

J. Louis Martyn

J. Louis Martyn died at home on June 4, 2015, as a result of congestive heart failure. His beloved wife of sixty-five years, Dorothy Watkins Martyn, was with him to the very end.

Lou was born on October 11, 1925, in Dallas, Texas. He graduated from Texas A & M in 1946 with a degree in electrical engineering. He journeyed to Andover Newton Theological School, receiving the B.D. in 1953. (He would glance at Dorothy and insist, “I was just following this beautiful woman.”) He then went to Yale University, completing his Ph.D. there in 1957 with a dissertation on salvation history in the Gospel of John directed by Paul Schubert. A Fulbright fellowship enabled him to spend 1957-58 in Göttingen, where he studied with Joachim Jeremias and especially with Ernst Käsemann, whose interpretation of the apostle Paul formatively influenced Lou’s thinking. Following the year in Göttingen, Lou taught for one year at Wellesley College before being invited to Union Theological Seminary (NYC), where he became Edward Robinson Professor of Biblical Theology in 1967, a post he held until his retirement in 1987.

The first stage of Lou’s work gave us landmarks in Johannine studies, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1967, rev. 1979, rev. 2003) and *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (1978). The second stage gave us landmarks in Pauline studies, his Galatians commentary in the Anchor Bible (1997) and *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (1997). Assessments are readily available, including: Raymond Brown, “A Personal Word,” in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, edited by Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards (JSNTS 24; Sheffield, 1989) 9-12; John Riches, *A Century of New Testament Study* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1993), 180-87; Beverly Gaventa, “J. Louis Martyn,” *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by John H. Hayes (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:133-34; D. Moody Smith, “The Contribution of J. Louis Martyn to the Understanding of the Gospel of John,” in *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel* (3rd ed.; Louisville, WJK, 2003), 1-23; and William Baird, *History of New Testament Research: Vol. 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 604-22. His works occupy permanent places not just on our bookshelves, but on our desks and in our classrooms.

Lou’s influence also comes to expression in Festschriften. The first was edited by Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards, *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (JSNTS 24; Sheffield, 1989); the second by Robert T. Fortna and myself, *The Conversation Continues: Studies on Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). In recent years his work on Paul has generated widespread interest in apocalyptic theology, evidenced especially in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, edited by Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

Names, dates, publication titles—these all come easily to expression. What is far more challenging to convey to those who did not know him is the character of the man. I have heard the word “Mensch” invoked often for him, and that may be the best we have. For all his brilliance, Lou was not concerned with being brilliant. He squirmed at the expression “Martyn school.” He cared about the subject matter. What counted was Paul or, as Lou would say, “taking a seat in an early Christian congregation” without succumbing to the temptation “to domesticate the text, to cage the wild tiger” (*Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 211-12).

Lou also would say, "Life is more than work." He was utterly devoted to his family, delighting in his children, his grandchildren, and in recent years his great grandchildren. His many students and friends could be forgiven for thinking ourselves part of that extended family as well. He nurtured our academic work, to be sure, with generous reading and careful probing. He nurtured our friendship with one another and loved finding what he called a "youngster" whose work stimulated him. He also stood with us in many a life crisis and in times of great joy. Little in my life can match the pleasure of picking up the telephone and hearing that unique voice, "Is this *the* Professor Gaventa? Do you have a minute?"

Lou's life in all its parts reflected Christian commitment that was secure enough not to need publicity. In a statement he prepared for a class on I Corinthians in 1971, he wrote:

I believe that God is first and that his being first "makes all the difference." It means that he is there before I think of him and that he is the one who speaks life and thought and hope into existence. He stands at the base of every arrow which points to life; and his doing that is a large part of my understanding of what life is. That is to say, because God is first, I know that life is a *gift* from him.

For Lou's students, indeed for all who study the New Testament, Lou Martyn himself was a gift.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa
June 5, 2015