

THE IDOLATRY DILEMMA IN 1 JOHN 5:21

Panayotis Coutsoumpos
Silver Spring, Maryland, USA
drotisc@yahoo.com

Resumen

La adoración de ídolos fue un dilema común que afrontaron los miembros de la iglesia en toda la región de Asia Menor. Es conocido de todos que para los lectores de primera Juan, idolatría era un problema real. Los cristianos en el primer siglo también afrontaron problemas con comidas sacrificada a los ídolos y participación en actividades socio-religiosas en templos paganos. Además, otro problema apremiante para los miembros de la iglesia era el culto a el emperador muy común en todo el mundo Greco-Romano. Así que, el mensaje y exhortación de Juan a sus lectores fue evitar todo lo que tiene que ver con la idolatría.

Abstract

The worship of idols was a common dilemma faced by church members in the entire region of Asia Minor. It is known that for John's readers idolatry was a real issue. Christians in the first-century also faced the problem of eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in social and religious activities in pagan temples. In addition, the worship of the emperors was another pressing dilemma to the church members in the Graeco-Roman world. Thus, John's message and exhortation to his readers was to have nothing to do with idolatry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The words in 1 John 5:21 *Τεκνία, φυλάξατε¹ ἑαυτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων²* have caused frustration among scholars.³ According to Marshall the main problem is both the abrupt introduction and ending of the epistle. Marshall also points out that “nowhere in the letter has John spoken of the danger of worship of the material images and false

¹ Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody, 1985), 397. It is interesting to note that the aorist imperative *φυλάξατε*, “guard,” is a call for immediate action. By its very nature the aorist imperative is a sharper, more authoritative command than the present imperative.

² Alan E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1948), 154. Raymond E. Brown also observes that the words “against idols, literally, ‘from idols.’” MGNTG 2, 460, regards the use of *ἀπὸ*, ‘from,’ instead of the classical accusative, after *πρὸς φυλάσσειν* as a reflection of Semitic influence (*min*). These last words of 1 John present us a final obscurity. The definite article implies that the writer was quite clear about which idols he meant, but interpreters are in complete disarray in reading his mind.” Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Doubleday: Doubleday, 1982), 627.

³ Gerald S. Sloyan, *Walking in the Truth: The First, Second, Third Letter of John* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1995), 59, observes: “The closing warning against idols (v. 21) seems out of place.”

gods whose cults flourished in the world of his readers.”⁴ Nothing in 1 John 5:21 prepares us for this conclusion, warning about the danger of idolatry.⁵ What is meant in 1 John 5:21 by εἰδώλων?⁶ Schnackenburg has adopted Nauck’s view in his commentary suggesting that the caution against idols is simply a caution against sin.⁷ Nevertheless, the connection between sin and idol worship does not necessarily mean that idolatry can be used without further explanation as an equivalent for sin.⁸

Nauck’s suggestion that idols (= false gods) and sin are closely related in the Qumran passages and in the epistle should also be understood in the same light.⁹ The worship of idols was a common dilemma both for the people of Israel and for many members in the early church. The new covenant was to cleanse God’s people from idolatry (Ezek 36:25). It is difficult to comprehend how the author of the epistle would introduce another dilemma in the last verse of the epistle. Braun observes that it is improbable that a second and third generation of Christians would be warned against returning to paganism.¹⁰

I suggest that idolatry was one of the more serious problems faced by the early Christians. The issue of idolatry cannot be completely ruled out.¹¹ John’s assertion is

- ⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistle of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 254.
- ⁵ D. Moody Smith, *First, Second and Third John* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1991), 137. “Probably ‘idolatry’ is to be understood with reference to opponents, whose false Christology, false understanding of Jesus, is taken to be idolatrous.”
- ⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* (trans. R. Philip O’Hara with Lane C. McGaughey and Robert Funk; Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1973), 90. According to Bultmann, “it is improbable that ‘idols,’ i.e., ‘images,’ are meant by εἰδωλα; for then the sense of the admonition would have to be not to participate in pagan cults. Εἰδωλα is to be understood in the sense of ‘false gods.’” Εἰδωλων, derived from ἰδεῖν, “see” (ὁράω, εἶδο, “form”), means form, image, but already in Homer’s *phantom*, “vision” (the “souls” in the underworld are εἰδωλα—ψυχή); for Plato the individual things in their lower form of existence are, in contrast to the ideas, mere εἰδωλα. Because in OT faith pagan deities are powerless or even unreal, in the LXX εἰδωλον, which in the Greek linguistic tradition indicated loss of existence, could be best used to translate Hebrew terms both for images of Gentiles’ deities and for the deities themselves.” For more detailed information see, H. Hübner, “Εἰδωλον,” *EDNT* 1:386-88.
- ⁷ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (HTKNT 13; Freiburg: Herder, 1965), 255.
- ⁸ Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 255. Brian Rosner writes that “the Old Testament supplies many reason for avoiding idolatry. The worship of false gods is said to be demeaning and a delusion. Other gods are seen as impotent and unable to save. Idolatry and social injustice are understood as inevitably inked. However, the most powerful and personal reason to have ‘no other gods’ before the Lord is the fact that idolatry arouses God’s jealousy.” Cf. Brian S. Rosner, “No Other Gods,” in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (ed. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992) 149.
- ⁹ Wolfgang Nauck, *Die Tradition und der Charakter des ersten Johannesbriefes* (WUNT 3; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1975), 260.
- ¹⁰ Herbert Braun, “Literar-Analyse und theologische Schichtung im ersten Johannesbrief,” *ZTK* 48 (1951): 288.
- ¹¹ On the matter of idolatry, see Panayotis Coutsoumpos, “The Social Implications of Idolatry in Revelation 2:14: Christ or Caesar?,” *BTB* 27 (1997): 23-27.

