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Buckley & Angell's "The Quaker Bible Reader" - Book Review

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BUCKLEY, P., and ANGELL, S. (eds.), *The Quaker Bible Reader* (Richmond, IN: Earlham Press, 2006), pp. xviii + 290. ISBN 1-8791-1716-9, Paper, \$19.95.

When I first held *The Quaker Bible Reader* (TBQR) in my hand, I found the title intriguing. The idea of producing a volume of reflections on the Bible written by Quakers seemed very worthwhile. I live in an age in which Liberal Quaker theology as I know it has splintered into an indeterminate number of variants, some with very little in common. Many Friends have turned their backs on the Bible. As co-editor Paul Buckley explains, this is particularly the case of those who feel ‘wounded by scripture’: women, people of colour, poor people, and lesbian and gay people (p. xvi). The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are often rejected wholesale along with the letters of Paul, while some room is left for the four gospels. So it is indeed refreshing to come upon a work dedicated to the study of scripture, which not only engages with both the Old and New Testaments but also and unabashedly proclaims its Quaker heritage.

Before I started reading, several questions arose: Will this book live up to its name? How will it reflect the immense diversity within modern Quakerism? The assertive presence in the title of the definite article is noteworthy. For years I have tended to agree with Henry J. Cadbury as he stated that there is no such thing as *the* Quaker approach to the Bible, cf. his 1953 Ward Lecture *A Quaker Approach to the Bible*. Given the tension between Cadbury and TBQR on this score, I could not help wondering whether such a move from ‘a’ to ‘the’ was justified. I shall turn to this below.

TBQR has a number of points in its favour. First, it wisely divides its attention evenly between the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. Secondly, while the editors and most contributors are based in the United States, the book includes essays from other shores such as Kenya (Esther Mombo), Mexico (Manuel Guzmán-Martínez), and Britain (John Punshon). Thirdly, it spans a wide theological spectrum from Liberal

Quakerism to pastoral and evangelical Friends. Curiously, the one who most openly declares his evangelical credentials is a European, namely, John Punshon (p. 268). He takes a critical stance toward George Fox's attitude to the Bible (p. 254).

The range and nature of the biblical subjects covered in *TBQR* is compelling. Perhaps the quality of the reflections offered is variable, but the commitment of the contributors is in evidence throughout. This book is not the exclusive territory of seasoned biblical scholars. While several essays are eminently academic, none is packed with intimidating jargon. This book is clearly aimed at the educated reader without specialist knowledge of the biblical world. Helpfully *TQBR* follows the overall disposition of the Bible itself in the sense that the first essay deals with the creation story in Genesis and the last with the book of Revelation. This arrangement reflects editorial humility vis-à-vis the biblical sources, and all contributions are characterised by an attitude of respect.

It seems to me that, to qualify for the Quaker label, several requirements should be met. First, this collection of essays would have to reflect the breadth and width of modern Quakers, going all the way from ultra-Liberal Friends to the staunchly evangelical. Such is only partly the case. Most contributors belong on the Liberal side of the spectrum, while four have different backgrounds. Three of these have been mentioned, the fourth being a Conservative Friend from the US. Secondly, the Quaker testimony to gender equality would necessitate a balance between female and male contributors. This balance is not attained. Five writers are female while nine are male. Thirdly, some significant minority voices would have to be represented, including lesbian and gay Friends. In this regard, one contributor identifies herself as lesbian (Becky Phipps). Fourthly, the geographical, cultural and theological diversity of Quakerism worldwide is such that containing it within a publication of 290 pages is a real challenge. The fact that only three countries outside the US are represented is a weakness. If this book had been presented as Volume One, one might expect the follow-up to fill some of the gaps. However, no such project is mentioned. So I draw the inevitable conclusion: on logical grounds, the definite article in the title is not justified. Indeed, for me this work would not have lost any of its appeal if it had been entitled *A Quaker Bible Reader*.

In the final analysis, does the positive outweigh the negative? My answer is an unwavering 'yes'. The female contributors may be in the minority, but the parts that have made this book memorable for me have been penned by women. Particularly moving are two contributions riddled with pain. Esther Mombo reflects on the life of her aunt Phoebe, who was struck by tragedy in the form of rape. No one in her African Christian environment knew how to help a survivor of rape and so everybody kept an embarrassed silence whenever they came near her. Phoebe was literally relegated to psychological exile within her own family and community, a socially imposed condition which aggravated her trauma and from which she never recovered. Mombo convincingly relates Phoebe's plight to several biblical stories of rape as she draws attention to the value of contextual Bible study.

Another significant case is that of Becky Phipps, who describes her long and arduous journey into and with the Bible. According to patriarchal church tradition, her lesbian orientation should bar her from engaging meaningfully with the scriptures.

Yet her essay on Ephesians proves that, in addition to resisting church tradition, she is capable of overcoming her personal discomfort as she sets out to seek and find insights in seemingly barren places. Ephesians is not exactly for beginners, but Phipps has the courage to wrestle with it long enough for it to yield some important spiritual gold nuggets.

For the concluding essay Janet Ross has combined linguistic and historical insights to provide a fascinating analysis of the book of Revelation. I have always found this legendary apocalypse difficult, but thanks to Ross' very helpful pointers I have begun to feel some measure of affinity with the ancient author. Throughout the Bible one of the primary concerns is idolatry, that is, the worship of false gods. In Revelation, idolatry takes the form of various beasts. Ross describes the enforced worship of the Roman emperor in the form of a hollow statue at the marketplace, which John must have witnessed. She goes on to compare this to the tribute that our own civilisation pays to powerful modern-day idols. She concludes: 'John is pointing us toward our responsibility... I have the ability to choose... to live from and with truth and integrity, turning away from the hollow beast' (p. 289).

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