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BEYOND THE MYTH: A REVIEW OF *THE JOURNAL OF ELIAS HICKS* AND *DEAR FRIEND: LETTERS AND ESSAYS OF ELIAS HICKS*

JIM LE SHANA

For many evangelical Friends, the name of Elias Hicks is as heartwarming and nostalgic as Lex Luthor, the Joker, or the Grinch. He is infamous as the bad, liberal guy in Quaker history who tried to derail the direction and progress of Friends as a vital and healthy Christian movement in America a long time ago, and who might have succeeded if it were not for the likes of Super-Gurney (who came to save the day). He is typically known for two specific things: stirring up the dreaded splits that took place among Friends over theological issues and serving as the founder and namesake of the Hicksites. Beyond that, most evangelical Friends would be hard pressed to give many details about the contours of his life, experiences, and beliefs. However, as Paul Buckley suggests, “the myth of Elias Hicks has overgrown the man.”¹

In the last few years, Buckley has taken on an enormous task that will prove helpful and instructive to Friends of all stripes, editing and republishing *The Journal of Elias Hicks* (2009) and *Dear Friend: Letters and Essays of Elias Hicks* (2011).² Far from a villainous cartoon character, and certainly not a stick figure, these volumes remind us that Hicks was a real person with a variety of feelings, challenges, opinions, and problems who also happened to live at the epicenter of arguably the most dramatic time of change that Friends have ever experienced as a group.

It is not difficult to understand why many people today might get the wrong idea about the identity and beliefs of Hicks. The problems likely began during his lifetime and shortly thereafter. One contemporary Quaker, Stephen Grellet, thought that his “assertions were so covered that few understood him fully,”³ which helps to explain why he thought so many Friends supported Hicks—they didn’t always grasp the implications of what they were hearing. As the lightning rod of controversy and conflict in the 1820s among

Friends, detractors like Grellet probably cast Hicks in a more negative light while his supporters tended to minimize his weaknesses, errors, and extremes. The first version of his *Journal* was published in 1832, just a short time after his death. The sympathetic and overactive editors eliminated as many as 100 pages from the original manuscript, purging many passages that might have portrayed him unfavorably or stirred up additional trouble in the aftermath of the denominational splits. Buckley discovered in his research that “thousands of changes were made, ranging from individual words to the elimination of an entire trip through the eastern shore of Maryland and Delaware.”⁴ On at least one occasion, the editors actually composed and inserted their own text into the *Journal* to make Hicks look good. They excised a lengthy discussion of his horse racing and other “vain activities” as a youth, during which time he said that he “became considerably hardened in sin and vanity in the course of this season.” In its place, they published: “I did not give way to anything which was commonly accounted disreputable, having always a regard to strict honesty, and to such a line of conduct as comported with politeness and good breeding.”⁵ Quite a change (and an ironic statement for the editors to even think of writing)! The original editorial committee had a particular agenda and story to tell. What remained from their efforts was a caricature of the man rather than seeing beyond the myth to his real life and experiences.

While every story has more than one side, and it is important to see from a variety of angles to gain comprehension of a subject, the full perspective that has been missing most blatantly from the legend of Elias Hicks has been his own. Until now.

As someone who has read the 1832 version of Hicks’ *Journal*, I concur with Larry Ingle (who wrote the forward for Buckley’s edition), when he labeled it “more than a little boring.” I believe that Ingle was gracious. The original editors published a truncated and tedious travel diary with brief statements about what happened in the meetings that Hicks attended. Its pages revealed very little about his wife, family, farm, or friendships, and obscured by selective omission his doctrinal beliefs and the ecclesiological controversies. Although titled, *The Journal of the Life and Religious Labours of Elias Hicks*, it more accurately should have been called *The Journal of the Travels and Religious Labours of Elias Hicks*. A lot of the life was taken out. Even the most motivated Hicks fan would have found the repetitious recounting of the “satisfactory meetings” at such-and-such a place to

be dull and dry. I remember thinking at the time when I first read the 1832 version, that I had just re-read the same 50 pages, 9 times.

