

Apostasy

- I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. Judaism
- III. New Testament
- IV. Christianity
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I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

The term “apostasy” (MT *mēšūbā*) is associated in the Bible with a number of different Hebrew words that involve the act of turning away from Israel’s one true God and worshipping or obeying other gods, laws or human agents. These Hebrew terms include *mārad* (“to rebel”) and *sārā* (“turning aside, apostasy” from the root *sūr*, “to turn aside”). The most frequent term is *mēšūbā* (“a turning” or “a returning, going back” from the root *šub*) which involves a rebelling and turning away from God or God’s commands.

The word *mēšūbā* indicates not only a turning away from doing what is right in the eyes of Israel’s God, but it also involves the forsaking of Israel’s one true God in order to pursue other foreign gods. Scholars in the past have sometimes associated the Bible with an ontological claim of a strict “monotheism” (no other gods exist except the one God of Israel). Supporters of such a view point at Deuteronomy in particular, especially Deut 6:4–5. However, even Deuteronomy seems to assume the existence of other gods for other nations (Deut 4:19; 29:26; 32:8–9 [the LXX and Qumran readings as opposed to the MT]). While Deuteronomy may not be strictly monotheistic, it argues strongly that Israel owes exclusive and singular allegiance to Israel’s God, YHWH. Apostasy is an ever present threat. Israel’s devotion to YHWH is grounded in God’s saving acts on behalf of Israel (Deut 5:6) and God’s election of Israel as God’s own people (Deut 7:7–9).

Apostasy in the HB can also mean turning away from following God’s law in favor of following the laws of other gods or following no laws at all. The “turning away” may also involve not trusting in God and trusting instead in the military might of foreign kings (Isa 31:1–3). More generally, *mēšūbā* can refer to any wayward behavior that goes against the standard to which God’s people are called (Jer 5:6; 8:5; 14:7). Translations of the term include “backsliding,” “falling away,” “turning away,” or “trespassing.”

The term is used most frequently within the prophetic books, especially Jeremiah (eight times). Israel’s apostasy in “turning away” from YHWH and going after other gods is also a prominent theme in Isaiah (Isa 1:2–4), Hosea (Hos 1–2; 11:7; 14:4), and Ezekiel (Ezek 16; 18). Israelite kings were often charged with leading the people into apostasy, including Ahab (1 Kgs 16:30–33), Ahaziah (1 Kgs 22:51–53), Jehoram (2 Chr 21:6, 10),

Ahaz (2 Chr 28:1–4), and Amon (2 Chr 33:21–23), among others.

An example of a prophetic use of the charge of apostasy is Jer 2:19. God recounts the wickedness and apostasies of the people of Judah. They have forsaken God and do not properly fear God. Jeremiah then employs a number of images and metaphors to depict the severity of Israel’s apostasy – a choice vine that turns into a wild weed, a people unable to cleanse themselves from their sin even with an abundance of soap, a swift camel that stubbornly goes on its own way and stumbles into danger, an obstinate ox, a prostitute who is never satisfied, and a thief who only apologizes because he has been caught (Jer 2:20–26).

In Jer 3:6, *mēšūbā* is used as an adjective directly associated with the name “Israel,” hence “apostate” or “faithless Israel.” Israel’s apostasy was so offensive that YHWH issued Israel a decree of divorce, dissolving their relationship (Jer 3:8). *Mēšūbā* refers not only to the wicked behavior of God’s people (breaking God’s laws) but also their infidelity (breaking the relationship) with YHWH by seeking to worship other gods.

Such turning away from God was an infraction against the first and most important of the Ten Commandments given at Mount Sinai: “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2–5; Deut 6:4–5). After hearing the Ten Commandments and agreeing to obey all of them, the first action that Israel undertook was an act of apostasy. The Israelites worshiped an idolatrous statue of a golden calf, declaring, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod 32:4). Only Moses’ intercession to God on behalf of the apostate Israelites saved them from God’s judgment and destruction (Exod 32:7–14). The golden calf story thus became a paradigm of Israel’s ongoing inclination to forsake YHWH and turn to other gods.

Since apostasy was a major breach of the law and the covenant relationship with God, the punishment was severe and sometimes involved the execution of the offender. For example, some laws stipulated that if an Israelite was caught worshipping any gods other than YHWH, then the community should stone the offending party to death (Exod 22:20; Deut 13:2–12; 17:2–7). If an entire city worshiped other gods, then all the inhabitants of the city would be put to death and the city itself would be burned to the ground (Deut 13:13–19).

The holiness laws of Leviticus stipulate that offering sacrifices to another god like Molech would pollute the sanctuary or temple. This act of ritual pollution would have an adverse effect on the whole community, and this effect could be undone only by the community stoning the offending party (Lev 20:2–3). In a similar episode, Israel’s apostasy in worshipping the gods of Moah endangered the

community and caused a plague among the Israelites. The plague was stopped by the action of a zealous priest, Phinehas, who killed the chief instigator of the apostasy (Num 25 : 1–9).

The term *mēšūbā* occurs outside the prophetic corpus only in Prov 1 : 32. The wisdom text warns that the apostasy of the people (referring to their moral defection away from wisdom) will lead to death. The punishment for apostasy was harsh because the high standards of YHWH call for purity, obedience, loyalty, and integrity. When God's people stray in their allegiance and worship of YHWH, severe consequences may result.

In spite of their frequent backsliding, the prophets also proclaim hope for the apostate people of Israel. It is a hope that is rooted in the mercy and forgiveness of God. The people are invited to repent of their disobedience and return to YHWH. Although it seemed nearly impossible for Israel to cure its own persistent tendency toward apostasy, the gracious favor and compassion of God remained capable of overcoming the people's unfaithfulness. In the end, God's mercy is strong enough to overcome the effects of Israel's repeated apostasies, bringing them back to obedience and faithfulness (Hos 14 : 4; Jer 31 : 15–34).

