

### III. New Testament

As in the LXX and in Hellenistic Jewish writings also in the NT the usage of the radical εἰδωλ- always contains a derogatory and polemic overtone. All these texts mentioned share a common semantic field of εἰδωλ- in contrast to the usage in pagan texts. Foreign gods and their cultic images are called idols (εἰδωλον) to emphasize that they actually do not exist, hence they are without any power. Meat or other kinds of food offered to pagan deities are by no means a sacrifice (ιερόθυτον; cf. 1 Cor 10:28) but negatively characterized as idol food (εἰδωλόθυτον). Thus, whoever worships these kinds of deities does not act in an acceptable way but as an idolater (εἰδωλολάτρης) practicing nothing else than idolatry (εἰδωλολατρία). Both terms only occur in the NT and related Christian literature. It is striking that most of the references can be found in the writings of Paul (in sum twenty out of thirty-four references in the whole NT).

In NT writings idols are usually mentioned in the context of critique or polemic directed against foreign deities. This is the case especially in the letters of Paul and in the Acts of the Apostles. Used in

the genre of conversion speech the term can sometimes also mean the religious experience and behavior in the specific stadium before turning towards the Christian God (cf. 1 Thess 1:9). As 1 Cor 8:4 shows, Paul uses the term εἰδωλον stating the inexistence of any other deity (“we know that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one”; cf. 1 Cor 10:19). Thus, he is to some extent ambivalent with regard to the aspect of the realness of foreign deities (cf. 1 Cor 8:5–6) and seems to identify them with demons (δαμόνια; cf. 1 Cor 10:20–21). Basically any other deity beside the true God can be seen as a mere product of human foolishness and sin (cf. Rom 1:23) and as creatures that “by nature” (φύσει) are no gods at all (cf. Gal 4:8). Likewise in Acts 7:40–41 the golden calf worshipped by the Israelites instead of the true God (cf. Exod 32) is referred to as an idol made “of their hands.” Similar statements appear elsewhere in Acts as well, but without using the word “idol” explicitly. According to Paul’s Areopag speech in Athens, a city he found to be “full of idols” (κατείδωλος; Acts 17:16; cf. 17:22), one should not believe that the deity (τὸ θεῖον) is “like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals” (Acts 17:29), whereas in Acts 19:26 Paul is accused by his Ephesian opponents for his view that gods “made with hands are not gods” (θεοί). There might be some allusions to the topic of polemic against idols also in Heb 6:1 and 9:14 where the phrase “dead works” (νεκρὰ ἔργα) is set as an opposite to the true faith or worship.

Strikingly, with regard to the relevant polemics in the NT further negative epithets or insulting motifs in addition to the term “idol” itself are almost absent. Even though it is certainly well known from the HB/OT tradition, this facet seems to be downsized with intent. Only 1 Cor 12:2 mentions idols as “incapable of speech” (ἄφωνος). And only one time in Gal 4:9 Paul calls the pagan deities, to which his addressees want to turn back again, more harshly “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα). The most elaborate evidence in terms of traditional patterns can be found in Rev 9:20, where idols of what kind of material ever (gold, silver, etc.) are jointly referred to with handmade things and demons and are in all characterized as incapable of seeing or hearing or walking. The only true and living god is the Christian God. Hence to devote oneself to God presupposes and involves leaving idols behind (1 Thess 1:9; cf. Gal 4:8–9; also Acts 14:15, where μάταια is used) as well as insight into their inanity and their incompatibility with Christian existence and behavior (cf. 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Cor 10:19–21).

A particular subject some NT texts deal with in the context of idols and idolatry is the question of the consumption of idol meat, i.e., meat sacrificed in pagan cults or temples and served in (cultic)

meals of various social settings or sold on the marketplace. With regard to this problem the so called apostolic decree in Acts 15:20 provides some basic rules for former gentiles who want to live in full unity with the Christian community. They have to keep themselves away from any sort of idols (εἰδωλον) and also to abstain from fornication, strangled animals' meat or any kind of blood. As can be seen in both references of the decree later on in Acts 15:29 and 21:25 where the term εἰδωλόθυτον (idol food) is used instead of εἰδωλον (idol) first of all minimum conditions for table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians is the basic issue here.

It is already Paul who engaged with the problem concerning idol meat. Paul discusses this issue quite broadly within his first letter to the Corinthians in 1 Cor 8:1–13 and 10:14–30. Though in his view idols or food sacrificed to pagan deities essentially bear no meaning at all (cf. 1 Cor 10:19). For that reason consuming idol meat is quite unproblematic for Christians, whereas participating in cultic meals is indeed absolutely refused by him (cf. 1 Cor 10:14–30). Paul however restricts his principal permission concerning idol meat with rather pastoral considerations in mind. In view of community life in practice Christians have to abstain from eating idol meat whenever Christian fellows are affected by such a liberal practice so that their conscience could get defiled (cf. 1 Cor 8:7). According to Paul personal liberty in Christ must not cause any offense to the so called “weak” (cf. Rom 14–15), i.e., to those, who by habit are insecure in terms of idols and “still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol” (1 Cor 8:7). Acting against them, disregarding, and hence scandalizing them is to sin against Jesus Christ himself in the end (cf. 1 Cor 8:12) although knowledge and conscience of them are valued negatively as being weak. But whenever there is no need for such considerateness Christians are free to eat meat without explicitly inquiring if it had been sacrificed to idols. Presumably however in everyday life this was an issue only for few people of higher social status who could afford meat anyway.

Unlike Paul the author of the book of Revelation strictly rejects any consumption of idol food, as is the point in Rev 2:14 and 2:20. In both instances eating idol food (φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα) is mentioned in combination with practicing fornication (πορνεύειν). In John's view these are the two main topics taught by the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6, 15) as well as by the prophetess Jezebel and their followers (Rev 2:20), certain groups from inside the Christian communities in Asia Minor which he condemns as being heretic. The concern present is not that much about ethical rules of conduct in a mere literal sense, the terms are first of all used figuratively and stand for falling off from God and prac-

ticing idolatry (cf. also Rev 17:2; 18:3, 9). Furthermore they indicate syncretistic tendencies. Whoever is willing to compromise and holds a liberal position towards the pagan environment and its social and religious claims has to face such harsh judgment and rejection.

Moreover the NT refers to “idolatry” (εἰδωλολατρία) respectively “idolater(s)” (εἰδωλολάτρης) quite often in paraenetic contexts. This is the case especially in vice lists and similar texts where they occur in combination with numerous other trespasses, among them usually fornication (1 Cor 5:10, 11; 6:9; Gal 5:20; Col 3:5; Eph 5:5; 1 Pet 4:3; Rev 21:8; 22:15). We can also observe a close relationship or even an identification with greed (πλεονεξία) in Col 3:5 and Eph 5:20 (cf. 1 Cor 5,10f.; also Matt 6:24). Because Paul lists idolatry beside other offenses without emphasis, as it seems, he believes that wickedness causes nothing else than permutation between God and the idols and replaces the creator by the creature (cf. Rom 1:18–32). In a similar way the last sentence of 1 John states that you/one must “keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21; cf. also 1 Cor 10:7, 14) in order to gain the true God, the giver of life.

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