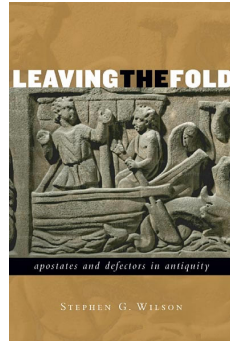


○ REVIEW OF STEPHEN G. WILSON, *LEAVING THE FOLD: APOSTATES AND DEFECTORS IN ANTIQUITY*

(MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS, 2004)

Michael F. Bird, Highland Theological College / UHI Millennium Institute



This book constitutes a study of the religious phenomenon of apostasy in antiquity through a study of ancient sources and also tries to take into account the point of view of the apostate.

In his introduction Wilson notes the relative absence of studies on the phenomenon of apostasy (as opposed to studies on conversion) especially in Graeco-Roman sources. Although he is aware of the semantic differences often made between Apostates and Defectors he chooses to use them interchangeably. He also identifies several problems in engaging in a study of this kind: (1) many groups did not publicize defections from their ranks; (2) those who defected may not have wished to draw attention to themselves; (3) some of the boundaries of religious communities were fluid and plastic; and (4) evidence for defection/apostasy is often scattered and fragmentary. Wilson adds some brief observations about the terms for ‘heresy’ and ‘apostasy’. In later Christian usage the terms are virtually synonymous and pejorative. A similar pattern is found in Rabbinic literature with the exception that the labels of apostate and heretic are more consistently pejorative. While Graeco-Roman literature does not use the same terminology of ‘heresy’ the language of ‘apostasy’ is present, and in any case the notion of dissidents and defectors in philosophical schools was well known enough. In Wilson’s definition, defectors/apostates are those who have been considered by others to have abandoned the main beliefs and practices of their religious community, while dissidents are wayward members of a community.

In chapter 2, Wilson examines evidence for Jewish apostates including literary evidence from the Maccabean writings, Josephus, Philo, Rabbinic writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and various inscriptions. The discussion of Tiberius Alexander is particularly noteworthy for a balanced handling of the materials (pp. 29–22). This chapter would have been improved with more attention given to the extent and varieties of Jewish acculturation to Greek and Roman religion that would have affected perceptions of apostasy and dissidence. For instance, the Epistle of Aristeas asserts that Greeks and Jews worship the same god but by a different name. The Septuagint and Philo

alter the proscription of committing blasphemy against God to not blaspheming against gods in the plural.

Wilson examines Christian apostates in chapter 3 including examples given from the New Testament. The discussions of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan are particularly illuminating especially in relation to the role of Roman persecution in fostering defections. Wilson analyzes Cyprian's testimony to the Decian persecution (250–251 CE) concerning those who lapsed, those who were martyred, those like Cyprian who went into hiding, and those who attained a false certificate through bribery stating that they had carried out the necessary sacrifice to the Emperor. In other cases the evidence from *1 Clement* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* indicates that Christians could defect without the pressure of external persecution. In many cases, such as the *Apocalypse of Peter* the defection was to Judaism. The most infamous and notorious defector was of course Julian the Apostate and Wilson attributes his defection to experiences he had in Nicomedia, Pergamum, and Ephesus in 348–351 CE at the hands of one Maximum, a theurgic expert and avid Neoplatonist.

The focus of chapter 4 is on pagan defectors. The evidence for this is not only scarce but, as Wilson notes, the syncretism and pluralism of pagan society did not result in labels of apostasy during transfers of belief or allegiance. In some cases, such as that of the Pythagoreans who had a strong sense of community identity and an identifiable body of doctrine, defection was genuinely possible. Dio Chrysostom shifted his philosophical allegiances from Cynicism to Stoicism. Schisms in the various academies like that of the Platonic Academy under Antiochus of Ascalon prompted debates about who was the true heir of Plato's philosophy. Wilson does mention possible pagan defections to Christianity such as the case of Flavius Clemens and his wife or niece Domitilla who may have converted to Christianity via Judaism (Dio Cassius 67.14.1-3; Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* 3.18.4). But the absence of any extended discussion of pagan defections/conversions to Christianity is a major deficiency in this volume. In the New Testament there is ample evidence that Wilson could have examined such as 1 Thess 1:10 ('you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God') and Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Ephesus where it is reported that many of the Greeks burned their magical scrolls in public (regardless of whether it is historical or not it points to a phenomena of pagan conversions to Christianity).

In his conclusion Wilson gives a general overview of the sociology of apostasy/defection. He notes and concurs with John Barclay's taxonomy of the varying degrees that Diaspora Jews were affected by Hellenistic culture along the lines of assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation. Yet while this model is helpful for Jews and Jewish Christians it is not so easily applied to Gentile Christians or pagans who would be defecting to a majority cultural position. Wilson also interacts with Barclay's application of the sociology of deviance and notes its value for the study of apostasy. Wilson follows this up by noting modern sociological studies of apostasy, deviance and defection from new religious groups and argues that such studies can help illuminate the gaps in our knowledge of the ancient world by providing many of the reasons as to why persons defect in the first place, something that is for the most part lacking from our knowledge of conversions and defections in antiquity.

Wilson has provided a useful volume in a much neglected area. While studies of conversion and mission in the ancient world are relatively well covered (e.g. Nock; McKnight; Schnabel; Porton etc.) it must be remembered that defection is the flip side of conversion since conversions did not take place without someone defecting or leaving the fold of some other religious or

philosophical group. This is a commendable work that looks at the diverse array of literary and epigraphic evidence for apostasy and applies sociological models to the topic with sophistication and care.