highly probable. What were the εἰδωλα, “idols,” which John warns his readers to guard against? Was John referring to the emperor’s worship? Or was he literally referring to idols of wood and stone, which were numerous in his day in Asia Minor and elsewhere?

2. IDOLATRY IN 1 JOHN 5 AND THE CITY OF EPHESUS

It is a well-known fact that idolatry was common throughout the whole region of Asia Minor and in all the territory of the Greco-Roman world.¹² For John’s readers the idolatry dilemma was a real one.¹³ Burdick observes: “If it is a figurative reference to the false doctrine referred to repeatedly on earlier pages of the letter, the appearance of the subject would not be so abrupt.”¹⁴ In addition, Culpepper rightly comments that “theirs is not a higher or more enlightened theology; it is simply idolatry.”¹⁵ Christians in the first-century¹⁶ faced the problem of eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in social and religious activities in pagan temples. They lived in a world “full of idols,” and the city of Ephesus was no exception.¹⁷ The church members to whom the epistle of 1 John was sent faced a similar dilemma.¹⁸ If the letters of John came from Ephesus with its adoration of the goddess Diana, the temptation for John’s listeners (church members) to yield to idolatry would have been real and per-

¹² Brook W. R. Pearson, “Idolatry,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 526-29.

¹³ Bultmann, *Johannine Epistles*, 91. See also Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 225. “John may refer, partly at least, to literal idols of wood and stone, which were numerous enough in his day in Asia Minor and elsewhere.”

¹⁴ Burdick, *Letters of John*, 397.

¹⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, and 3 John* (Knox Preaching Guides; Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox, 1985), 114.

¹⁶ On the matter of idolatry in the Jewish and Christian Context in the first-century, see Panayotis Coutsoumpos, “Paul’s Teaching of the Lord’s Supper: A Socio-Historical Study of the Pauline Account and Its Graeco-Roman Background” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1996), 161ff.

¹⁷ Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1986), 45. “Temples dedicated to gods and goddesses were everywhere, and so were statues of the deities.”

¹⁸ See Udo Schnelle, *History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1998), 459; James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 268: “The church father Irenaeus and the church historian Eusebius claim that the apostle John spent his last five years in Ephesus and during this time wrote the five books of the New Testament ascribed to him.” See also G. M. Burge, “Letters of John,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 587-99. “The traditional view that the Johannine writings originated from Asia Minor is sound.” The same also in Robert Kysar, “Epistles of John,” *ABD* 3:909.

manent.¹⁹ The addition of the definite article ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων, “from the idols,” or “from your idols,” implies that he sensed danger. It is likely that he was referring to the pagan worship, which was practiced in Ephesus at that time.

According to Oster, the most popular and important cult during the first three centuries of the Roman Empire was unquestionably Artemis Ephesia. The people of Ephesus considered the city’s relationship to her in terms of a divinely directed covenant relationship.²⁰ It is interesting to note that by the time John wrote the epistles, there was an imperial cult and most of the cities in the region had an imperial temple or at least an imperial altar.²¹ Thus, a literal meaning of physical images of false gods made perfect sense to the church community in Asia Minor. It may also refer to worshipping the image of the emperor, since the festival held for the imperial cult was one of the most significant events in a city of that time. It was celebrated at regular or irregular intervals and was carefully arranged and carried out with the participation of the entire population, each person being obliged to fulfill his duty.

Biguzzi has rightly observed that Asia was the center of the imperial cult, and cities competed for the privilege of building a temple.²² According to Strabo’s accounts, the ancient temple of the great goddess identified with Artemis stood less than a mile outside the walls of the city.²³ All around the Graeco-Roman cities idols were worshipped in temples devoted to traditional Gentile gods, in popular magic and superstition, as well as in mystery religions and mystery worship.²⁴ The ruins found by archaeologist in Ephesus, Sardis, Hierapolis, and Miletus are evidence of the overwhelming reality of idol worship and the images from the emperor’s worship.²⁵ In Ephesus as in any other city in the Graeco-Roman world, the worship of idols was part of the daily customs.

As it is well known from the Christian tradition of the second century, John the apostle and John the evangelist were connected with Ephesus. Clement of Alexandria

¹⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1984), 309. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (JSNTSup 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986), 47.

²⁰ Richard E. Oster, “Ephesus as a Religious Center Under the Principate, I. Paganism Before Constantine,” *ANRW* II.7.2, 1661-1728.

