

BOOK REVIEW

Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). xiv + 214 pp. Pbk. US\$22.00.

Brian Rosner tips his hand with the title of his new book, altering the Pauline phrase ‘greed, which is idolatry’ in Col. 3.5 (πλεονεξίαν ἥτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία, cf. the similar statement in Eph. 5.5) to forward his interpretation of this relative clause as a metaphor. The Greek study is not particularly deep; there is little analysis of the broader discourse, or discussion of the attraction between abstract concepts and the relative pronoun in the similar statement in Eph. 5.5. Rather, the book is a largely successful compromise between a shorter, more accessible study on pastoral theology and ethics on the one hand, and a purely academic (and typically much longer) treatise on the provenance and meaning of a biblical phrase on the other. To Rosner’s credit, *Greed as Idolatry* runs just long enough to answer the questions raised in the reader’s mind by its title: Does the simile indicate a pre-existing hermeneutic on the author’s part? Does Rosner assume a one-to-one correspondence between the terms? How could the apparent equation of greed with idolatry be understood differently? The metaphorical understanding is integral to Rosner’s thesis, but he gives due consideration to the other possibilities that accrue over the course of his analysis.

Rosner follows a brief orientation with a history of interpretation of Paul’s phrasing, assuming (but not requiring) authentic Pauline authorship. Employing his own recurring metaphor of mountain-climbing, he hopes to learn more about the previous routes taken by other ‘climbers’, surveying scriptural intertexts, patristic and premodern observations, liturgical samples and even incidental overlaps with Marx. Rosner’s collected data are organized by interpretations of greed: ‘greed is as bad as idolatry’, greed causes idolatry, greed amounts to worship of the demon/rival god Mammon, greed entails slavery to the economic system, and the like. Four more options, presented as inclinations

toward wealth (service and obedience, inordinate love and devotion, trust and confidence, along with interpretations combining these attitudes) provide Rosner with a bank of preferred metaphorical accounts from which to draw. He lingers on Chrysostom (whose approach characterizes service and obedience) and Luther (trust and confidence), interpreters from whom he later borrows in order to balance the twentieth-century emphasis on greed as love and devotion to wealth. His account of Chrysostom is one of the book's many standout features, as the archbishop's homilies on Colossians and Ephesians personify greed as an evil master, a rival eager for the allegiance that is properly due to God—a reading implicitly dependent on Jesus' saying about serving either God or Mammon. Cyprian and Jerome offer further confirmation of what Rosner terms the 'enslaving power of riches' (p. 23). This imposition of slavery by an *alien* god subsidizes the comparison with idolatry; perhaps Paul could have as easily written 'greed, which is slavery'.

The cumulative force of these interrelated interpretations leads Rosner to a brief chapter on methodology: the greed-idolatry analogy was not formed *ex nihilo* by the Pauline author, but was intended to sharpen and develop trends already extant in Jewish moral teaching, which Rosner underlines in both Colossians and Ephesians. The metaphor, then, has a basis in biblical theology and an expressive rhetorical function. To be altogether plausible, the metaphor must be *prepared* (in view of semantic and symbolic commonalities between the two referents—'grounded' and 'rooted' might be alternative labels for this stage), *felt* affectively, *mapped* contextually and *compared* with other contemporary sources. Rosner will return to these stages in his final major chapter, once he and his audience have had a chance to process the origins and connotations of idolatrous greed.

Rosner devotes the next four chapters to those origins: the 'distant ranges' of the Jewish Scriptures, the 'tablelands' of the early Jewish moral teachings (charted earlier in both epistles), the 'foothills' of the New Testament, and a 'debriefing' section for review before scaling the heights of greed, idolatry and the combination of the two meanings. His selected Old Testament texts emphasize the all-embracing scope of the first commandment, Deuteronomic connections between prosperity, pride and the rejection of God, riches in the Psalms as a potential substitute for relationship with God, and links in the prophets between greed, idolatry and oppression of the poor. Under the heading of moral

teaching, opposition to greed and idolatry is virtually automatic in the Qumran community, with some continued concern for concomitant oppression, as in the commentary on Habakkuk. Philo targets the conspicuous love of money, in parallel with certain New Testament texts, while Targumic renderings of the Shema extend to loving the Lord with all one's *possessions*, prompting consideration of intertexts from Luke–Acts.