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II. Judaism

- Second Temple, Hellenistic, and Rabbinic Judaism
- Medieval Judaism ■ Modern Judaism

A. Second Temple, Hellenistic, and Rabbinic Judaism

Apostasy normally connotes not merely dissenting from the fundamental beliefs of a particular religion (cf. heresy) but – more drastically – defecting from that religion altogether. The term *apostasy* has no objective reality but is a label subjectively designated, at least in Late Antiquity, by the apostate's detractors. The boundary line between assimilation through ritual neglect and outright apostasy is not always clear. While the Hebrew Bible cites occasions in which certain Israelites rebel against YHWH and serve other gods (e.g., Deut 13), the first documented Jewish apostasy – in the sense of deserting the Jewish *religion* – occurs in the 2nd century BCE. Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler of Palestine in the Maccabean period, decreed – with the help of two "apostate" high priests, Jason and Menelaus – that Jews "should abandon their particular customs" (1 Macc 1 : 42). Some Jews "gladly adopted [the king's] religion" and "sacrificed to idols and profaned the Sabbath,"

(1 : 43) while others begrudgingly adopted the Hellenistic way of life for fear of death (1 : 50). In Alexandria, Philo presents three types of apostates: those seeking pleasures of the body (*Virt.* 182), those seeking higher social status (*Mos.* 1.30–31), and those driven by philosophical conviction. Some in this last category, such as Philo's nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander, challenged specific Jewish theologies like divine providence, while others, denying the divinity of the Torah, ridiculed the Bible's mythology and the Jewish philosophical project to allegorize it (*Conf.* 2 : 2). Josephus echoes the views of Jewish apostates in his own day when re-writing the biblical account of the Israelites' sin with the Midianite women (Num 25). He places in the mouth of the "apostate" Zambrias [the biblical Zimri] a scathing critique of the heteronomous nature of Mosaic Law which, for Josephus' Zambrias, merely serves the tyrannical interests of Moses and, moreover, curtails human freedom (*Ant.* 4.126–49). Though scholars debate whether the label "apostate" should be applied to Paul, he was certainly seen as one by zealous Jews (Acts 21 : 21) and the Ebionites (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 26 : 2). Unlike Josephus' Zambrias, Paul doesn't deny the divinity of the Mosaic Law, but downgrades its importance since he considers its fulfillment an insufficient means to achieve eternal salvation. In rabbinic literature, the legal status of the apostate (called *mumar* or *meshummad*) is ambiguous. In some legal contexts he is treated as a Jew, while in other contexts a non-Jew. The rabbis do not see an independent biblical section dealing with apostasy, yet they "discover" hidden allusions to its specific laws by highlighting anomalous biblical terminology in various legal sections that do not outwardly refer – even implicitly – to apostasy (e.g., *bHul* 5a). The most famous apostate in the rabbinic period, Elisha ben Abuyah (Aḥer), is driven to defection by a "mistaken" literal reading of Deut 22 : 7 (*pHag* 2 : 1).

See further → Aḥer (Elisha ben Abuya)

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B. Medieval Judaism

Throughout the Middle Ages there were Jews who apostatized, converting to Christianity or Islam. Some of these conversions occurred under duress. Motivated by anti-Jewish sentiments and confident of the superiority of their respective faiths, both Christians and Muslims compelled Jews to apostatize at sword's point. Forced conversions occurred on a large scale in 1096, at the dawn of the First

Crusade. Christians on their way to the Holy Land ransacked Jewish communities in the Rhineland, confronting Jews with the choice between conversion and death. Some Jews chose to become martyrs, but others submitted to baptism, becoming *anusim*, or forced converts. These individuals came to the attention of Emperor Henry IV, who permitted them to return to Judaism. Pope Clement III protested this measure, for although the church opposed baptism under duress, it insisted that, once effected, baptism was always valid. Jews were forcibly converted on other occasions, as well. In North Africa and Spain in 1143, e.g., Almohads forced Jews to convert to Islam. Other instances of forced conversion occurred in France and Aragon in 1320 and in Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany in 1348–49.

If in some cases the alternative to baptism was death, in others, medieval Jews apostatized in the absence of direct coercion. One such apostate was an adolescent named Judah, who converted in the first half of the 12th century, taking the name Herman and becoming a Premonstratensian monk. Herman's autobiography suggests that his conversion was motivated in part by a genuine attraction to Christianity. A number of other voluntary apostates are renowned for the ways they used their knowledge of Judaism to attack their ancestral faith. Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani served as Christian disputants at public Jewish-Christian disputations. Pablo de Santa Maria (Solomon ha-Levi) combated Judaism as archbishop of Burgos, advocating the promulgation of anti-Jewish legislation and condemning Judaism in his writings. Alfonso of Valladolid (Abner of Burgos) spearheaded the persecutions of Jews in 14th- and 15th-century Spain. The tendency of these apostates to harass their former coreligionists may have stemmed both from their hostility to Judaism and from a desire to prove their allegiance to the church.

Little is known about the majority of voluntary apostates, who are mentioned briefly in rabbinic responsa and diplomatic sources from Castile, England, France, Germany, Italy, and the Crown of Aragon. These individuals sought baptism for many reasons, including a desire to escape the hardships of Jewish life, the hope of obtaining pardon for a crime, love for a Christian, a desire for material gain, intellectual disenchantment with Judaism, and genuine faith in Christ. Although many of these individuals were baptized in the 13th century, a period during which Christian theologians viewed Jewish conversion with a new sense of urgency, there is no evidence that ecclesiastical missionary efforts led to these conversions. Indeed, Christian attempts to convince Jews of the truth of Christianity through the christological interpretation of passages from the Bible and post-biblical Jewish literature generally failed.

