin in 1 John does not resolve around perfectionism, but about what sin excludes from the community (thus Tertullian).

Chapter five relates these findings to the whole of 1 John and establishes a setting for the Johannine community. The simple christological confession of 2:22 (‘Jesus is Lord’) is taken as the control by which the relatively opaque confession of 4:2 (‘Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’) should be interpreted. The consensus is that 4:2 ( and 5:6) are needed to make sense of 2:22. However, 2:22 makes excellent sense when the confession is translated ‘The Messiah is Jesus’ (grammatically Χριστός is the subject). A comparison with exact syntactical units in Acts 5:42 and 18:5, 28 supports this option. A straightforward reading of 2:22 therefore indicates that it is the messiahship of Jesus that is in question, and that we are dealing with the apostasy of Jewish Christians back to Judaism (2:19; a comparison with Justin, *Dial.* 47, reveals almost exact verbal and substantial parallels for the thesis advanced here). The controversy may well have been induced by Johannine claims made for the equality of the ‘Son’ with the ‘Father’ (2:23 with 5:20).

Does 4:2 make sense in this context? A survey of the phrase ‘in the flesh’ reveals parallels where no christological axe is being ground. In particular the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written against a backdrop of bitter antagonism between Jews and Christian Jews, uses ἐν σαρκί with ἔρχεσθαι of Jesus to indicate no more than the *fact* of his entry into the world (*Barn.* 5:10-11 [twice]). The *mode* of his entry (a docetic concern) is irrelevant in this context. Indeed, ‘in the flesh’ is used twice of Jesus in contexts which refer to his messiahship (*Barn.* 6:7-9; 12:10). Furthermore, many instances can be adduced where ἐν σαρκί functions in a neutral sense in parallel with ἐπί [τῆς] γῆς (*Barn.* 5:6-7; *T. Benj.* 10:8; *2 Clem.* 8:1-2; *Ep. Diog.* 5:8-9) or in parallel with ἐν κόσμῳ (*2 Clem.* 8:2; *Ep. Diog.* 6:3). It is therefore argued that 4:2 should be translated as ‘Jesus, Messiah come in the

flesh'; *i.e.*, that the promised Messiah has come into the world and he is Jesus (*cf.* Jn. 11:27). Taken in this way 4:2 is a restatement of 2:22, and what is at issue is the fundamental Christian confession of the community (*cf.* Jn. 20:31), within a Jewish context. Accordingly, a spirit/flesh dualism, the presence of which is really required in docetic or gnostic understandings of 4:2, is absent.

The final chapter addresses the question of whether a traditional Jewish polemic against Gentiles can function in reverse. Examples of Jews using this polemic against other Jews whom are regarded as apostates are found in the Qumran literature (1QS 2:11-18; 4:5-10; 1QH 4:9-20; CD 20:8-13; 4Q166 2:1-6; 4Q169 2:8-3:5). Note also in different contexts *Apocalypse of Abraham* 25-27; Acts 7:44-50; Galatians 4:8-10 (against Judaizing tendencies); and some second-century Christian polemic against Judaism. It can therefore be demonstrated that traditional Jewish idol polemic, drawn from the Old Testament, can function on a variety of contexts to define the limits of community, even when those limits are defined *vis-a-vis* (other) Jews.

Thus, a new rhetorical interpretation of 5:21 is proposed, one that allows the literal meaning τὰ εἰδωλα without requiring a Gentile context to make sense of it. It is our reading of the confessional material in 1 John that enables us to interpret 5:21 as an example of polemical reversal against Judaism. The main conclusion to be drawn is that the Jewish matrix of the Johannine tradition in 1 John has been underplayed, and that the relationship between 1 John and the Fourth Gospel (both temporally and theologically) needs a radical reassessment.