The New Testament reveals wealth as a danger to worship and discipleship alike: since one's heart follows one's treasure, wealth can be a reason for choosing not to follow Jesus. Luke displays a particular interest in reversing the opposites of riches and poverty, while Revelation combines politics and economic indulgence, denouncing an amalgam of Babylon and Tyre in comparing the evil city's excesses to prostitution. If these points are not strictly biblically dependent, Rosner argues, there remains a definite tradition of conceptual and analogical links between greed and idolatry.

Though his thesis requires abstract definitions of greed and idolatry that allow for figurative meanings, Rosner delineates his referents as precisely as he can, sorting through his assembled precedents, side-by-side contexts, and grammatical, causal and clausal relationships to discover the significance of greed and idolatry and the polemically stipulated identity of the greedy and idolatrous. Rosner's evidence points to material avarice rather than sexual covetousness, though the latter is often found in close contact with both greed and idolatry. Similar ties connect his chosen terms to violence and corruption, even if *πλεονεξία* and its word group do not necessarily connote violent acquisitiveness (though the subtle economic domination of modern colonialism weakens his argument for 'legitimate' *πλεονεξία*, p. 121). Idolatry, too, has a broad semantic range, interwoven with impurity, impiety and profanity, and subject to vicious polemic ridicule in keeping with God's jealous and even vengeful love. Presented biblically through anthropomorphic models of marital relationships (again underscoring Rosner's love-and-devotion category) and political alliances (trust-and-confidence), and in recent history encompassing areas from nationalism to sports, idolatry constitutes an attack on God's exclusive rights.

With the facilitating features of the metaphor established, Rosner moves quickly and compellingly through his climactic chapter, reviewing previous points as he focuses on *identity* as the key to the greed-

idolatry metaphor. The analogy functions rhetorically to identify gentiles/heathen (and by extension, unbelievers) as lovers of gold and silver, whether in monetary or iconic form, over against the people of God, whose everyday existence has so often been defined by mercenary domination. Rosner could have stressed this last important point still further, given the political implications of many Pauline texts on idolatry: 1 Cor. 8.4-6, mentioned only briefly by Rosner as a Shema intertext, deserves at least as much attention for its subversive deployment of imperially idolatrous titles ('there are many "gods" and many "lords"'). But the points he does make are well taken, and the two excurses he offers here—the first profiling condemnations of greed in ancient Judaism and Christianity, the second considering idolatrous greed as an implicit religion—are resources that all readers will find helpful as reference aids, nicely supporting Rosner's conclusion on the need to recognize, name and decry contemporary forms of greedy and idolatrous behaviour.

Rosner submits, quite simply, that a broader understanding of idolatry can be recovered from Paul. His definition of a god as 'that which one trusts, loves and obeys above all else' (p. 179), is consistent with his findings. Interacting with Rosner, readers may find themselves reminded of phenomenological god-definitions like that of E.R. Goodenough (perhaps another intersection for fruitful research?) and political parallels, such as the implicit idolatry of the U.S. Air Force's telling new slogan: 'Above All'.

The book's brevity is literally its most significant shortcoming. Like Ann Jervis's *At the Heart of the Gospel*, also recently released by Eerdmans, *Greed as Idolatry* stands a good chance of being referred to, favourably, but with condescension, as 'an excellent little book'. There are a number of ways that its succinct analysis could be augmented and (at the risk of one more economic pun) enriched. First, while certainly thorough as a study of the three-word Pauline phrase, the volume's attempt to formulate 'a biblical theology of both greed and idolatry', especially when based on such an admittedly 'slim lexical base' in the Old Testament (pp. 172, 49 n. 2), requires more prolonged studies of other passages, at least from the New Testament if not from the rest of Scripture, to succeed. Rosner's glancing references to Judges (p. 164) could be expanded to include the cyclical recurrence of idol-service and the curiously symptomatic relationship between idolatry and the neglect of social justice.

Secondly, as a study deliberately located not just in biblical theology but also in theological ethics, an attempt to move beyond condemnation is essential. Paul is clear on the need to avoid greed/idolatry, but he also goes on to suggest attitudes and actions that can repair much of the damage greed and idolatry inflict upon the community, as in the compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and solidarity of Col. 3.12-15, or the reminder to the rich of their covenantal obligations of generosity in 1 Timothy 6. Thirdly, some more concrete applications might be suggested to address this deficit in our own day. Beyond previously mentioned areas such as national pride, where else does the entity of idolatrous greed hide today? What perniciously subtle forms does it take? What are its footholds, for instance, in the world of advertising? How might it govern our scholarly quests to build our professional libraries? Rosner is not required to answer these questions; but his book is more than 'idol' talk. The substantial basis he provides may demand deeper and more practical responses than his readers can comfortably give.

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