The phenomenon of apostasy presented Jewish communities with challenges that rabbis struggled to address. Rashi established that it was technically impossible for a Jew to change his religion. The apostate (*mumar* or *meshummad*) was a "sinning Jew," who was expected to repent and return to Judaism. Although not universally accepted, this view influenced the thinking of subsequent generations.

Jewish apostasy occurred on an unprecedented scale during the massacres and forced conversions that ravaged the Iberian Peninsula in 1391. Thousands of Jews were baptized, resulting in the creation of a new social group known as the New Christians, Conversos, or Marranos. This group grew throughout the course of the 15th century, as more Spanish Jews joined its ranks. Old Christians increasingly resented New Christians and accused them of practicing Judaism in secret. In 1449 Old Christians attacked New Christians in Toledo, and shortly thereafter Statutes of Purity of Blood were enacted that restricted the rights of individuals with Jewish ancestry. Jewish converts to Christianity had long been suspect in the eyes of Christians, but never before had they been the subjects of official discrimination. When Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews in 1492, thousands more apostatized in order to be able to remain in Spain. The Spanish Inquisition, which began to operate in 1480, sought to stamp out judaizing among New Christians.

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C. Modern Judaism

Apostates from Judaism to Christianity are very numerous in the modern world, and have produced an abundance of reflection on the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments. They are an extremely varied group, coming as they do from nearly every existing Jewish background, and converting into nearly every denomination and group in Christianity. [The Jewish conversos of the Ibe-

rian world, whose experience of forced conversion, and whose history of discrimination and persecution throughout the early modern period led them to a unique relation to both Judaism and Christianity, and hence to the Bible, are discussed elsewhere.] In spite of this diversity, however, certain common threads in Bible interpretation can perhaps be traced among modern Jews who accepted Christianity.

Some rejected Judaism very strongly, and tended therefore in the direction of an almost Marcionist reading of the Old Testament (OT). Simone Weil, who decried the cruelty and militarism of the OT, for instance, is a notable example.

Others, perhaps more numerous, tended, on the contrary, to harmonize Judaism and Christianity in smaller or larger measure, offering highly Jewish readings of Christianity and indeed highly Christianized readings of Judaism, particularly ancient Judaism. This is typical of present-day “Messianic” Jews.

Many Jewish converts to Christianity identify strongly with the apostle Paul. It is typical of this latter group that they also identify more broadly with the generation of the apostles, and that they stress the Jewish identity of the first generation of Christians and indeed of Jesus (“Yeshua”) himself.

A third interpretive tendency is to stress the secular, ethnic, or even racial aspects of Jewish identity, so as to minimize the conflict between Jewish identity and religious commitment as a Christian. Benjamin Disraeli, who asserted the aristocratic dignity of his Jewish biblical ancestry, is a famous example.

All of these trends can be combined with one another to some degree, and none of them is by any means unique to Jewish converts to Christianity. Each of these three trends can indeed be seen very broadly as typical of a wide range of modern interpretations of Jewish identity and its relation to Christianity. For instance, Baruch Spinoza, who was not a Christian, adumbrates each of the three in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. They reflect, respectively, recognition of the Jewish, non-Christian character of the OT, of the Jewish character of much of the NT, and of the secular character of much of Jewish life and group experience. But if Jewish apostates have no monopoly on any of these notions, they certainly have a special stake in each one, and have brought each one to specially sharp and poignant expressions.

See further → Conversos

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III. New Testament

1. Introduction. Two statistical observations show that in the New Testament (NT) “apostasy” is not yet a technical term (*terminus technicus*) to describe the renunciation of the Christian faith – which it would become later in and after the 3rd century CE:

a. In the NT there are not many instances of the word family “apostasy,” “apostate,” “to apostatize.” The noun “ἀποστασία (apostasy)” is found two times (Acts 21:21; 2 Thess 2:3), but only one counts, namely 2 Thess 2:3, which mentions an eschatological “ἀποστασία (apostasy)” before the final coming of Jesus Christ, whereas in Acts 21:21 it is said that Paul teaches all Jews, who live among the gentiles, the “ἀποστασία (renunciation) of Moses” by telling them “not to circumcise their children and not to walk according to the customs.” The noun “ἀποστάτης (apostate)” appears one time, and that merely in a secondary textual variant of Jas 2:11: “ἀποστάτης νόμου” instead of “παράβτης νόμου (apostate/transgressor of the law).” The intransitive middle voice “ἀφίσταμαι” is used three times with the meaning “to apostatize, to withdraw, to go away”: Luke 8:13; 1 Tim 4:1; Heb 3:12.

b. In the NT, other Greek verbs are also employed to speak about “apostasy” and “to apostatize” from Jesus or the Christian faith. In Matt 26:56/Mark 14:50 and in John 16:32 the verb “ἀφίημι” stands for “to forsake, to abandon, to renounce” Jesus. In John 6:66 “ἀπέρχομαι εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω” means “to fall away, to apostatize.” Paul has the middle voice “μετατίθημαι (to turn away, to defect)” in Gal 1:6, when addressing the Galatians’ turning to another gospel. In 1 Cor 10:12; Rom 11:11, 22; Heb 4:11 the verb “πίπτω (to fall)” is used for persons falling (out of God’s grace). In Heb 6:6 the hapax legomenon “παραπίπτω (to commit apostasy)” is found, and in Heb 10:26–29 the phrase “ἐκουσίως ἁμαρτάνω (to sin willfully)” has nearly the same meaning in its context. With the exception of Peter’s denial (which in all four gospels is just an ephemeral failure), the instances where the verb “ἀρνέομαι (to deny)” has the direct object Jesus (Christ) or God are to mention here: Matt 10:33/Luke 12:9; Acts 3:13–14; Titus 1:16; Jude 4; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Joh 2:22, 23. So it is with the verb “ἀστοχέω (to swerve, to turn aside)” in 1 Tim 1:6; 6:21; 2 Tim 2:18 and with the verb “καταλείπω (to forsake, to go astray)” in 2 Pet 2:15.

