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Hans Rollman

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# JOSEPH LEMUEL MARTIN (1810-1871) And the Voice of the Seven Thunders

By Hans Rollmann

History makes no exception for the Restoration Movement when covering with its cloak of silence the many individuals who once stood in the limelight of their day but now are all but lost to us. While history silences and hides, it also has the capacity to bring back to life, to recover and reconstruct a now forgotten past in the light of contemporary questions and concerns. Permit me, then, to introduce a pioneer preacher, Joseph Lemuel Martin, a man who rose from the most humble beginnings to become not only a successful minister and missionary in southern Indiana, but also “the” midwestern authority on questions of apocalyptic eschatology and the book of Revelation. His advice was so much coveted in his day that the editor of the *Christian Record* turned eschatological questions routinely over to him for reply, and his lectures on the Apocalypse of John were collected and published shortly before his death, upon the request of the many who heard them, and went through ten editions.<sup>1</sup>

The name of Brother Martin has now been so successfully erased from our collective memory that an otherwise fine academic thesis on Revelation 20 in the Restoration Movement does not even mention him.<sup>2</sup> Only those for whom eschatology was an equally living reality knew him and could conjure up his name in kinship, as did Robert H. Boll in his passionate private exchange with fellow editors of the *Gospel Advocate*.<sup>3</sup> Religious thinkers and historians in the Churches of Christ today have rediscovered eschatology as an important dimension of Christian faith and existence, and they are seeking to study the tracks and consequences that differing views about the end-time have

left indelibly impressed upon the course of our movement. Permit me, therefore, to resurrect from his long rest Joseph Lemuel Martin of Martinsburg, Indiana, the author of *The Voice of the Seven Thunders*.<sup>4</sup>

Brother Martin was born on November 14, 1810, in Shelby County, Kentucky, into the family of a farmer whose ancestors had come from Muesen in the Rhineland. These ancestors had once been elders in the German Reformed Church of Virginia, where they had lived with fellow Germans under the protection of Governor Spotswood.<sup>5</sup> As a child, Joseph shared his family’s pioneer life and limited education, interrupted only by the move when he was ten to the fertile region north of the Ohio from Louisville, Kentucky. The place where the Martins settled would later be named Martinsburg (Washington County, Indiana) after its founder, Joseph Lemuel Martin’s uncle Dr. Abner Martin; there, today, the family still exerts an important influence upon community and church life.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps his lack of a formal education, which was first limited to the rudiments of the three Rs, combined with a restless curiosity are the reasons that Joseph treasured education throughout his life—education was a value that ranked for him immediately after the religious life. The fourteen-year-old even disinherited himself in return for four months of further formal training in English and arithmetic, which enabled him to become a teacher as well as a cabinetmaker. His abiding support of a formal education was recognized in 1855 with a directorship on the board governing the newly founded Northwestern Christian University (the future Butler University) in Indianapolis.<sup>7</sup>

Religiously, the Martins were Calvinistic Baptists, and for young Joseph, the uncertainty of salvation became a crucible that for a while drove him into doubt and unbelief. Only the reading of the Bible saved him from this profound religious crisis and enabled him to accomplish a constructive religious viewpoint that left Frontier Calvinism's predestination behind along with its psychological torment. Joseph was baptized at the hands of yet another Indiana pioneer figure, Absalom Littell, without ever being required to demonstrate to the Baptist church his "saving experience."<sup>8</sup>

Young Brother Martin's first preaching efforts, shortly after his marriage to Nancy Martin in 1831, were by all accounts a disaster—so much so that his vocation became a hopeful paradigm for seemingly hopeless cases. The contrast of the early and the later Gospel preacher served his contemporaries both as an empirical witness of God's grace and as encouragement for others who began their ministry under similarly inauspicious circumstances.<sup>9</sup> In 1833, the Baptist church at Martinsburg, where he was a member, decided as follows:

to dispense with all human Creeds and confessions of faith and take the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as our only rule of Faith and practice, believing them to be the only infallible guide from earth to Heaven as being not the works of uninspired Men but indeed and in truth the words of God.<sup>10</sup>

