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Keep Yourselves from Idols: A New Look at 1 John

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“Keep yourselves from idols” is not only the title of this book, but also the last words of 1 John (5:21). Griffith focuses on the question of the reference of idols in this last verse. As he understands the letter, the “closural strategy of the letter, culminating in the reference to ‘idols’ in 5.21, provides a hermeneutical key” (1) for understanding the main issues in this letter, that is, the christological and ethical issues. He suggests that he will provide a new approach with new solutions to these main issues—thus the second part of his title. He tries to show that 1 John is the product of a “continuing debate between Jews and Jewish-Christians over whether Jesus was the Messiah, at a time when some Jewish-Christians belonging to Johannine Christianity had reverted to Judaism” (1). This locates this letter firmly within a Judaistic background.

Therefore, 1 John should be read as a primarily pastoral rather than a polemical letter, since it endeavors to prevent further apostasy among Johannine Christians. This is done through strengthening the cohesion and identity of these Christians by calling on them to maintain their confession that Jesus is the Messiah, to strengthen their cohesion through mutual love, and to avoid idols.

In order to argue his point, Griffith to a certain extent reads this letter “backwards,” by asking what is intended by the reference to the idols in 5:21. He argues that the ending is inspired by idol polemics in the LXX, with parallels in the Hellenistic Jewish literature of that period. The word *eidolon* is used as polemical term within the Jewish opposition to idolatry, especially referring to pagan images. It is further argued that the author of 1 John knows this polemic well and that understanding of this phenomenon is essential for interpreting the ending of 1 John. In Jewish contexts, idol polemic served to

strengthen Jewish identity and cohesion—rejection of idols is a basic element of what it means to be a Jew. This “structure” should be applied to members of the community of 1 John defecting back to Judaism, turning against the confession of the messiahship of Jesus. Against this idolatry the high christological claims of Johannine Christianity are set and defended. This would then be the same situation found in John 8:31–59, where Jews who were the followers of Jesus reverted back to their former Jewish religious roots. This leads to the following remark: “The general conclusion of my thesis is that the Jewish matrix of the Johannine tradition has been significantly underplayed with reference to 1 John” (209).

Griffith, therefore, pleads for the acknowledgment of the “essential ‘Jewishness’” of 1 John. He tries to prove it by discussing different passages in this letter and illustrates how this perspective (which he calls a “new look”) sheds light on the issue of sin and messiahship of Jesus. The messiahship is thus interpreted in line with what is found in the Gospel of John. Seeing it this way also strengthens the argument that 1 John was most probably written earlier than the Gospel, which might explain the differences between the Gospel and the letter more adequately (e.g., the apparently more primitive soteriology found in 1 John, as compared to the Gospel of John).

After the introduction, which treats issues such as what the study will focus on, literary genre, and integrity, a survey of interpretations of 1 John 5:21 follows (ch. 2). The wide variety of scholarly suggestions for interpreting *eidola* in 1 John 5:21 is amazing, indicating the need for some clarification. In chapter 3 the meaning and background of the term *eidolon* is established. The Greek, Jewish, and Christian backgrounds are investigated. The conclusion is that the term is generally used as polemical term among insiders to strengthen their self-identity. In Jewish and Christian circles the image of the god and the god itself were identified and were described by using the word *eidolon*. Rejecting *eidola* means knowing and accepting the true God.

Griffith discusses the form and ending of 1 John in the fourth chapter. His discussions (dealing with the text of 1 John, not only in this chapter) are thorough. He focuses strongly on language level, dealing properly with grammatical issues (in more or less the classical way). By working comparatively on this level, he builds his arguments pointing to links between different Jewish traditions and the text of 1 John. In this way he concludes a Jewish framework for reading 1 John. His focus on the language is both a strength and a weakness. The strength lies in building a solid basis for comparison. The weak point is that the exegetical work is not always comprehensive enough and that other necessary aspects of interpreting a text were not done with the same intensity or often not done at all.

Perhaps related to the above point is the often-surprising treatment of other research. Good overviews of available research are given, but it often seems that when he disagrees on one or other point that approach is rejected without looking at the possible advantages it could bring or without trying to integrate the strong points of that particular viewpoint with his own. In some cases finer nuances of the current research were even overlooked. Often descriptions of research are found without real engagement with that research. Simply rejecting other views without proper engagement is indeed problematic. He often emphasizes that his view presents a “new look at 1 John,” as the title says. Could it be that emphasis on the “new” closed his eyes for the “old”? It is just a guess. Without denying that there are some novel elements, his interpretation is not so completely different and new as he wants his readers to believe. Especially in the Chinese rice field of Johannine studies (Schnackenburg’s expression) “new” should be used sparingly. These points of criticism should in no way close our eyes for the good and thorough work that was done—in a good piece of research such as this, it should rather encourage even better research.

In chapter 5 Griffith deals with the closure in 1 John, looking at its structure and suggesting an exegetical approach to the conclusion. He maintains that major issues arising in the letter are picked up and resolved in the conclusion. The following chapters (6–8) substantiate this view. “Assurance and Dualism” (ch. 6), “Sin and Apostasy” (ch. 7), and “Christology and Community (ch. 8) receive attention. In chapter 9 the function of the ending is explained. The usual indexes end the book.

What is done in this book is thorough, it is presented in a systematic and clear way, and overall the book makes interesting (although at times technical) reading. It deserves to be read by Johannine scholars.