Buckley's version of the *Journal* is a great improvement on the original publication and there are many things to be commended. Based on Hicks' hand-written manuscript, he reinserts the multitude of passages that were taken out by the 1832 editorial committee (each with an explanatory footnote to highlight the change). His prefatory comments, "Some Notes on the Text," are interesting and instructive regarding his methodology and they also reveal a glimpse of his aim for this volume. When writing about the erstwhile mundane topic of his presentation and techniques for punctuation, Buckley explains that he makes these alterations "to retain the characteristics of his voice."⁶ That phrase seems to summarize his mission in the entire *Journal* (and to some extent, the *Letters*, as well). He helps the reader to hear Hicks' full voice. This is also true in relation to several other additions made by Buckley.

Although Hicks would have undoubtedly preferred a plainer look, Buckley included some illustrations and maps in the *Journal* which contribute significantly and positively to the overall presentation. The illustrations primarily feature Friends Meeting Houses that Hicks visited, including the inside of the Mount Pleasant Meeting House (where a near riot erupted in 1828). The maps portray the routes of a few of Hicks' grueling missionary journeys. It is one thing to know that he took 59 major trips in 52 years, it is another to see the scope and pathway of those adventures. To be fair, the original readers of the *Journal* would not have needed such aids because they would have had a good picture in their minds' eye of the locations and routes that Hicks mentioned.

Another positive editing choice of Buckley's relates to the spacing, lay-out, and varieties of headings designating dates, places, and several topics. These additions to the text of the *Journal* help to break up the long paragraphs and make it all more readable. Supplementary resources printed at the end of both the *Journal* and *Letters* provide valuable research tools, including the indexes, listing of place names, and the brief biographies of several key individuals mentioned in the texts.

One of the main ways in which an editor makes a contribution to the original work of another author is through the use of the footnotes. Buckley's notations throughout the *Journal* and *Letters* are especially helpful and...well... noteworthy. First of all, they

provide clear and simple guidance for the non-Friends reader who has ventured unwittingly into the strange world of Quaker nomenclature. The explanation of terms such as “Yearly Meeting,” “Queries,” and “Birthright Member,” show that Buckley has in mind a wider audience than those who might attend a gathering of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. In keeping with his desire to let Hicks speak in his own words, Buckley also retained even arcane 19th century terminology that would confuse the average contemporary reader, but with helpful explanations and definitions. A glossary of Quaker and period terms in the back of both of the books assists with this, as well.

The footnotes also show meticulous attention to detail in the use of the original materials and a wide array of additional background information, including historical commentaries and brief biographical sketches, providing richness to the overall context and story line. In addition, a plethora of biblical references predominate in the footnotes of both the Journal and Letters, showing the vast number of verses that Hicks either quotes specifically or alludes to in his writing. Sometimes, Buckley even points out when a phrase that the reader might think was from scripture, actually originated from another source (such as the phrase “the only hope of the saint’s glory” from the Journal of *another* Quaker minister published just a few months before Hicks wrote it).⁷ On more than one occasion while reading Buckley’s footnotes, I was moved to say aloud, “how did he know that?!” Overall, the notations show the breadth of Buckley’s background and his commitment to diligent research. Indeed, I was pleased when I was able to find *anything* amiss in the volumes as a whole, just two typos in each (such as the normal bane of the name: “Fiends” instead of “Friends,” all no doubt owing to problems with the publisher), such was his degree of excellence throughout.

So, what does Hicks have to say about himself? What does his regained voice reveal? Plenty, but not as clear of a picture as one might hope or imagine. The cartoon nemesis (or hero, depending upon your perspective) proves to be a much more complex individual than painted previously and not as easily defined by neat theological categories—certainly not by the simple “liberal” appellation he often receives.⁸ Hicks forcefully opposed some of the groups typically thought of as liberal theologically or even non-Christian. He often refuted “the schemes of the Universalists, atheists, and deists” using “scripture and reason.”⁹ Although he had evidently read Thomas Paine’s writings,

far from being a devotee, he argued that his *Age of Reason* was “falsely so-called.” He lamented that some other Friends had been seduced by Paine’s “dark insinuating address” and were now in danger of making “shipwreck of faith and a good conscience” by yielding to the “spirit of great infidelity and deism” it engendered.¹⁰ In response to this pernicious “deism and infidelity,” he preached “how all might come to the knowledge of and firm belief in the outward manifestation of Christ as set forth in the scriptures.”¹¹ At times, Hicks could sound almost evangelical in his tone and emphasis, even in relation to such important and controversial topics as the Bible, Jesus, and salvation.