c. From the statistics, it follows that “apostasy” does not belong to the major subjects of the NT and that it is mainly treated in some later scriptures. Hebrews and the deuteropauline and catholic epistles belong to the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century CE. There are a few instances in the four Gospels and Acts (Matt 10:33/

Luke 12:9; Matt 26:56/Mark 14:50; Luke 8:13; John 6:66, 16:32; Acts 3:13–14), even less in the letters of Paul (Gal 1:6; 1 Cor 10:12; Rom 11:11, 22), and some more in the deuteropauline epistles (2 Thes 2:3; 1 Tim 1:6; 4:1; 6:21; 2 Tim 2:18; Titus 1:16), in Hebrews (Hebr 3:12; 4:11; 6:6; 10:26–29), and in the catholic epistles (Jas 5:12; 2 Pet 2:1, 15; Jude 4; 1 John 2:22–23). It is to be understood that later juridical dealing with apostasy in Christianity refers to Heb 3:12; 6:4–9; 10:26–29; 2 Pet 2:15–21; 2 John 9, 11; Luke 12:9 (Friedberg: 698).

2. Apostasy from Jesus in the Four Gospels and Acts. a. Apostasy from Jesus in Matthew and Mark.

Jesus' words at the end of the exhortation to fearless confession in Matt 10:26–33/Luke 12:9 (cf. 2.2) are rather general: "Whoever denies (ἀρνέομαι) me before men, I also will deny before my father who is in heaven." What is recorded in Matt 26:56/Mark 14:50 is more concrete: After Jesus' arrest "all disciples forsook (ἀφίημι) him (i.e., Jesus) and fled." Mark 16:7/Matt 28:10 and Matt 28:16–20 leave no doubt, that this apostasy from Jesus is just temporary: The disciples will meet Jesus in Galilee.

b. Apostasy from Jesus in Luke-Acts. In the interpretation of the parable of the sower (Matt 13:18–23/Mark 4:13–20/Luke 8:11–15), it is only in Luke 8:13b that the seed on the rock is likened to those believers in God's word "who in the time of temptation (πειρασμός) withdraw (ἀφίστανται)." Here Luke links together temptation and apostasy. Two peculiarities in Luke show what that means (cf. Brown: 15, 66–68):

- 1) Only in Luke's story of Jesus' arrest are the apostles admonished twice by Jesus (only once in Matt and Mark), "that they may not enter into temptation" (Luke 22:40, 46), an admonition which recalls a petition of the Our Father in Luke 11:4b/Matt 6:13a,
- 2) As opposed to the accounts of Matthew and Mark, in Luke the apostles/disciples do not forsake (ἀφίημι) Jesus and flee after he has been arrested (Luke has no parallel to Matt 26:56/Mark 14:50). In Luke 23:49 all "acquaintances" of Jesus see his crucifixion and death together with the women from a distance (in Matt 27:55/Mark 15:40 solely the women are mentioned). All apostles and disciples remain in Jerusalem and meet the risen Jesus there and not in Galilee, "during 40 days" (Acts 1:3).

Jesus' word about blaspheming (βλασφημέω) against the holy spirit, which will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10), follows directly after Luke 12:9 (denying of Jesus). The parallels in Matt 12:32/Mark 3:29 are found in different contexts. Thus, in Luke's gospel denying and blaspheming Jesus are closely related. The importance of these two words is illustrated in Acts: denial in Peter's second address in Jerusalem (Acts 3:12–26), and blasphemy

in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). In Peter's address, the Israelites are blamed for having denied (ἀρνέομαι) Jesus before Pilate (3:13–14), though at once they are assured of having acted "in ignorance" (3:17) and are asked to repent and to turn back (3:19), which clearly is a correction of Luke 12:9. With Ananias and Sapphira the outcome is different. The couple had decided that Ananias would bring to Peter only a part of the proceeds of selling some property (Acts 5:1–2). Peter accused Ananias of lying to the holy spirit under satan's influence (5:3), and Ananias fell down and died (5:5). The same happened to Sapphira, who subsequently entered (5:10). Ergo, blaspheming the Holy Spirit brings death.

c. Apostasy from Jesus in John. John's gospel alone speaks about an apostasy in the midst of Jesus' public ministry: "Many of Jesus' disciples fell away from him (ἀπέρχομαι εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω) and no longer walked about with him" (John 6:66). In the context it is made quite clear that God the father had predestined who would believe in Jesus and who would not (6:37, 44) and that Jesus knew beforehand who would not believe and who would betray him (6:64b). The prediction of the disciples' flight and their leaving (ἀφίημι) Jesus alone in John 16:32 corresponds with Matt 26:31/Mark 14:27, but contrary to Matt 26:56/Mark 14:50, John gives no hint that this prediction was fulfilled.

d. The Betrayal of Judas. In all four gospels and in Acts, the traitor Judas is condemned, but nowhere is his deed called apostasy. In Matt 26:24/Mark 14:21, it is said that it would have been better for the traitor if he had not been born. In Luke 22:3 and in John 13:2, 27, it is stated that Satan entered into Judas. About the death of Judas there are two different stories. In Matt 27:3–10, Judas repented and returned the thirty silver pieces to the high priest and elders, confessing, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (27:4). When they sent him off, Judas committed suicide. In Acts 1:18–19, Judas bought a field with the payment for his ill deed, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all of his bowels poured out.

3. Apostasy in the Letters of Paul. Within the NT the letters of Paul are the earliest extant evidence of Christian life, stemming from the sixth decade of the first century CE. In them there are only three texts which might have to do with apostasy: Gal 1:6, 1 Cor 10:12, Rom 11:11, 22.

