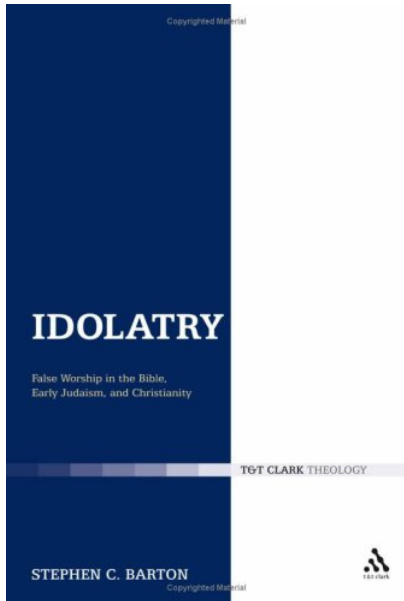


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Barton, Stephen C., ed.

Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity

London: T&T Clark, 2007. Pp. x + 338. Hardcover.
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The book under review comprises nineteen essays on idolatry that were presented in the course of the Bible and Theology Research Seminar and the New Testament Research Seminar of Durham University's Department of Theology between 2002 and 2004. Thus it is natural that many contributors are from Durham University. The fact that all authors are from British universities proves the claim made in the acknowledgements that "the essays collected here represent a very fair range of current British theological expertise and commitment" (viii). This representation should by no means be "exhaustive" (1), but it should highlight specific aspects of a "many-faceted, critical tradition." The manifestation of this programmatic intention becomes immediately visible after a first quick glance at the table of contents: the titles of the contributions and the categorization of the essays into two main parts proves that the project was determined to span the diverse periods of time from the Old Testament to modern society. This appears to be an extraordinary approach to idolatry, a subject matter that has become fashionable over the last few years, as the many monographs and collections of essays dedicated to it show. However, one might wonder from the very beginning of the reading process if an approach like this can be realized at all in an appropriate way.

The editor, Stephen C. Barton, introduces into the volume by summarizing the subject matter and presenting brief abstracts of the papers to come. Then the reader is confronted

with ten essays collected under the heading “Idolatry in the Bible, Early Judaism and Early Christianity” and is at once made aware of the somewhat fragmentary coverage of “idolatry.” Stuart Weeks and Nathan MacDonald deal with idolatry in the Old Testament. Robert Hayward writes about the Septuagint Pentateuch, Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis about Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*, and John M. G. Barclay about Josephus. Then Helen K. Bond addresses “Jewish Reactions to Aspects of the Roman Cult in the Time of Pilate,” Mark Bonnington studies social embodiment of anti-idolatry in the first century, David G. Horrell works on Paul and idolatry, and Stephen C. Barton tackles the issue of food and sex rules and the prohibition of idolatry. Finally, Christopher Rowland delivers a “lecture” (he calls it “an exercise”) in biblical theology. It is surprising that a systematic and philological study of the different Greek terms that are important for any research into “idolatry” is missing. , Further, various other texts that would be of interest in this first main chapter, such as the so-called Pseudepigrapha, could have been of significance for a more colorful and more complete picture of idolatry. Perhaps an analysis of Clement of Alexandria’s *Protrepticus* (above all, its fourth chapter) might have helped to close that gap, no matter if it were placed as a summarizing chapter at the end of the first or as an introductory chapter at the beginning of the second main part.

The contributions collected in part 2 span the period of time between Augustine and modern society, which is a tremendously long period of time with diverse forms of the phenomenon idolatry and with very individual developments in research. Consequently, nine studies cannot exhaustively cover every relevant aspect. What is possible and done is to pinpoint this and refrain from writing about that. That is fair enough. Carol Harrison studies Augustine’s theological aesthetics. Trevor Hart links transcendence with the problems of visual piety. David Clough focuses on Karl Barth, Andrew Goddard on Jacques Ellul, and Paul D. Murray on Nicholas Lash. Gerald Loughlin addresses the issue of idol bodies, Timothy Jenkins presents a sociological account of idolatry, and in the final two essays Graham Ward and Bernd Wannewetsch reflect upon idolatry and capitalism.

The book comes with a very welcome section with “Suggestions for Further Reading on Idolatry” (331–34), which—together with the annotated bibliography in *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): 143–50 (it would have been a service to readers to reprint this bibliography in the volume itself)—is a real helping hand for those who want to know more about idolatry in general and some of its specific features in particular. An index of modern authors (335–38) marks the end of the book and is helpful, although more comprehensive indices, such as an index of ancient authors and works and another one of subjects, would make it easier to navigate through the whole volume.

It might be disputable whether or not the title of this collection is really appropriate. Maybe it is a form of pedantry on this reviewer's side to question whether it is possible to focus on "false worship" in the Bible without permanently writing about "correct worship" simultaneously or, in other words, on malpractice (idolatry as heresy) without orthopractice (worship/cult images as orthodoxy). In addition, the setting in which early Judaism and Christianity existed should have been considered in one way or the other, not ignored, as it is done in some of the contributions, which themselves would have benefited from a wider approach.

It is almost impossible to evaluate a collection of essays like this one as a whole. The only thing that can be done is to point at some inconsistencies but also at the strengths of the collection (see above); this book can definitely be recommended to everyone interested in the phenomenon idolatry, although readers need some background and, best of all, even some specialist knowledge of certain aspects in order to profit from the results of most of the essays. Scholars involved in the (publication) project are specialists in their essay topics and thus focus on the aspects they regard as essential. Consequently, the core and the details of an individual essay will have to be challenged by exactly those other scholars who themselves have specialized on that subject matter.