HICKS AND THE BIBLE

Based on the liberal label, many Friends today would be surprised to see the hundreds of times that Hicks quoted from the Bible either directly or indirectly. This was the “common spiritual language” of the day (as Buckley points out) and Hicks spoke that dialect well. He frequently journaled occasions when he read from the Bible as one of the most important activities in his life, stating that “I have always delighted in reading them in my serious moments—in preference to any other book from my youth up,” and “I apprehend that I have read them as much as most other men and none, I believe, has received more profit from them than I have.”¹² Although he acknowledged the primacy of the Holy Spirit or Light Within (and various other terms he used synonymously) in matters of revelation, he interestingly and repeatedly resorted to the Bible as the foundational proof for his various spiritual assertions. He often preached “the truths of the gospel—proving from clear scripture testimony” his beliefs, “accompanied with the demonstration of the Spirit in harmony with right reason.”¹³ By his behavior he seemed to hold Scripture in high esteem and as authoritative. However, he also said, “mere Scripture has but a very little part in forming my faith” and that by accepting the Bible as sacred, Friends “have all been more or less dupes to tradition and error.”¹⁴ He thought that many were guilty of idolatry, placing the written words of God above the Word of God (Christ), and that the wide variety of interpretations of Scripture yielded divisions and separations among believers (a somewhat prophetic irony).¹⁵ He mused that “it might be as well” if the Bible was “entirely done away” (although he said this was not his “settled belief”), and that God could raise up new authors to write new Scriptures for a new generation that

“likely would be much better than those written so many hundred years” before.¹⁶

HICKS AND JESUS

In relation to Jesus Christ, Hicks again repeated statements that sounded evangelical in tone. He argued that a “real belief in God and Christ as one undivided essence” was one of the “principle requisites to the being and well-being of a Christian.” He also acknowledged the dual nature of Christ, asserting that he was both “Son of God and Son of Man.”¹⁷ He identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world,” and advocated his claims of exclusivity, restating that Jesus was “the Way and the Truth and the Life” and that “no man cometh unto the Father” but by him.¹⁸ Hicks also held a variety of other views in relation to Christ that caused consternation among his critics. Although he claimed to maintain a belief in the Virgin Birth (contra many accusations), he equivocated at times when asked about it directly, adding to suspicions of heresy. On more than one occasion he stated that the topic of the Immaculate Conception should be a non-issue among Friends and that “no certain evidence can possibly be produced to prove... who is, or who is not, the real father of the fleshly or natural body of Jesus.”¹⁹ Hicks also thought that Jesus didn’t experience the full measure of Sonship until the Spirit descended on him when baptized by John (suggesting that he was less divine prior to that).²⁰ For Hicks, Jesus seemed primarily a model for how someone should live, frequently referring to him as our “Great Pattern” or “Perfect Example.”²¹

HICKS AND SALVATION

The fog surrounding Hicks’ perception of Scripture and Jesus rolls over into his views concerning soteriology. He opposed the doctrine of “universal salvation” (or “ultimate reconciliation” as it is sometimes referred), believing that those individuals who die “in their fallen state” will “be eternally miserable... under the excruciating pains of death.”²² However, he did not believe that eternal punishment was anyone’s foreordained destiny. He argued against “predestinarians,” stating that “all might be saved” through “regeneration through the operation of the one essential baptism of the holy Ghost.”²³ Hicks

acknowledged that the means of salvation came “by grace... through faith... not by works” (quoting Ephesians 2:8-9, a favorite for evangelicals), and that it wasn’t enough to read, hear, or know about Jesus, but to be saved a person needed to “believe in and become settled on the eternal and unchangeable rock of salvation, Christ the Divine Light, not only as a light to enlighten the Gentiles, but to be God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.” He often proclaimed “the glad tidings of life and salvation through Jesus Christ”... because, as he said, “as in Adam... all die, so in Christ... all are made alive.”²⁴ He frequently preached to people “not of our profession” and the irreligious, writing with evident pleasure whenever he learned that someone became a convinced Friend.²⁵ At funerals, his favorite sermon could be summed up as “get right with God before you die, too.”²⁶ Contrary to the popular misconception that “Quakers do not proselytize,” Hicks was an active evangelist, attracting great crowds and preaching his gospel to them.²⁷ But Hicks was no Charles Finney. How this salvation came about was the chief sticking point. In relation to the atonement, he thought that Jesus’ death only saved the Jews while obliterating the Old Testaments laws. He believed that it was a “vulgar error” to think that the “redemption of the immortal soul from the bondage of sin” could come through “the death or outward dying of Jesus Christ on the outward wooden cross.” He thought that Christ’s death was simply a “figure” of inward redemption, suggesting that His physical death and shed blood were neither efficacious nor sufficient to atone for the spiritual sins of mankind. He abhorred the thought of immediate justification without sanctification.²⁸ In his introduction to the *Journal*, Buckley observed that Hicks spoke “only as led by the Holy Spirit or Inward Light.” That statement may or may not be accurate. That Hicks *believed* it to be true is evident from his many comments to that effect. However, the legitimacy of this claim was precisely the bone of contention for Orthodox Friends who insisted that he misrepresented God in his preaching and views on *each* of these aforementioned theological topics.