The Restoration Movement in southern Indiana had taken its own course, even prior to the union of Christians and Disciples, under the leadership of John Wright. In the 1840s these restored denominations formed a brother- and sisterhood of congregations where once there had been Baptists, Old Christians, New Lights, and Tunkers.<sup>11</sup> Martinsburg's Baptist church, called Friendship, founded in 1821, had from 1830 on been part of the Silver Creek Baptist Association. The association, comprising churches from Floyd, Clark, Jefferson, Scott, Jennings, and Washington Counties, agreed unanimously in 1836 "to amend our Constitution by Erasing the Articles of faith (finding them Superfluous believeing [sic] as we do that the Scriptures are of divine Authority and the only infallible rule of faith and obedience."<sup>12</sup> In the following year, at Martinsburg, the association was replaced with an Annual Meeting.<sup>13</sup> In September of 1848 Martinsburg, with its 102 members, was the third largest church of the Silver Creek District, the largest being New Albany, with 180, followed by Silver Creek,

with 156.<sup>14</sup> Brother Martin had been made a deacon of the Martinsburg church and later preached, at first only occasionally as an unlicensed elder, but a few years afterward as a traveling evangelist and as Martinsburg's regular preacher. In September of 1852 when the preachers of the second judicial district of Indiana met at Salem, the county seat of Washington County, he was chosen a missionary to neighboring Harrison County, while keeping his residence and affiliation with the Martinsburg church.<sup>15</sup>

Martin's method of engaging in missionary work was to offer his service to already existing but often neglected churches, whether they were United Brethren, Baptist, or Methodist. In several cases he took over an existing congregation or formed a new one from among those who had followed his invitation or call to reform. The numerous entries in the *Christian Record* testify to his active missionary work and engagement in the reform cause. According to the obituary by his son Peter J. Martin, the overall statistics for Brother Martin's thirty-year ministry amounted to "60,000 miles of travel, 9,000 discourses, and 6,000 additions."<sup>16</sup>

In 1867 Brother Martin relocated to Cloverdale, Putnam County, and took over the "prophetic department" of the *Christian Record*. This influential midwestern periodical had recently, after a brief period of inactivity, been revived by Lem's friend James M. Mathes. The following year we have word that Martin intended to publish his lectures, held in a variety of Indiana communities, on the book of Revelation. The book appeared in 1870 and was heralded by its publisher, Mathes, with the superlative that it represented "by far the best exposition of that wonderful book, ever published." The printed lectures represented for both men a business success. The author was able to use his profits to establish himself near his son Peter J. in Bedford, Indiana, when Mathes purchased from him half of his share in the publication venture. Brother Martin did not, however, enjoy the success for long, for he died of a stroke on May 19, 1871, and was laid to his final rest in the Church of Christ graveyard at Martinsburg.<sup>17</sup>

*The Voice of the Seven Thunders* became for a short while a popular guide to the book of Revelation and was republished in our century as part of the Restoration Reprint Library. By then, however, it had been forgotten by subsequent generations, for whom any living eschatology, either premillennial or postmillennial, was only an embarrassing and unpredictable curiosity in an otherwise predictable rational religion. Only now, in an age less preoccupied

with denominational differences and open to wider varieties of religious experience—even those not necessarily our own, can we appreciate once again the eschatological engagement of our ancestors in the faith.

### The Voice of the Seven Thunders

In the beginning of the Restoration Movement, eschatology—in particular, the nearness of the end—played a greater role than we might suspect from our present general state of relaxation regarding the last things. The near disappearance of all expressions of a living eschatology may be due partly to eschatological excesses at the beginning and partly as a result of the twentieth-century struggle against Premillennialism within the Churches of Christ. The radical fringes of both Disciples and New Lights, who had made apocalyptic eschatology central in their vision of Christianity, quickly left the movement. Disciples such as Sidney Rigdon, Parley Pratt, and Isaac Morley went with other church members on the Western Reserve to the Mormons, while the New Light radicals such as McNemar, Dunlavy, Houston, and Worley defected to the Shakers. It may indeed be that these defections put a damper on apocalypticism, although not completely, as the retention of Premillennialism in Stone, Lard, Boll, and others witnesses. In a thought-provoking recent article, Richard T. Hughes has even made apocalyptic eschatology a key in the normative self-definition of the Restoration Movement and its eventual split into Disciples and Churches of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

The Premillennialists in the Restoration Movement were quite reserved in their judgment, and their view of the cosmic deliverance, perhaps unlike that of their apocalyptic-minded equals in other churches, seems to have been tempered by the movement's this-worldly ecclesiology and soteriology. There is, nevertheless, some value in viewing eschatology in relationship to culture. Premillennialism, the view of Christ's reign with his saints for one thousand years before the final judgment, is generally identified with an other-worldly culture-critical attitude, whereas Postmillennialism, the return of Christ after one thousand years of a human millennial reign, tends to be an affirmation of culture with a vision of a much more positive role for humans. It is with the latter that Martin's *The Voice of the Seven Thunders* can be identified, albeit with its own safeguards that relativize culture.

