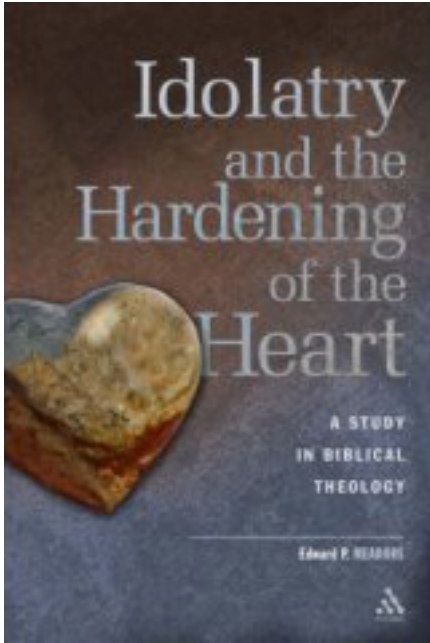


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Meadors, Edward P.

Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart: A Study in Biblical Theology

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The title and subtitle of Edward P. Meadors's (Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana) book clearly alerts readers to what is to come: the book is about "idolatry," focuses on the motif of the "hardening of the heart," and approaches its topic from a "biblical-theological" perspectives. All that has been covered by Meadors in an impressive way. Whether individual readers will be fully satisfied by the study will depend on the expectations and/or specific conceptions and associations that readers link with the key terms and issues of the book. Be that as it may (see below), Meadors's courageous survey of idolatry and the hardening of the heart in many biblical texts is quite welcome. It certainly paints a realistic picture of the sinful (= idolatrous) behavior of those people in the Bible who produce and worship idols and stick to their practices, whether they are destined to do so by God's activity or by anything else.

Before dealing with specific biblical texts and their concrete settings, Meadors describes the basic structure of his approach. In the first chapter he explains the biblical paradigm he refers to: the connection between idolatry and the hardening of the heart. Meadors's central questions result from Isa 63:17a: "Why, O LORD, do you cause us to stray from your ways and harden our heart from fearing you?" From the potential irreconcilability of "God's love and mercy with his active, unyielding 'hardening' of human hearts" (1)

Meadors deduces a set of consecutive questions that have to do with sin, determinism, free will, and supremacy, to mention only a few key issues. Meadors's major concern is "to address these questions as they unfold in Scripture" (2), and rightly so. Idolaters simply do not refrain from idolatry but continue their sinful practice by producing lifeless idols and thus they "become like them" (see Ps 115:4–8; 135:15–18). With his reference to Deut 28-29, Meadors combines the hardening motif with the renewal of the covenant and emphasizes the significance of "eschatological warnings ... for the corporate people of Israel" (7). Further model texts that demonstrate the relevance and scope of the approach are Exod 20:2–6; Lev 26; Isa 6:9–11; and Jer 5:19–22 (7–11). Chapter 2 completes the framework and foundation that is essential to assess the next nine chapters with specific biblical texts. Although Meadors's work is not of a philological but of a theological character, the five pages about the terms "idols/idolatry" and "heart" ("the heart in Egyptian thought" and "heart in the Old Testament") are too simplistic, especially in the treatment of the potentially harmonizing tendency in the Septuagint to translate "fourteen different Hebrew words" (12) with εἰδωλον. Of course, the other terms used in the Septuagint (ἀγάλματα, εἰδωλοθύτος, and εἰκόν) are less important and occur only rarely; however, they should at least be mentioned to avoid an giving a partial impression, something that becomes more relevant as the results of this chapter are applied to the discussion of (Greek) New Testament passages. Here it becomes evident that Meadors concentrates mostly on the Hebrew Bible.