In Gal 1:6–7, Paul complains that the addressees have turned away (μετατίθημι) from the gospel he preached to a different gospel since there are some who want to pervert the gospel of Christ, and in Gal 1:8–9 he announces that anyone who preaches another gospel should be accursed. Nonetheless, Paul does not call the Galatians apostates. Rather, he wants to win them back by the letter,

which he otherwise could have refrained from writing.

In 1 Cor 10:12, Paul warns the Corinthians, “Let the one who thinks he stands watch out lest he fall.” For this warning Paul had given an example in 1 Cor 10:1–11: The disobedient Israelites in the wilderness were killed. However, now the situation is different. In 1 Cor 10:13, Paul assures the Corinthians that they can trust in the faithfulness of God, who will not allow them to be tempted beyond their power. From this point of view, apostasy is not “a real danger” (pace Oropeza: 222).

In Rom 11:11–32, Paul asks whether the fact that the majority of Israel does not believe in Christ means that they have fallen (11:11.22). He answers decisively, in the negative, for “God confined all men in disobedience so that he might have mercy upon all” (Rom 11:32).

4. Apostasy in the Deuteropauline Letters. *a.*

Apostasy in 2 Thessalonians. In 2 Thess 2:3, “the apostasy” and “the man of lawlessness” have to come first, before “the day of the Lord” at the end of time, and 2 Thess 2:5–7 also indicates that these two things, an apocalyptic event and an apocalyptic figure, have not yet come. In 2 Thess 2:3b–4, 8–12, much is said about the “man of lawlessness” (“the Antichrist,” although this word is not used in 2 Thess), but what “apostasy” means remains more or less open. Perhaps one may infer from 2 Thess 2:10–12 and from its positive counterpart in 2 Thess 2:13–14 (Marxsen: 92) that apostasy refers to the defection from “belief in truth” by those who delight in wickedness, whenever and wherever that might happen.

b. Apostasy in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. In the pastoral epistles, false Christian teachers and their disturbing influence on other Christians are mentioned. In 1 Tim 4:1, it is said that in the end time (ἐν ὑστέροις καιροῖς) some will apostatize (ἀφίσταμαι) from faith. Yet other instances speak about the present. There are “some who have turned aside (ἀστοχέω),” from faith to idle talk in 1 Tim 1:6, “from the Christian faith by adhering to that what falsely has the name of knowledge (γνώσις)” in 1 Tim 6:20–21, and “from the truth” in 2 Tim 2:18. In Titus 1:16, “they confess to know God, but deny (ἄρνέομαι) him by their works.” Second Timothy 2:18b warns that they have swerved from the truth by saying that “the resurrection (of the Christians) has already taken place,” and 1 Tim 4:3 says about their works that they “forbid to marry and (they urge) to abstain from foods,” i.e., they ask Christians to be ascetic in sex and foods. Apparently the false teachers have made some impact, overthrowing the faith of some individuals (2 Tim 2:18) or even of whole houses (Titus 1:11). Nevertheless, by his teaching, “Timothy” may save himself and those who listen to him (1 Tim 4:16), and there is the chance that “God may give the oppo-

nents the gift of repentance to recognize the truth” (2 Tim 2:25).

5. Apostasy in Hebrews. In Hebrews, what apostasy is seems certain, and where it is a theme there are two lines of thought. On the one hand, those who were Christians but then apostatized (aor.: ἀποστήναμι) from God (Heb 3:12; or, as in 6:6, committed apostasy [part. aor. of παραπίπτω]) will not get a chance for a second repentance (μετάνοια); cf. Heb 4:11, 10:26–31, 12:17. On the other hand, the addressees are admonished to exhort each other daily so that none of them may be hardened by sin (Heb 3:13), and in Heb 6:9–12 they are assured that God will not forget their work and love for the saints (= all Christians). Hebrews 10:26–31 is framed by similar admonitions and assurances, Heb 4:11 is embedded in them, and the reminder that the Christians have received an unshakeable kingdom (12:28) follows the desolate example of Esau (12:17). The position that there is no chance for a second repentance for the apostate is so strict that it is clear that the addressees of Hebrews have “not actually fallen away” (Koester: 71). Later in the 3rd century, Montanists and Novatians took up the position of Hebrews, while the majority tried to soften it.

6. Apostasy in the Catholic Epistles. *a.* Apostasy in Jude and 2 Peter. Jude 3–4 indicates the letter’s purpose and occasion. The addressees are asked to fight for the faith they have received, since godless persons who are denying (ἄρνέομαι) God and Jesus Christ have crept in. What these intruders are really doing and teaching remains open. They are attacked with hard polemics, assurance is given that these godless sinners will be judged by the Lord.

Jude is very likely used in 2 Pet 2, which is much more explicit and detailed. Already 2 Pet 2:1–3 speaks of false teachers who will introduce destructive convictions and deny (ἄρνέομαι) the Lord. Many will follow them, and because of them the way of the truth will be blasphemed. Condemnation and destruction, however, will be in store for them. In 2 Pet 2:15–17, it is emphasized (now formulated in the present and not any longer in the future) that the false teachers have gone astray by forsaking (καταλείπω) the straight way and that for them black darkness has been reserved. Worse, however, is the fate of recent converts, as is shown in 2 Pet 2:20–22 (this text deals with them; so with Fuchs/Reymond: 101, Neyrey: 221 et al. pace Senior/Harrington: 277 et al.): “For them it would have been better not to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment handed down to them.” Such behavior is like a dog turning back to its own vomit, or like a sow just washed rolling in mire. However, that is not all. In 2 Pet 3, it is intimated that the false teachers were mocking the yet unfulfilled promise of the coming of Jesus, and 2 Pet

3:9b states against them that “God is patient, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.”

