Excerpt Page from Douglas Campbell
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Excerpt from Preaching Romans: Four Perspectives*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Eerdmans, 2019), pages 40-58, an essay by Douglas Campbell titled,* ***"Romans and the Apocalyptic Reading of Paul."***

Revelation versus Foundationalism

[Louis] Martyn is important first of all because he affirms how Paul's gospel declaration rests on a revelation from God centered on Jesus. . . . The resulting reading of Paul is usefully known as "apocalyptic" because the Greek for "revelation," which Paul uses in Galatians 1:12 and elsewhere, is *apokalypsis*. It is critical to appreciate that this is a claim about *epistemology* or **truth criteria**. . . .

Epistemology raises a vital issue. Many of us frequently make various claims about what God is like and is doing as we expound the Bible, develop our theology, and preach and teach. But how do we know that what we are saying about God is true? This pressing question leads us to consider our truth criteria, this being the concern of epistemology. What criteria are we using to judge the truth or falsity of our statements? How are we measuring the accuracy of our God talk? Obviously a great deal rests on this — nothing less than whether we are speaking the truth about God or are lost in our own illusions — and at this moment it will prove helpful to take a short detour from Martyn to Karl Barth, to further clarify what is at stake.

Some time ago, Barth inaugurated a theological recovery of the Bible's approach to truth criteria over against the ostensibly sophisticated approach to truth of the modern university, which had led, in his experience, to complicity by his learned divinity professors in the inauguration of two world wars. Barth saw with prophetic clarity that modernity had been led astray by believing that the establishment of the truth or falsity of statements about God rested ultimately in the hands of humanity, who developed their most basic truth criteria for themselves and then judged statements about God to be true or false in their light. . . . The key problem, however, was that God's activity in Jesus was being judged by these prior criteria instead of these criteria being brought themselves under the judgment of God as revealed by Jesus. If Jesus was the revelation of God, as the creeds have always affirmed, then he has to be our key truth criterion and there can be no other; in that case we would be admitting other lords beside and even above *the* Lord. Jesus's truth must be lord over and judge all other truths. . . . In more biblical parlance, it is an *apokalypsis* or revelation. God reveals the truth about God as that truth is definitively disclosed by Jesus. . . .

But there is a sinister flip side to this insight. Barth also saw with great clarity what happens when people insist on asking if the truth that is Jesus's revelation of God is itself true, evaluating this truth with some other truth criteria that they have developed for themselves and that are then placed over the top of the truth that is God. This process is usefully known as "theological foundationalism," because people thereby construct their own foundations for evaluating God and God's truth (see 1 Cor. 3:10-15). The damage resulting from this hubris became particularly clear to Barth in Europe during the 1930s, when the vast majority of the German church, then the most sophisticated Christian nation in the world, cooperated enthusiastically with the rise to power of National Socialism, compounding its earlier compromises with aggressive German expansion in World War I. Barth articulated his insights sharply in a famous exchange with Emil Brunner in 1934, who had affirmed the possibility of deriving knowledge about God from the spirit of a nation's history and culture, independently of a direct relationship with Jesus Christ — in retrospect, a disastrous thing to affirm in Europe in the 1930s. Barth's charge against Brunner was that when the starting point for Christian truth that is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is abandoned, the church loses its way. It becomes incapable of distinguishing between God's commands and commands arising from its own culture, and evil exploits this confusion, resulting in complicity in oppression and violence. The Bible relates this awful spiral to "idolatry," and instructs in counterpoint that God must not be imaged, which is really just to say that God is in charge of what God looks like (Exod. 20:2-6; Deut. 5:6-10).

In view of all this, Martyn's sustained emphasis on the epistemology of revelation in Paul could hardly be more important, and this has to be the first key element in Paul's apocalyptic construal. It is the *sine qua non* of further insight. Without it we immediately lose our way, along with any possibility of adjudicating competing claims made by other Christians about God and God's claims on us.

