

Book Review

The Reluctant Parting: How the New Testament's Jewish Writers Created a Christian Book. 2005. By Julie Galambush. Harper SanFrancisco. 2006 paperback edition. 326 pages. ISBN: 00608-72012.

Dr. Jacob Neusner, research professor of theology and senior fellow at the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard College, said, "This brilliant and original demonstration of how the New Testament opens the way to the Torah of Sinai, challenges both Christians and Jews to confront the founding writings of Christianity." Julie Galambush has a solid grasp of the subject matter. She is a long-time professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary, but previously she was ordained as a Baptist minister, and served for years as part of the ministerial team at the Interfaith Center in Columbia, Maryland. She holds a Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, and a PhD in Old Testament Studies from Emory University. At the completion of her studies, she converted to Judaism and is a member of Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, Virginia. In retirement she serves informally as a scholar in residence at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

With that background, her manuscript, now fifteen years old, still commands attention from any scholar in the tradition of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Her theme, of course, is to demonstrate how and why, by the end of the first century of the common era, the Jewish leaders in the Jesus movement took the Gospel into the pagan world, laying the groundwork for the emerging church, manifesting a distinct "religion" outside the confines of Judaism. The focal point of the texts in the New Testament, of course, is Jesus, the peripatetic teacher who came out of Galilee preaching nothing but the kingdom of God to the people of Israel until the day he died. But Galambush is concerned less about the content of Jesus' message than she is with the communities of Jesus' first generation followers. What we have here is a compelling picture of a "not-yet" church and a "no longer" synagogue – part Jewish sect and part Gentile religious association – struggling to find its footing under an oppressive Roman colonial administration. Forty years of accommodation and uneasy co-habitation within Judaism was thrown into a massive cultural mutation by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 ce. As a result, the next forty years was marked by a complex working out of the question "what does it mean to be a Jew without the temple?" An energetic segment of the Jewish leadership was answering the question by affirming that Jesus was the new temple, but in Galambush's reading, we see these claims in a deeper and more rich level of complexity.

Galambush organizes her text by treating the New Testament writings in the order that we see them in our familiar canon, starting with the synoptic Gospels, followed by the Acts of the Apostles and then the Letters of Paul. Whereas this allows the casual reader to grasp much of the background and context of the first century life of Palestine, the reader has to constantly be reminded that these documents originated at the end of the first century, decades after the initial oral tradition coalesced around the memories of Jesus and the letters of Paul. Perhaps treating all of the documents in the order they were written might yield a more coherent picture of the emerging written texts and the dynamics unfolding between the Jews and the Gentiles in the Jesus movement. By the time the Gospels were being written, why were "the Jews" being

vilified as hypocrites and liars, when the authors (with the exception of Luke) were themselves devout Jews? In many ways, the reluctant parting is a painful story. Galambush shows now the first century leaders in the Jesus movement, in seeking to re-establish their own Jewish identity while awaiting the return of their Messiah, instead created a new religion.

There are many questions concerning the origins of the Christian Church that remain unanswered to this day. For instance: if Jesus was crucified by the Roman procurator Pilate as an insurrectionist, why did his legions not pursue the disciples? They reconnoitered in Galilee, but the tradition tells us that within forty days, they were back in Jerusalem freely preaching the risen Christ – boldly and without significant opposition from the temple authorities. How was that possible? And how was the Jesus movement growing and being sustained in Jerusalem during those first fifteen years, right under the nose of the temple authorities who supposedly were responsible for turning Jesus over to their Roman overlords? Paul, of course, was off doing his own thing preaching Christ to “God-fearers” and the Jews of the diaspora throughout Asia Minor, until the Jerusalem Conference was convened under the authority of Peter and James the brother of Jesus in 49 ce. For the next decade, Paul’s mission intensified, and his letters to the fledgling churches throughout Asia Minor and into Europe were bringing some structure to the movement. Galambush helps the reader grasp the significance of each of these New Testament documents, especially when we get to the text of Hebrews and the so-called pastoral epistles.

She saves the Johannine writings – the Gospel, the three letters named for John, and the final book Revelation – to the end, and this is very important because they are so different from everything that has gone before. It is particularly important that the modern Christian reader understand how this Johannine community, an “outlier” from the Jesus movement mainstream, came to dominate the thinking of the second and third centuries as the church began to differentiate itself from Judaism and to shape what came to be known as orthodox doctrine. Today, of course, many Christians do take the Johannine stance very seriously, even though there is very little in any of the Johannine texts that might be considered as “history.” One of the reasons for this is that the Gospel of John served as the basic textual reference for the “high Christology” embedded in the early Christian creeds. And the creeds provided the foundation for what became orthodox Christianity. In fact, you can look at the Nicene Creed (d. 325 c.e.) and find just about every doctrinal statement about Jesus rooted in the Fourth Gospel. But just as important for us, you can also trace the most dreadful events in human history – such as heresy hunts and the Inquisition – to texts in the Gospel of John as well. Probably most significant is the way the Gospel of John’s language has calcified the mythological concepts forming the doctrine of the Incarnation, framed by a three-tiered universe that modern thinking has left behind. That being said, we are fortunate that we have other language and points of view in the NT so that we can, in fact, leave these outdated concepts behind. We can talk about Jesus as the Christ without resort to all this mythology. And Galambush makes a similar point by referencing the work of Paul as a counter-balance to John. Paul, himself, has to be deconstructed, but at least it is much easier with Paul to recover the Jewish roots of the NT writings and to make sense of the first century claims about Jesus as they were emerging.

To conclude, Galambush succeeds in demonstrating how the New Testament writings,

composed and compiled by Jewish leaders of the Jesus movement, moved so far from its Torah origins. One of the most remarkable things about the New Testament turns out to be the passion with which the authors fought to affirm their roots, the legitimacy of their cultural identities. This is difficult for most Christians to admit today, because the battles reflected in the texts take the form of attacks on a whole people, portrayed as misguided or at worst demonic. But, as difficult as it may seem, the New Testament authors wrote out of deep love and appreciation of their religious heritage, As Galambush concludes, “A new Jewish understanding of Christian scripture will not and should not undo the parting of Jew and Christian. But it seems right that we should at least pause to recognize how reluctant that parting really was, and perhaps one day view it as a parting of friends.”