



Apocalypse Now

A Book Review

J. Louis Martyn, *The Anchor Bible: Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

Author

The impressive book, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, is written by J. Louis Martyn, Ph.D.¹ Dr. Martyn “is Edward Robinson Professor Emeritus of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He has written books and scholarly articles on various New Testament topics, notably *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*. He lives in Bethany, Connecticut.”²

Synopsis

“As the early church took shape in the mid-first century A.D., a theological struggle of great consequence was joined between the apostle Paul and certain theologians who had intruded into the churches founded by the apostle in Galatia. Writing his letter to the Galatians in the midst of that

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struggle, Paul was concerned to find a way by which he could assert the radical newness of God’s act in Christ while still affirming the positive relation of that act to the solemn promise God had made centuries earlier to Abraham.

“With the skill of a seasoned scholar and teacher, J. Louis Martyn enables us to take imaginary seats in the Galatian churches so that we may hear Paul’s words with the ears of the early Christians themselves. Listening in this manner, we begin to sense the dramatic intensity of the theological struggle, thus coming to understand the crucial distinctions between the theology of Paul and that of his opponents. We can therefore see why Galatians proved to be a momentous

turning point in early Christianity: In this letter Paul preached the decisive and liberating newness of Christ while avoiding both the distortions of anti-Judaism and his opponents' reduction of Christ to a mere episode in the epic of Israel's history. Like the Galatians of Paul's day, we can begin to hear what the apostle himself called 'the truth of the gospel.'³

Apocalypse

In his treatise J. Louis Martyn declares that religion constitutes "the various communal, cultic means — always involving the distinction of sacred from profane — by which human beings seek to know and to be happily related to the gods or God.

Religion is thus a human enterprise that Paul sharply distinguishes from God's apocalyptic^[4] act in Christ."⁵

"The genesis of Paul's apocalyptic — as we see it in Galatians — lies in the apostle's certainty that God has invaded the present evil age by sending Christ and his Spirit into it. There was a 'before,' the time when we were confined, imprisoned; and there is an 'after,' the time of our deliverance. And the difference between the two is caused, not by an unveiling, but rather by the coming of Christ and his Spirit."⁶

" . . . [T]he advent of Abraham's seed, Christ, far from being a sacred event in a religious history that includes Sinai, involves the termination of the sacred/profane distinction that was introduced . . . at Sinai. . . . With the advent of Christ, then, the antinomy [opposition; contradiction] between apocalypse and religion has been enacted by God once for all."⁷

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Conclusion

Therefore, in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians, J. Louis Martyn concludes that Jesus Christ is the end of religion, with its divisive sectarianism, ritualism, sacramentalism, legalism, pseudo-possession and false empowerment.⁸

More profoundly, by becoming human as Jesus Christ, God terminated all fallacious religious claims that man

could ever achieve divinity. Furthermore, from his very first earthly appearance, Jesus Christ has been and remains the eternal, revelatory presence of God himself. Now he invites human understanding, acceptance and celebration (Philippians 2:5-8; Revelation 3:20; 22:17).⁹ Soon he will become manifestly present and Parousaically enthroned (Second Coming). "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20)!

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Endnotes

1. J. Louis Martyn, *The Anchor Bible: Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 614.
2. Barnes and Noble, at search.barnesandnoble.com/Galatians/James-Louis-Martyn/9780385513777.
3. Ibid.
4. “Apocalyptic . . . Of or pertaining to a prophetic disclosure or revelation” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* [1976], s.v. “Apocalyptic”).
5. Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 588.
6. Ibid., p. 99.
7. Ibid., p. 39.
8. Tragically, while Paul undoubtedly acknowledged Jesus Christ as the end of religion, he (or perhaps the Pauline school) apparently introduced such requirements as the ecclesiastical subjection of women (1 Timothy 2:9-15) and the installation of bishops and deacons (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). This must have contributed (possibly, inadvertently) to the emergence of Christianity as a religion similar to all others.
9. See Dan O. Via, *The Revelation of God and/as Human Reception in the New Testament* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 245.

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