b. Apostasy in 1–3 John. As opposed to the other parts of the New Testament, 1–3 John is unambiguous regarding the question of apostasy. The apostates are named, their origin and their doctrine are named, the addressees are advised how to deal with them, and mention is made of one person who has made use of this advice. 1 John 2:18 makes clear that now in the present many antichrists have turned up, and 1 John 2:22–23 gives the definition that “he who denies (ἀρνέομαι) that Jesus is the Christ is the antichrist.” What this means is later rendered with more clarity. 1 John 4:2: “By this you recognize the spirit of God; every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” 1 John 4:15: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him, and he in God.” 2 John 7: “Many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; this is the deceiver and the antichrist.” Apparently the antichrists have a docetic christology, i.e., they do not believe in the incarnation of Jesus, and Jesus is for them only a heavenly figure. About the origin of the antichrists 1 John 2:19 says: “They went out from us, but they were not from us; for if they had been from us, they would have remained with us.” Apparently the antichrists were originally members of the same Christian communities as the author of 1 John and his addressees. Yet what does the declaration mean that the antichrists have never really belonged to these communities? It is only understandable against the background of a strict doctrine of predestination similar to the one which was met in the gospel of John (see “2.c”). Somehow this background also explains the harshness of the practical advice to the addressees in 2 John 10: “If anyone who has not this doctrine comes to your house do not receive him and do not greet him.” Thus in 2 John the ancient custom of hospitality is called off when questions of doctrine are at stake. That at least one of the Johannine Christians used the advice in real life is shown in 3 John 10b, where it is noted that a certain Diotrephes does not host the brothers, hinders those who would do so, and casts such people out of the community.

Rightly it has been remarked, “The most eloquent NT author on the necessity of love is singularly unloving in dealing with those who disagree with him” (R. E. Brown: Preface, X).

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Martin Rese

IV. Christianity

■ Patristics and Medieval Times ■ Modern Europe and America

A. Patristics and Medieval Times

Apostasy is not just the formal abandonment of one's religion, or the religious interpretation of such a biographical decision by former coreligionists, but a change of loyalty in a highly polarized situation. It thus becomes a major threat in a cultural framework of competing religions. Though the concept of apostasy first developed in Judaism (2 Macc 5:8; Josh 22:22, cf. Acts 21:21), where it has mostly been regarded in connection with some external influence or political enemy (“Hellenistic culture,” “Roman Empire”), in Christianity the concept early took on a basic relation to ideas about heresy, the “internal enemy.” This is already true for Cyprian, *Ep.* 57.3.1, who also faces the problem of the readmission of Christians who had not proven steadfast during persecutions of the church. This became a matter of serious controversy, not just to be resolved by distinguishing different degrees of “lapsi” (as “thurificati,” “sacrificati,” “libellatici,” “traditores”). More severe and more lenient models of church discipline competed (cf. e.g., Canones of the Council of Ancyra 1–9 [311 CE]). The connection of heresy and apostasy also meant that apostasy was perceived as moral deficiency, not as a legitimate change of mind about one's religious affiliation. Tertullian expresses this in passages like *Praescr.* 3.23; 4.1, 5; 41.6 (former apostates work as gnostic functionaries); *Val.* 1; cf. *Pud.* 6, 9 and *An.* 11.5; 56.9 (Saul as apostate). Related is the apocalyptic expectation of a widespread desertion of true religion at the end of time. The Antichrist becomes the apostate par excellence (2 Thess 2:3), as also the devil and his demons are “apostates” (Tatian, *Or.* 8; Hermias, *Irrisio gentil. philos.* 1). A concept of crypto-Christianity as a loop-hole out of the persecutions seems to have been advocated only

by some gnostic and elchesaite groups (e.g., Tertullian, *Scorp.* 15).

Pliny the Younger (*Ep. Tra.* 96) already questioned ex-Christians. At present “apostates” from a new religious movement constitute a major source of stereotypes, atrocity tales and public opposition concerning “cults.” So apostates may have been a driving force in the persecution of Christians. The anonymous pamphlet with names of Christians that reached Pliny the Younger (*Ep. Tra.* 96.5) certainly was written by ex-Christians who for unknown reasons had kept a deep aggression against their former religion. The drop-out rate in all new religious movements tends to be high, which probably was also the case in early Christianity. What Christians saw as apostasy might well have been evaluated by those concerned as what today is called post-cult trauma. This changed in the 4th century CE when the already nostalgic appeal of paganism became a major impact. Famous apostates from Christianity in late antiquity were Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* vi.19.9.; details are controversial) and the emperor Julian (361–363 CE). Among others, Augustine (*Civ.* v.21) discussed reasons for his decision, though the concept of a legitimate conversion to paganism did not exist for Christians. Julian defends his return to pagan neoplatonism (*Contra Galilaeos* 384–85; *Ep.* 47), as did the rhetor Libanius (*Monodion*). Gregory of Nazianzus called Julian “apostate” immediately after his death (*Or.* 4.1; 21.26), though he can more properly be understood by means of the dynamics of conversion experiences. Wrongly attributed to Cyprian is the 4th-century poem “*ad senatorem ex christiana religione ad idolorum servitutem conversum*” (CSEL 3.3, 302–5), which gives interesting insights into the psychology of such decisions. Non-Christians like Porphyry on the other side interpreted conversion to Christianity as tasteless abandonment of ancestral gods (Eusebius, *Praep.* cv. i.2.2). Ebionites saw Paul as an apostate (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* iii.27.4).

Of the Christian emperors, Theodosius I in 381 CE (repeated in 383 CE) made apostasy (*violatae atque desertae christianae religionis crimen: Cod.* Theod. xvi.7.3) punishable by civil penalties like confiscation of property, denial to make a legal will or receive a legacy, and even by formal infamia (social disgrace as a legal construct), “*ut sint absque iure Romano*” (ibid. 7.2). Like the emerging legislation against pagans, the practical impact initially seems to have been rather minimal. Penalties became increasingly severe (*Cod. Just.* i.7 de apostatis; also i.5, 11).