Meadors's nine case studies follow the chronological pattern of the canonical Bible. After starting with the book of Exodus ("Pharaoh's Falsehood: Human Gods Are No Gods at All" [17–36]), Meadors deals with the Old Testament historical books ("Follow Vanity and Become Vain: Israel Is Guilty Too"; or, according to the page header, which differs from the chapter title, "Idolatry and the Downfall of National Israel" [37–55]), then tackles prophetic judgment in relation to idolatry and the hardening motif ("Listen but Don't Perceive: The Prophetic Commission to Harden Hearts" [56–76]) before he turns to the New Testament. Chapter 6 is devoted to "Seeds, Taxes, and Mammon: Jesus and the Kingship of God" (77–96), where Meadors also addresses extracts from the Dead Sea Scrolls (CD 20:8b–10a; 1QH 12:14b–17a), and chapter 7 is given to "Paganism, the Temple, and the Hardening of the Heart in Acts" (97–104). The next three chapters are dedicated to Paul's Letter to the Romans, with one chapter each to Rom 1–2 ("Exchanging God for an Image: Idolatry in Romans 1–2" [105–18]), Rom 9 ("God Hardens Whom He Desires: Divine Sovereignty in Romans 9" [119–38]), and Rom 10–11 ("Jealousy and the Partial Hardening of Israel" [139–53]). Other relevant passages in Paul's letters remain unaddressed. This is proof enough for Meadors's selective approach to idolatry and its possible links to the "hardening of the heart" motif, as other studies of Paul's attitude toward and reasoning against idolatry demonstrate that there are diverse and different

perspectives in his letters. For further study, see, for instance, the encyclopedic and comprehensive work by Johannes Woyke, *Götter, 'Götzen', Götterbilder: Aspekte einer paulinischen 'Theologie der Religionen'* (BZNW 132; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), which was probably not available to Meadors when he wrote this book. The last case study, in chapter 11, addresses the book of Revelation (“Hardening and the Followers of the Beast” [154–72]).

Finally, chapter 12 (“Insidious Idols Within: Pride, Theology and Worship—Conclusions and Contemporary Application” [173–95]) sums up what Meadors has discovered in the previous chapters. Here he gives answers to his three crucial questions. (1) God’s hardening of human hearts in the Bible is by no means “an arbitrary, unconditional, indiscriminate act.” (2) God hardens hearts because it “is a this-worldly consequence of divine judgment,” because “sensory depletion are symptoms that diagnose the presence of idolatrous sin,” because it “prolongs the duration of God’s revelatory acts,” and because “sensory depletion are forms of chastisement that aim to provoke repentance and destroy pride” (173–75). (3) Salvation is possible for those whose hearts God hardens; in other words, “is indeed a biblical expectation for the people of God.” (177). Certainly, there is an end to the curse of hardened hearts (see Isa 6:11–12), and God really rescues Israel in the end. Meadors’s overall conclusions are sound, genuinely drawn from his previous discussions, and thus offer insight into the interaction of idolatry and the “hardening of the heart” motif.

Some readers may find Meadors’s “Contemporary Applications” (181–95) somewhat random and thus not very helpful, wondering why these texts and authors (Friedrich Nietzsche, John Wesley, A. W. Tozer, and Don Hustard) were singled out from the massive amount of potential references. Others may regard exactly these as beneficial and profit from them and Meadors’s explanatory notes. I belong to the first, not the latter, group of readers.

The book ends with a bibliography (198–202), which could have included more specialist articles on the subject matter (above all, literature not written in English), and indices of biblical and other ancient sources (203–13) and of modern authors (214). In addition, there are acknowledgments (viii) and a preface (ix–x), the latter with a short explanation of the general approach and aim of Meadors’s study (see also the text on the back cover).

Meadors’s interesting work will challenge other approaches to idolatry and the “hardening of the heart” motif in biblical texts. Even if readers with some background knowledge, postgraduate students, and scholars may criticize the absence of Greek and Hellenistic conceptions or ask themselves whether a closer look at specific interpretative approaches in late antiquity and/or early Christianity, such as Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Clement

of Alexandria, *Ptrotrepticus* (see ch. 4), or the *Apocalypse of Peter*, could have added significant further aspects to the topic, Meadors fulfills what he sets as his own objective by remaining on the biblical-theological level. It is to be hoped that Meadors's thought-provoking observations and interpretations will be received by many scholars working on the same or similar topics.