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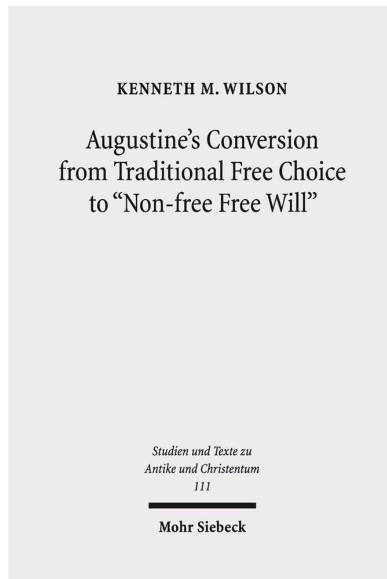

Kenneth M. Wilson

Augustine's Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to "Non-free Free Will": A Comprehensive Methodology

Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 111

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018. Pp. xxiv + 388. Paper. $141.00. ISBN 9783161557538.

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Hannah Arendt, in her *Life of Mind*, called Augustine of Hippo the first philosopher of the will. Indeed, Augustine's writings on free will and predestination have exerted profound influence on Western thought from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. It is only natural that the genesis and evolution of Augustine's discourse on the subject continue to attract the attention of modern scholars. The relationship between Augustine's early concept of the free choice and his later works, where he emphasized the importance of divine grace, has been a particularly contentious subject. While G. Letieri spoke of "two Augustines," other authors, such as G. Madec, P.-M. Hombert, and C. Harrison, played down the contrast between Augustine's early and late views and argued that his theology of grace did not annihilate the freedom of the will. Regardless of their differences, however, scholars have agreed on the importance of the year 396/397, when Augustine became bishop for his theology of grace and predestination. Kenneth Wilson, in a new book based on his Oxford doctoral thesis, aims to challenge the "consensus view" that Augustine changed his early vision of grace, predestination, and original sin in 396/397 in *Ad Simplicianum*. Wilson argues that the fundamental change in Augustine's theology did not occur until 411, when Augustine added the concept of *reatus*, universal guilt, to his concept of original sin. The error of the consensus view, Wilson argues, is rooted in incorrect dating of *Lib.* 3.47–54 and *Simpl.* 1.2, which he moves by fifteen years to fit his theory. Further, echoing Augustine's early critics Pelagius and Julien of Eclanum, Wilson argues that after 411 Augustine parted ways with Christianity and essentially reverted to the Manichaean heresy.

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Wilson devotes chapters 1–3 to Augustine's predecessors. Rather than focusing primarily on those authors who exerted influence on Augustine, such as Seneca, Tertullian, and Ambrose, Wilson sets out to review the entire spectrum of views on the problem of free choice versus determinism, from ancient Mesopotamian civilizations to early Christianity. Wilson's unconventional approach immediately shows in his division of all pre-Augustine concepts into two groups: the "traditional free choice" view, which originated in Judaism and was further developed by Christian authors, and "non-free free will" determinism, whose proponents included Pindar, Aristotle, Stoics, gnostics, Manicheans, Platonists, and everybone else outside Judaism and "traditional" Christianity.

Chapters 4–9 follow the progress of Augustine's vision of human will and predestination treatise by treatise, and chapter 10 deals separately with Augustine's exegesis of the Scripture. Wilson makes a point of analyzing the entire corpus of Augustine's works—indeed, a remarkable feat to achieve in 176 pages. Wilson correctly points out that commentaries on Paul's Epistles written in 394/395 led Augustine to understand the weakness of the human will and to consider the role of divine grace as a necessary element of any good act. The central thesis of the book—that little change occurred in Augustine's understanding of the will and original sin from 396 to 411—is argued in chapters 5 and 6, with the dating of *Lib.* 3.47-3.54 and *Simpl.* 1.2 at the focus of the discussion. It should be noted that, although the dating of many of Augustine's works is far from settled, the year 396/397 for *De libero arbitrio* and *Ad Simplicianum* is never questioned, as it is based on Augustine's own testimony in *Retractiones*. Against this consensus view, Wilson puts forward a conjecture that both texts were revised by Augustine in 411-412, with Augustine failing to mention these revisions in *Retractiones* or anywhere else. Wilson gives nine arguments in support of this conjecture for *Lib.* 3.47–54 (135–36). Wilson argues that, if 3.47–54 is omitted, "3.55 naturally follows 3.46." In a similar vein, he suggests that in the suspect part of the book, "Augustine's prior philosophical complaisant tone suddenly converts to sententious exegesis of the book of Genesis." Yet another argument is the frequent occurrence of biblical citations in 3.47–54, six out of fifteen in the entire third book. Some of the Wilson's arguments simply do not hold water: for example, the assertion that *Lib.* 3.4–11 and 3.47 treat divine foreknowledge in a similar way is inexplicably given by Wilson as a proof that *Lib*. 3.47 was changed around 411. The others could be considered if the dating were otherwise uncertain, but they can hardly be taken seriously against Augustine's clear statement in *Retract.* 1.9 that he finished the second and third books of *De libero arbitrio* together after becoming bishop.