In the Middle Ages apostasy is also the disaffiliation from a religious order (*apostasia a monachatu*) or the abandonment of clerical duties (*apostasia a clericatu*), discussed already by the Council of Chalcedon. In later canonical law apostasy from faith is

threatened with excommunication, whereas monastic and clerical apostasy are discussed in much more detail (Gregory IX., *Decretales* 5 tit. 9; CIC [1983] c. 751; 1364 §1), especially also by moral theologians (Peter Damian). Thomas Aquinas (*S. Th.* II-II qu. 12) stresses the political aspect: a prince forfeits his dominion over his subjects on account of apostasy, so that they no longer owe him allegiance. He also defends the right of the church to demand punishment of apostates. Albert the Great sees apostasy as denial of the greatest good, God (*S. Th.* II tr. 4 qu. 18 m. 2 a. 1).

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B. Modern Europe and America

An overview of the history and scope of apostasy (the abandonment or renunciation of faith) in modern Europe and America depends upon one’s understanding of the Christian faith that has been abandoned. In modern philosophy and theology, traditional church teachings about God, the Trinity, Incarnation, miracles, the resurrection, the afterlife, prayer, the virgin birth, and revelation itself have been given radically different interpretations. Has a self-identified Christian abandoned his faith (and thus committed apostasy *a fide* or *perfidia*) if he rejects an earlier conservative, Chalcedonian view of Christ, and comes to see the incarnation as no more than an illuminating metaphor, perhaps authored or inspired by God, that reliably discloses God’s love? There are compelling biblical and historical reasons for thinking that such a substantial departure from Chalcedon would constitute a departure from Christian faith, or, at best, that it would count as heresy, but in some contemporary religious denominations or communions (such as Anglicanism), this departure would commonly be seen as a matter of re-interpretation rather than a repudiation. Denominations or communions with more rigorous treatments of the boundaries of faith, such as Roman Catholicism, permit a clearer distinction between the following: orthodoxy; a faithful re-interpretation of a tenet of orthodox faith; a licit, religiously permissible dissent by someone who is fundamentally or largely orthodox; and outright apostasy.

In an important study on the nature of religious traditions, *Faith and Criticism*, Basil Mitchell identified three parties: the conservatives, liberals,

and radicals. From a broad vantage point, a religious tradition such as Christianity may be seen as having a significant comprehensiveness to include both conservatives and radicals, with the liberals wedged in between. Even so, without a substantial agreement about central doctrinal beliefs, the broader the definition of "Christianity," the less meaningful (and the less profound) the term becomes. While there is an obvious danger of too broad a definition of *Christianity*, the danger of an overly narrow concept of Christian faith is that it will promote a schismatic, fracturing of faith into multiple, ever increasing different denominations or other religious bodies.

Many, but not all, religious skeptics in the modern era were brought up with at least a nominal Christian belief and practice. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) famously observed that he was one of the few thinkers who never abandoned religious faith, but only because he never had any faith to abandon. While Bentham was surely not the first, those in his position were a minority. And those philosophers or leading intellectuals who did have a faith in their early years were sometimes reluctant to overtly signal their deep repudiations of faith. David Hume (1711–1776), for example, never renounced his baptism, and Charles Darwin (1809–1882) was reluctant to publicize his skepticism about theism until late in life.

In modern philosophy and theology, there has been substantial attention to what may be termed spiritual or personal apostasy, as when an individual may nominally subscribe to Christian faith and practice but does so without passion or authentic commitment. Such passionless commitment prompted the vigorous, searing criticism of Blaise Pascal (1623–1862) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). The 20th-century existentialists were especially focused on the central importance of authenticity and the poisonous malady of bad faith. The existentialist Roman Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) developed a deep account of what he termed "creative fidelity" in which a believer aspired to an unconditional love and hope in God. Given Marcel's position, apostasy turns out to be a refusal to engage in creative fidelity.

Apostasy is distinguished from *secularism*. Someone may commit apostasy by renouncing faith and embracing a different religious belief and practice. Moreover, someone may be secular and, like Bentham, never have adopted a religious faith to begin with. The stigma or onerous charge of apostasy is that it involves a voluntary infidelity. As such, the charge of apostasy is very grave, much like the charge of adultery or suicide (as a form of self-murder rather than a self-killing brought on by depression and a loss of sanity). A charge of apostasy implies that the apostate is culpable or blame-worthy; the charge is inappropriate, then, in a case of when

a one time religious believer comes to question and then give up his religious belief on non-culpable, honest grounds.

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V. Islam

In Islam apostasy means the action of a Muslim, in word or deed, to leave Islam in favor of another religion. In the course of the development of Islamic Law, jurists came to agree that the male apostate must be put to death. This punishment is affirmed in recent Muslim writings on the treatment of apostates.

In the Qur'ān, the material on apostasy revolves around the concepts of turning, disbelieving (*kufur*), and withdrawal (*irtidād*). A number of verses speak of disbelief in God after believing (S 16:106; 4:137), and promise wrath from God, great punishment, and loss "in the world to come" (S 16:109). Other punishments for disbelief include the curse of God, angels and humankind, and the withdrawal of God's guidance and forgiveness. The repentance of persistent disbelievers will not be accepted; theirs will be a painful doom and they will have no helpers (S 3:86–91; 4:137). Similar punishments are promised for "turning back" (S 88:23, 24). The concepts are combined in S 2:217: "Whoever of you turns (*yartadīd*) from his religion, and dies disbelieving (*kāfir*) – their works have failed in this world and the next; those are the inhabitants of the fire."