Apocalyptic Storytelling

Now that we have realized that Jesus is the definitive truth concerning God as revealed by God, we need to attend closely to the content of this revelation. What does Jesus reveal? It will be hard to go much further without telling a story, and it is critical that this story is told in a certain apocalyptic way.

Stories are our way of describing people — how they act through time, what they intend, how they interrelate, and hence what they are like as people. Moreover, as Jesus reveals, God is personal in a way that exceeds most of our categories for even saying this. Paul constantly calls his converts to respond to God the Father, to his Son, our Lord, and to the Holy Spirit, who is also the Spirit of Jesus. So we now need to tell a story. But we must avoid falling into the same trap we just detailed as we tell it.

Stories often have a problem-solution structure and consequently work forward. They set up a difficulty, and then usually (although not invariably) the story's heroic protagonist overcomes it. (Think of all the superhero stories so beloved of the American public.) But Jesus is our definitive truth, so there is a sense in which we cannot know the problem before he, as the solution, arrives. We cannot tell the apocalyptic story forward, and trying to do so will betray it.

To know a problem in detail is always to know the solution already. Our problem might be a flat tire on our car. In this case, we know that the solution is to get the punctured tire patched at a garage, and then to get the doughnut tire off and the repaired tire back on. To know the problem is to know the solution, and when the solution arrives — the repaired tire — it adds nothing to our knowledge of the situation. When we tell this story forward, all the key information arrives with the problem, which is the punctured tire.

But if we tell the story of Jesus in this way, with some detailed account of our problem, we define why he is coming before he arrives and thereby take control over his truth. Our account of the problem, developed before his arrival, will dictate who he is and what he does. Hence our account of the problem will be our ultimate truth, and Jesus will arrive like a repaired tire and be fitted onto a problem that we have already worked out for ourselves — an instance of theological foundationalism, albeit undertaken with the best of intentions. Rather, if Jesus is the definitive truth, he will have to tell us why he has come. If we have a problem, he will have to tell us what this is after he has arrived. So the apocalyptic story will have to work *backward* or *retrospectively*. In the light of Jesus's arrival, we will see what our situation is really like. Insofar as we have a problem, his definitive solution will tell us what our problem is. So the story of God acting through Jesus must unfold like a memoir, a story that looks back on a life and reflects on its significance with hindsight, finding a meaning and direction only apparent with that hindsight.

Deliverance

Looking back on our past situation through the lens of Jesus's great battle with evil in the cross and resurrection, we do see that we have a problem; indeed, we see a human plight that is piteous (Rom. 7:24). But, crucially, this is now revealed to be, as Martyn said, a "four-actor," not a "three-actor," drama.[1] We learn this because Jesus *liberates* us from something. Jesus's salvation is a deliverance from the incarcerating state Paul calls the flesh. The flesh sins, but not simply of its own volition. It is deceived (7:7-13) and enslaved (7:14-25) by something Paul dramatizes as "Sin" in Romans 5-7 but describes elsewhere in terms of lustful passions. The location of these lusts in our very being (5:12) has introduced an ongoing propensity to sin and the inevitable consequence of this: a long spiral through corruption into death. And to make matters worse, we are beset from without by evil powers under the leadership of Satan (8:38-39). So the state of the flesh is indeed piteous. Consequently, Jesus's liberation of us from the flesh, as he lifts us into a new, resurrected, and spiritual state, discloses a radical account of our current problematic situation that Paul narrates in terms of Adam. The flesh cannot simply be repaired or healed. It must be *terminated* and *reconstituted*.

> *This is why in Romans 6 Paul uses drastic language about baptism as dying and rising with Christ. Jesus has come to deliver us from our enslavement to sin and to free us takes nothing less than participating, through the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' death and resurrection.*

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1. The problem humanity faces includes enslavement to evil powers who oppose Christ and God the Father (= four actors); the traditional reading merely posits a problem between humanity and God the Father mediated by Christ (= three actors): see Martyn, *Galatians*, 97-105 (Comment #3), 272-73 (#28), and 370-73 (#39).