²¹ Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 158-67. See the definitive work on the imperial cult. S. E. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 79-86.

²² Giancarlo Biguzzi, “Ephesus: Its Artemision, Its Temple to the Flavian Emperors, and Idolatry in Revelation,” *NovT* 40 (1998): 276-90. See also Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (ECNT 27; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002), 7: “In 29 B.C. Pergamum was the first to erect a temple, and Smyrna the second in A.D. 21 after a vigorous competition. Ephesus was the third, and it was liked with establishing the Flavian dynasty in Asia.”

²³ Strabo *Hdt* 1.26.

²⁴ P. L. Garber, “Idolatry,” *ISBE* 2:799-800. See also Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 35ff.

is quoted as saying: “For when, after the tyrant’s death, he returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus, he went away upon their invitation to the neighboring territories of the Gentiles, to appoint bishops in some places, in other places to set in order whole churches.”²⁶ The name Ayasoluk attached to the village and also the hill around Artemision, is derived from *Agios Theologos* (Ἅγιος Θεολόγος), the name given to John in the Eastern Church. It has been suggested that from this hill John witnessed the pagan worship in the Artemision.²⁷

John considered the participation in banquets at the temples in honor of pagan deities nothing less than idolatry. It is clear from the book of Revelation that some church members participated and felt (as the woman Jezebel did)²⁸ that it was not a sin to attend such banquets (Rev 2:2, 14, 20). It may be possible, although not mentioned before in the epistle, that the false teachers also felt this way. John was writing in a time of crisis. What is clear is that all “God-substitutes” are idols and that from them the church member must guard himself. This may clarify the use of the verb φυλάξατε in its ‘peremptory aorist imperative’ sense.²⁹ The verb means “keep” in the sense of “guard.” The use of the active with a reflexive pronoun ‘guard yourselves’ is an expression that emphasizes the need for personal effort. John’s message is that Christians have to guard themselves at all times against idolatry. As 1 Corinthians 8-10 illustrates, idol worship was a very pressing dilemma for Christians at Corinth.³⁰

In contrast to the church at Ephesus, the church of Pergamum appears to have tolerated those who adhered to the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. In all probability the Nicolaitans agreed with some of the Christians at Corinth that pagan deities did not really exist and that an unscrupulous Christian might fully participate in the social life, commerce, and politics of a great pagan city. John did not specifically describe their doctrine, but focused on their conduct.

Edwards has pointed out that John wrote primarily for his own time rather than for our time. The terrible influence and enticing images (= idols) continued to affect the newborn Christian church.³¹ John was concerned with the correct belief and prop-

²⁶ Eusebius, *H. E.* 3.23.6. There is no definite information in the church father concerning the date when John first came to Ephesus.

²⁷ Jack Finegan, “Ephesus,” *IDB* 2:118.

²⁸ Coutsoumpos, “The Social Implications,” 24. Obviously, in this context, eating meat sacrificed to idols is an act of idolatry and also an act of homage to the pagan deities. The evil behavior of the Nicolaitans and Jezebel therefore centers on the issue of eating meat sacrificed to the idols and what that practice implies.

²⁹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 309.

³⁰ Coutsoumpos, “Paul’s Teaching of the Lords’ Supper,” 160.

³¹ M. J. Edwards, “Martyrdom and the First Epistle of John,” *NovT* 31 (1989): 164-71. “Those who wanted meat would often find themselves eating the remnants of a sacrifice, and there were times when even readers of St. Paul might find it expedient to reckon such foods unclean. The Acts (15:29) record a prohibition issued by the council of Jerusalem; Irenaeus denounces the Nicolaitians—somewhat tardy, since the author of Revelation had already assigned the rebuke well known that Lu-

er conduct. He wanted his readers both to believe in and behave accordingly—not to follow the common pagan practices and beliefs. Doctrinal error, however, was but one aspect of the false teachings mirrored in 1 John. Theological changes were accompanied by moral decadence on the part of some of the church members.³² Thompson rightly observes that “the warning ‘little children, keep yourselves from idols’ points to the danger of worshiping any God other than the one revealed through Jesus Christ.”³³ John urges his readers to have nothing to do with false views of God (idolatry) and the sins that accompany them.

3. CONCLUSION

It is possible to conclude that John’s main concern was to protect the church members and to caution them to avoid the dangers posed by the idolatrous worship including the cult to the emperors. This interpretation makes sense in the context of the larger context of the passage where John is clearly warning the members of the church against the false teachers who seek to lead his people away from the worship of the one true God.

cian has his Peregrinus expelled from a Church which ‘probably saw him eating one of the foods that they call accursed’.”

³² Burdick, *Letter of John*, 52, writes: “A survey of 1 John reveals several facts concerning the persons addressed, one of the most obvious of which is that they were Christians. It seems clear that at least some of them had been followers of Christ for a number of years. The strong language of the epistle is not directed against the intended readers, but against the false teachers who threatened them.”

³³ Marianne M. Thompson, *1-3 John* (IVP New Testament Commentary Series 19; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 148.