Some Muslim exegetes and scholars have understood the scriptural materials to indicate a punishment for apostasy in the next world only. However, the jurist al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820) famously found support for the death penalty in S 2:217, and other scholars and exegetes have justified death for apostates from S 88:24 and S 16:106. An explicit command to kill comes at S 4:89: "if they turn back, take them and kill them wherever you find them." The context of this verse seems to indicate an act of political treachery. However, many exegetes have broadened its application to all apostates. Other scholars make a similar case for death from S 9:12–14.

Several indications of the killing of apostates are found in the sayings attributed to Muḥammad. Al-Bukhārī transmits the *ḥadīth*, "He who changes his religion, kill him"; and "Wherever you find them, kill them, for whoever kills them shall have reward on the Day of Resurrection." One of three reasons why a Muslim's blood may be shed, according to Muḥammad in another *ḥadīth*, is when he "reverts from Islam and leaves the Muslims." However, in other traditions Muḥammad holds back his companions from killing apostates.

A consensus developed in all schools of Islamic Law that the male apostate must be put to death, while most schools agreed that female apostates should be dealt with in the same way. In modern times, influential South Asian Islamist author Maulana Abū al-Aʿlā Maudūdī affirmed the medieval consensus in his book, *The Punishment of the Apostate According to Islamic Law*.

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See also → Conversion; → Persecution; → Sin, Sinners

Apostle

- I. New Testament
- II. Christianity
- III. Islam
- IV. Literature
- V. Visual Arts
- VI. Film

I. New Testament

1. Issues in Defining "Apostle." Scholars have debated the meaning of ἀπόστολος (often translated "apostle"), since J. B. Lightfoot's seminal work (Lightfoot 1981; originally 1865). A few linguistic issues raised in the study of ἀπόστολος invite clarification. First, the word is used in a general sense as well as a semi-technical sense in the New Testament. A few of the 80 occurrences of ἀπόστολος are used to express the more generic idea of one who is sent (cf. John 13 : 16 where the noun is essentially defined by πέμπω, "to send;" "an ἀπόστολος is not greater than the one who sends him/her"). The occurrences at Phil 2 : 25, 2 Cor 8 : 23, and Heb 3 : 1 (Christ as ἀπόστολος), also fit this category. Most occurrences of ἀπόστολος, however, fit a semi-technical sense by referring to a group of leaders within the early church who fulfilled a role vested with some authority. Scholars have debated the defining features of this group and the resulting breadth of its membership. E.g., some scholars understand the "apostles" to be limited to the "Twelve" and Paul, while others recognize a number of additional New Testament leaders to belong to the apostolic group, including James and Barnabas. A complicating issue is the somewhat circular interplay between defining the sense of ἀπόστολος (e.g., a witness of Jesus' earthly ministry; cf. Acts 1 : 21–22) and identifying its referent (e.g., the Twelve).

A second linguistic issue in defining the term ἀπόστολος is its much-discussed etymology. Early

discussion of the origin of its New Testament usage explored its possible derivation from the Semitic *šālīah* concept. Though introduced by Lightfoot, Rengstorf has provided the most detailed argument for the connection between ἀπόστολος and the *šālīah* figure of rabbinic Judaism (Rengstorf 1952: 11–24). The *šālīah* speaks and acts not out of self-authorization but from the sender's authorization (cf. John 13 : 16). The greatest difficulty with this argument is the post-New Testament dating of the evidence for a direct connection between *šālīah* and ἀπόστολος. A resulting second stage of research emerged in the middle of the 20th century, arguing for the novelty of the New Testament ἀπόστολος concept. While most of these scholars argued for a solely Christian origin of the concept, Schmithals (1969: 114–192) traced its Christian usage to a gnostic redeemer figure. In recent research, there has been a modification of the view that ἀπόστολος is of Jewish derivation, focused on the HB/OT and the Jewish sending tradition as the source for both ἀπόστολος and *šālīah* concepts (Agnew 1986: 94).

2. Primary New Testament Usage: Paul and Acts. a. Paul. Occasionally, Paul uses the term ἀπόστολος in a general sense to refer to those sent by and acting for churches. In Philemon 2 : 25, Erastus is called "[the Philippians] ἀπόστολον." In 2 Corinthians 8 : 23, Paul refers to two believers who have assisted with the Jerusalem collection as "ἀπόστολοι of the churches" (cf. 8 : 19). Scholarly consensus understands these uses of ἀπόστολος to convey the sense of "messenger(s)."

Paul's other uses of ἀπόστολος carry a more restricted, semi-technical, sense. Typically translated as "apostle," these occurrences refer to those with specific leadership credentials and tasks. Paul mentions several such credentials, which include having witnessed the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 9 : 1; 15 : 3–8; cf. Acts 1 : 22); having been commissioned as an itinerant missionary or church planter (Gal 1 : 1, 8–10; Clark 1989: 56; Agnew 1986: 77); and performing mighty works in the spread of the gospel (Paul's "signs of a true apostle"; 2 Cor 12 : 12). Yet if Schnackenburg (1970: 301) is right that Paul "did not know of a uniform concept of apostleship [with] clear-cut criteria," care should be taken to allow for flexibility in Paul's sense(s) of the term.

Even in Paul's semi-technical use of ἀπόστολος, he refers to a broad group: the Twelve (δώδεκα), himself, and a number of other "apostles." Paul affirms his own apostolic role and authority as equal to that of the Jerusalem apostles (likely, the Twelve and James; Gal 1 : 19). In Galatians 1–2, he argues that his apostleship has come directly from Christ apart from human mediation (1 : 1, 10–12, 16–20; cf. ἀπόστολος in his other epistolary greetings: Romans; 1–2 Corinthians; cf. Ephesians, Colossians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus). In addition, Paul speaks of his distinctive role as apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11 : 13; Gal 2 : 7–9; cf. 1 Tim 2 : 7).