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Keep Yourselves from Idols: A New Look at 1 John

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Colleen Conway
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ 07079

The “new look” offered by this reworked King’s College dissertation comes through a focus on the ending of 1 John, especially the warning against idols in 5:21. Griffith argues that the closure strategy of the letter provides a hermeneutical key to unlock the *Sitz im Leben* for 1 John. According to Griffith, the final admonition should be understood within a Jewish matrix that used such rhetoric to reinforce community identity. This insight is extended to the letter as a whole: its discourse is intended to strengthen community identity and boundaries. For this reason, 1 John is better viewed as a pastoral rather than polemical writing. On this latter point, Griffith’s dependence on his advisor, Judith Lieu, is especially apparent.

The argument unfolds in nine chapters. After introducing the topic in chapter 1, Griffith proceeds with a history of interpretation of 1 John 5:21 in the second chapter. Here he critiques the imprecision of typical definitions of the “idols” in 5:21, especially when the term is defined as false ideas or false teaching about God. Instead, he defines *eidolon* in a more literal and practical sense as “a physical representation of a deity, usually used as an object of worship” (14). Still, Griffith disagrees with readings that view the reference to idols in 5:21 as a warning against pagan worship per se, since nothing in the letter has anticipated such an admonition. Instead, metaphoric use of the term in 1 QS 2.11, 17 reveals both the term’s versatility and its use in the context of intra-Jewish dispute.

Dissatisfaction with traditional interpretations of *eidolon* in 5:21 leads to the third chapter, in which Griffith explores the meaning and background of the term in detail. Examining the use of the term in a full range of Jewish literature—prophetic, wisdom, testamentary, historical, and philosophical—Griffith concludes that *eidolon* was

extensively used to convey the pejorative understanding of idolatry but not necessarily in response to a real danger of apostasy. Instead, the term was often used rhetorically to evoke the literal meaning of the term *eidolon* in the Jewish mind that was faced with social pressures to minimize or abandon distinctive Jewish identity markers. So, too, in 1 John, Griffith concludes that the term is used strategically to maintain self-identity and maintain group boundaries.

Chapter 4 is a detailed analysis of semantic and grammatical aspects of 1 John 5:21. According to Griffith, the shared elements between this verse and two scenes in *Joseph and Aseneth* suggest the use of a Hellenistic Jewish *topos* that includes the antithesis between the true God and idols, the concept of eternal life and the avoidance theme. Chapter 5 argues that 1 John 5:6–21 form the conclusion of the letter, which revisits three major issues that have arisen previously: the issue of assurance within an overall dualistic scheme (5:18–20d, 11–13), the issue of sin and apostasy (5:14–17), and the issue of Christology (5:6–10). Chapters 6 through 8 focus on each of these issues in turn, both within the concluding section and the letter as a whole.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how the dualism of 1 John reinforces the theme of assurance. According to Griffith, 1 John 5:21 should be seen as part of the antithetical structure that precedes it, contrasting idols with the true God of 5:20. Once again the point of these binary opposites is to reinforce community identity over against the realities of “the world.” Thus, the antithetical nature of 1 John should not be viewed as a polemical response to those who have deserted. Instead, here one should see the pastoral nature of the letter as it projects an attitude of certainty with respect to position of those in community.

Chapter 7 takes up the perplexing issue of the two types of sin described in 5:16 and an analysis of *hamartia* throughout 1 John. Notable here is Griffith’s convincing discussion of 1:6a, 8a, and 10a. Whereas these phrases traditionally have been viewed as slogans by the opposition, Griffith uses multiple examples to illustrate how such constructions follow well-established patterns of debate and reinforcement of commonly held values within a community. He further argues that “sin (not) unto death” should be understood in light of sin that does lead to death, that is, apostasy. To reject belief in Jesus would mean to leave the community of life, hence the “sin unto death.” This, according to Griffith, is what has happened with some former members of the community. Again reading against the grain of most interpreters, Griffith suggests that the secessionists did not leave in favor of a gnosticizing Christology. Instead, they rejected life in the community to return to life in the synagogue. This can be seen also in the final verse of the letter, Griffith contends, which amplifies the notion of sin unto death by placing into the rubric of idolatry.

The chapter devoted to Christology and community adds further support to the overall thesis by redefining the nature of the christological debate. Here Griffith suggests that “the move from a messianic Christology towards a Father-Son Christology, which tended to emphasize equality, may well have been the trigger for the apostasy referred to in 1 John” (174). Here Griffith contends that 2:19 describes a situation in which “ethnic Jews who had become Christians were returning to the synagogue and thereby denying their formerly held belief that the Messiah was Jesus” (175). If this is the case, the most pressing need in the community would be to give pastoral support to those who remained.

This is a well-argued thesis and an important contribution to scholarship on 1 John. Griffith’s arguments are both exegetically precise and conceptually sound. Not only does he provide a “new look” at 1 John, but his argument falls in line in interesting ways with some recent scholarship on the Gospel of John. Recently some have begun to argue that the anti-Jewish rhetoric and references to expulsion from the synagogue should be read in a similar context to what Griffith is proposing for 1 John, namely, a concern over believers *returning* to the synagogue. Griffith’s reading would provide more evidence that this was a real issue within the community, as would his contention that the letter need not reflect a further stage of development far removed from synagogue tensions.

With respect to such tensions, more discussion of the obliqueness or reticence of the letter regarding the situation it faced would have been useful. If the situation was as Griffith describes, it is notable that we do not find the same kind of rhetoric against “the Jews,” as in the Gospel or, say, the “synagogue of Satan,” in Revelation. Nevertheless, this is a book to be taken seriously and one that offers a solid contribution to a growing movement to reconsider the rhetoric and *Sitz im Leben*, not only of 1 John, but also of the Johannine literature in general.