Wilson's suggestion to move the dating of *Simpl.* 1.2 to 412 is even more surprising. This treatise was written in response to a letter from Augustine's friend Simplicianus and sent to him the year Augustine became bishop. Wilson contends that in *De praedestinatione sanctorum* (428/429) Augustine "neglects to mention that he revised it [*Ad Simplicianum*], also neglecting this fact in another work of the same period (*De Trinitate*)" (208). If Augustine indeed felt the need to revise the treatise in 412, why would he consistently neglect to mention this revision in *Retractiones*, *De*

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praedestinatione sanctorum, and elsewhere, considering that the original version had already been in circulation?

Wilson's suggestion to revise the dating of *Lib.* 3 and *Simpl.* 1.2 goes along with his argument that around 411 Augustine introduced a fundamentally new vision of original sin. The argumentation relies heavily on Augustine's use of the term *reatus* in *Simpl.* 1.2 and after 411. Wilson contends that *reatus* differs from *culpa* (the term that Augustine used since his early works) based on the Latin-English dictionary of White and Riddle, which translates *reatus* as "personal blame." In other words, a theological thesis is proved with the help of a bilingual dictionary. No attempt is made to use Augustine's texts to demonstrate that Augustine actually meant a different thing when he used *reatus* rather than *culpa*. The weakness of such argumentation speaks for itself. Elsewhere in the book (253–54), Augustine's concept of the free will is discussed as if Augustine wrote in English and our modern use of this term was relevant to the discussion.

In chapters 7–8 Wilson aims to show that after 411 Augustine broke with the Christian tradition and returned "to the Manichaean concept of inherited spiritual damnation" (280). Wilson is particularly critical of Augustine's defense of paedobaptism, arguing that for post-411 Augustine, "unbaptized newborns are damned (mildly) by God's predestination" (187). Interestingly, Wilson suggests that Augustine's argument is invalidated by "modern in-vitro fertilization and somatic cell nuclear transfer techniques" (229). Furthermore, Augustine's errors are said to be rooted in his poor knowledge of Greek and mistranslations of the Bible (249–55), as well as in his Neoplatonic conversion, renouncing of sexual intercourse, Manichaean past, the illegal appointment as cobishop of Hippo, and personal pride (281–82).

The weakness of the argumentation is not, regretfully, the only problem with the book. While Wilson remarks that Augustine's "logical fallacies and scriptural idiosyncrasies are too numerous to recapitulate here" (293), his own work is filled with mistakes and oddities of all kinds. I will mention just a few. Wilson lists Mani as the author of Cologne Mani Codex (311), a hagiographic work about Mani's life, revelation, and death. Furthermore, Mani is placed among "non Judaeo-Christian authors," while bar Daisan, who was no closer to "traditional" Christianity than Mani and even Platonist Alexander of Lycopolis, are listed as Christian authors. Wilson's assertion that in Manichaeism "by free will Primaeval Man abandoned his realm of light to condescend to matter and darkness" (35) has no basis in Manichaean texts, and no reference is given to support this statement. Wilson states that "Stroumsa summarized the response of Alexander of Lycopolis to Manichaean 'grace' " (35) and cites Stroumsa's article "Titus of Bostra and Alexander of Lycopolis: A Christian and Platonic Refutation of Manichaean Dualism" (1992). However, the article never mentions the concept of grace.

In chapters 1–3 Wilson excessively quotes from secondary sources; for example, the entire section on Tatian (47) is composed of quotations. Likewise, page 46 is composed of direct and indirect

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quotations from secondary sources (with two excerpts from a primary source added; so also 53, 54, 58, 60, 68). The following sentence exemplifies the book's style: "Löhr implicated Tertullian, Clement, and Origen as careless builders upon Irenaeus's unstable foundation, concluding, 'Plotinus does not refer to any sort of 'gnostic determinism,' when he is criticizing his Gnostic opponents,' trying to refute Dihle's contrary assertion." On the other hand, when it comes to Augustine's vision of grace and predestination, Wilson ignores key modern works on the subject, such as Hombert's *Gloria Gratiae: Se glorifier en Dieu, principe et fin de la théologie augustinienne de la grâce*, K. Flasch's *Logik des Schreckens: Augustins von Hippo de diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum I,2,* V. Drecoll's entries in *Augustinus-Lexikon* and *Augustin Handbuch* (e.g., "gratia," "Jacob et Isai," "praedestinatio"), and G. Lettieri's *L'altro Agostino. Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina*.

The book lacks every characteristic of a good work: a well-formulated thesis and clearly exposed arguments, accurate analysis of the sources and knowledge of the state of the art, attention to detail and absence of repetitions. It falls way short of mounting a viable challenge to the established views while doing justice neither to Augustine's oeuvre nor to modern Augustinian studies.

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