The vision of the end is of immediate relevance to Martin and his midwestern audience. The Apocalypse of John, literally understood, becomes a guide to God's will

in history. Using his biblical brush, Martin paints a panorama of church history in the darkest colors upon the canvas of an apostate church that was lost for 1,260 years "in the fog and in the mists of the wilderness of tradition, superstition and humanism."<sup>19</sup> During this period, people no longer had access to the Bible. They were shut out until the day that Martin Luther said, "The Germans shall have the scriptures in their living language."<sup>20</sup> History—as predicted by John of Patmos—witnesses in good Protestant fashion to the victory of God and his Word over the forces of ecclesiastical darkness. The availability of the Bible becomes the key to the cosmic drama unfolding before our own eyes. Even the nineteenth-century Bible Union, supported by the Restoration Movement churches, was, according to Brother Martin, an instrument in that divine plan.<sup>21</sup> It is through the service of the word that darkness gradually yields to light and that Christians have a decisive role to play in the ushering in of the Millennium. Martin wrote:

John, then, from the close of the thirteenth chapter to the first of the twentieth, gives us an account of the mighty conflict between the Word of the Lord and the doctrines of uninspired men. He shows to us, from every imaginable stand-point, all the conflicts the Word of the Lord has to pass through, until the Lord's people unite in following the Word of the Lord, and gain the victory, and bind Satan one thousand years.<sup>22</sup>

The author demythologizes the apocalyptic dimensions of the cosmic struggle and renders them more relevant for those engaged in the good fight. The battlefield of Armageddon is not a distant Holy Land but the cities of the American Midwest or wherever Christians live and work. Here lies also the pastoral value of the Apocalypse, for it is a battle with a certain and comforting outcome. He wrote:

The place where the battle will be fought is right here, in Indiana; right here at Unity, and over at Greencastle, and at Indianapolis—all over the State of Indiana, and in Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri, and Illinois; in all the Western States, and along the valley of the Mississippi, and over the ridge in the Eastern States; all over the continent of America, and over Europe; all over and throughout Asia, and down in Africa—all over the world, the battle of Armageddon must be fought,—the battle of the Word of the Lord against every error. A great battle, a mighty

struggle, too; all the earth will engage in it before it is through with, and the Word of the Lord will conquer.<sup>23</sup>

This battle is gradual, as is the release of the nations from the bondage in which they were kept by the “speckled beast” and the instruments of Satan, an apostate Roman Catholic and Episcopal Church. But it is a great constructive task in which Christians are involved. Martin exhorts, “Better work on with a good will; we will certainly accomplish this mighty work of bringing the nations to the feet of Jesus. Old Satan must be bound; but the Lord’s people can only do it by being in the grand work.”<sup>24</sup> This “grand work” has social consequences as well. It ushers in an unheard-of reign of peace and prosperity, but one which in turn will once more become a severe testing ground. Once the Millennium has been ushered in with its unprecedented peace and prosperity, its luxury and wealth “will draw their hearts away from God’s Word—from the Bible—until they despise it, and have their affections fixed on the things of earth and the wealth around them. . . .”<sup>25</sup> This period of final satanic temptation at the end of the Millennium is for Martin a clear indication that the presence of Christ during its tenure cannot be the literal rule of Christ on earth stipulated by the Premillennialists, for even a temporary activity and victory of the devil in the presence of Christ is unthinkable. So the presence of Christ during the Millennium is the reign among the saints in his church. Martin continued:

The saints can reign with him without his coming here, as well as if he does come—those that are resurrected. Jesus is reigning in his Church now, for his kingdom is not of this world; nevertheless he has a kingdom in this world, and he is the King ruling it; but he does it without being here personally.<sup>26</sup>

For Martin the availability of the Bible and the restoration of a church measured by the Bible were an indication of the nearness of the millennial reign, but not the millennial reign itself. Thus he preserved the tension between “the already” and “the not yet,” in which Christian existence is one of waiting and hoping but also of deciding and acting. Even the prosperity and peace of the millennial reign are

not without ambiguities and temptations, as the final loosening of Satan indicates. In fact, in the final end, after the Millennium, prosperity will no longer be a value in the apocalyptic scheme. John’s Revelation becomes once again a sure guide in revealing the totally gratuitous character of the new heaven and the new earth. Martin wrote:

We need not buy it; there is no gold asked for in exchange; the poorest man in all the land that begs his bread, that lies in the street with the dogs around him, if he longs for citizenship in this holy city on the new earth, and thirsts for the water of life, he can have it freely, as certain as if he were worth ten millions of money. If that had not been put in there by the Lord, I would not have known to-day but that it would take a large amount of money to buy a lot in that holy city on that new earth; but it is free, brother, for the poor and the rich, for the high and the low, for the bond and the free, for the beggar and the monarch, alike; it is offered freely if we are thirsting for it.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, Joseph Lemuel Martin’s Postmillennialism, with its ethical safeguards, its historicized and somewhat demythologized progression, its ethos of Word and proclamation, and the submission of the church under the Word, preserved no less than in Premillennialism the gratuitous nature of God’s reign, even where it attributed to humans a more active role. Even though some among us may find it difficult today to identify with the millennial thoughts and feelings of our ancestors, their ethos and pathos of life, lived while facing a horizon of hope, remain relevant for us as well who stand, no less than did our nineteenth-century ancestors, under God’s abiding judgment and grace.

HANS ROLLMANN is professor of religious studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. He is married to Marcella Rose Kames, a third great-granddaughter of Joseph Lemuel Martin. He also maintains a Restoration Movement Homepage with many historical texts and pictures, which can be accessed via the following URL: <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/restmov.html>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the first edition appeared in 1870, I am using throughout this paper the unchanged 6th edition of 1873, as reproduced by the Restoration Reprint Library: J. L. Martin, *The Voice of the Seven Thunders: or, Lectures on the Apocalypse* (Bedford, IN: James M. Mathes, 1873).

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the most useful M.A. thesis by Dan G. Danner, "A History of Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10 in the Restoration Movement" (Abilene Christian University, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Boll to J. C. McQuiddy, Sherman, Texas, May 26, 1915; manuscript letter in the possession of the Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University. I am grateful to Brother Craig Churchill for making this text available to me.

<sup>4</sup> The major source for the life of Brother Martin remains the biography by his friend James M. Mathes, prefaced to *The Voice of the Seven Thunders*, ix-xi. The full text of this biography is available on my RM Homepage referred to in note #1. In addition, I have used the many entries on Martin in *The Christian Record* as well as the unpublished church record of the Martinsburg, Indiana Church of Christ, now in private possession.

<sup>5</sup> On the Martin family, see especially the comprehensive privately issued genealogy of Marjorie Ann Martin Souder, "Peter Martin (1741-1807): A Revolutionary Soldier of Virginia Buried in Shelby County, Kentucky, His Washington County, Indiana, and Many Other Descendants" (Pekin, IN, 1989). An important Church of Christ preacher in the twentieth century, related to Joseph Lemuel Martin, was the pioneer missionary to Japan, Orville Bixler.

<sup>6</sup> *History of Washington County, Indiana (1884)* ([Salem: Washington County Historical Society, n.d.], 782-3.

<sup>7</sup> Martin, *Voice*, ix-x; Henry K. Shaw, *Hoosier Disciples: A Comprehensive History of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Indiana* ([St. Louis]: Bethany Press, 1966), 149, note 91. According to his will, Martin left to each of his daughters "one share of stock in Northwestern Christian University." See Lulie Davis, "Abstract of Wills of Washington County, Indiana, 1808-1902" ([Salem, IN: Washington County Historical Society], 1971), 69.

<sup>8</sup> On Absalom Littell, see Madison Evans, *Biographical Sketches of the Pioneer Preachers of Indiana* (Philadelphia: J. Challen, 1862), 42-56. The full text and a portrait are available on my RM Homepage (note 1).

<sup>9</sup> Martin, *Voice*, xiii.

<sup>10</sup> "A Record of the Church of Christ at Martinsburg," 3; manuscript in private possession.

<sup>11</sup> On the early unity efforts of southern Indiana churches, see, besides the histories of Shaw (note 8), Cauble (Commodore Wesley, Cauble, *Disciples of Christ in Indiana: Achievement of a Century* [Indianapolis: Meigs, 1930]), and Evans (note 9), especially David B. Eller, "Hoosier Brethren and the Origins of the Restoration Movement," *Indiana Magazine of History* 76(1980): 1-20. A convenient short summary of Wright's early unity efforts is also furnished in Winfred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1958), 218-20.

<sup>12</sup> "Minutes of the Silver Creek Association (1812-1835)," typescript in the possession of Christian Theological Seminary, Butler University, Indianapolis, 66 (71). I'm grateful to Ms. Laura Isental, librarian of CTS, for furnishing a copy of this item.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 71/2 (67).

<sup>14</sup> J. L. Martin, letter of September 1848, *Millennial Harbinger* (December 1848): 705.

<sup>15</sup> S. W. Leonard, "Minutes of the Salem Meeting," *Christian Record* (October 1852): 113-114.

<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Martin, May 25, 1871, letter to the *Christian Record* 5(1871): 285.

<sup>17</sup> On the financial success of the book, see the unpublished "Autobiography of James Madison Mathes," typescript, Christian Theological Seminary, Butler University, 108. I am grateful to Brother Roger Shouse, Indianapolis, for furnishing a copy.

<sup>18</sup> I am particularly referring to the stimulating study of Richard T. Hughes, "The Apocalyptic Origins of Churches of Christ and the Triumph of Modernism," *Religion and American Culture* (Summer 1992): 181-214.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, *Voice*, 308, cf. 191.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 260-1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 318-9.