Although clearly well-read and bright, a logical thinker and an excellent debater, when it came to important topics such as the Bible, Jesus, and salvation, Hicks revealed himself in his *Journal* and Letters as primarily a preacher, not a systematic theologian. Hicks seemed unaware of a variety of other inconsistencies in his beliefs and behaviors. For example, he thought Friends should stay separate from contamination by the world and its sinful, non-believing population, yet he frequented meetings with them in ministry. Although he warned

Friends to avoid joining with people of other faiths in any of the various Bible, missionary, or philanthropic societies that sprang up during that era, so as to avoid the threat of spiritual compromise, he remained unconcerned and tolerant with heterodox views even closer to home, *within* the Friends fold. In fact, he came to refer to his co-religionists (after the 1827 splits) as “Tolerants” for this very reason.²⁹

While it is impossible to compartmentalize Hicks into a tight theological box, the lack of consistent doctrinal clarity in his *Journal* and *Letters* may contribute to a greater understanding for scholars of the theological tensions, disagreements, and confusion among Friends in the 1820s. In addition, Hicks’ expanded testimony in Buckley’s editions makes more clear the direct role he played in the events and circumstances leading up to and following the denominational separations. Far from a casual by-stander at the end of his life and ministry, he was an active participant in the controversies. Contrary to the myth that Hicks avoided conflict and didn’t anticipate the divisions, this material suggests that he knew it was coming and may have self-consciously advocated it. Early in that decade, he wrote, “it would not be safe to hide or keep from public view one necessary truth, for fear of breaking unity in Society.” When a group needed reformation (a desire he often applied to Friends), he argued that “nothing short of a breach of unity” was in order.³⁰ Unfortunately, space does not permit a full explication of other interesting aspects of the conflicts, let alone a variety of other worthwhile topics found in Hicks’ writing.

Taken together, Buckley’s editions of Hicks’ *Journal* and *Letters* will provide scholars and laymen alike with a fresh and more complete perspective into the mind, heart, and experiences of this iconic, and at times, enigmatic Quaker. With these excellent tools in hand, a simple, two-dimensional cartoon caricature of Hicks will no longer suffice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Paul Buckley, ed., *The Journal of Elias Hicks* (San Francisco: Inner Light Books, 2009), p. xix.
- 2 Paul Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend: Letters and Essays of Elias Hicks* (San Francisco: Inner Light Books, 2011).
- 3 Benjamin Seebohm, ed., *Memoirs of the Life and Gospel Labours of Stephen Grellet* (London: A.W. Bennet, 1861), p. 109.
- 4 Buckley, ed., *Journal*, p. xviii-xix.
- 5 Emphasis added. Compare *Ibid.*, p. 5 with Elias Hicks, *Journal of the Life and Religious Labours of Elias Hicks* (New York: Isaac T. Hopper, 1832), pp. 8-9.

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- 6 Buckley, ed., *Journal*, p. xxii.
- 7 Ibid., p. 346; Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, p. 254.
- 8 Such as that described by Bliss Forbush in *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956).
- 9 Buckley, ed., *Journal*, p. 54.
- 10 Ibid., p. 77.
- 11 Ibid., p. 98.
- 12 Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, pp. xviii, 256. See also Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 8, 139.
- 13 This was often his three-fold test of truth (the Bible, the Spirit, and Reason), rather than the Inner Light alone—an epistemological approach that resonates well with an evangelical perspective. Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 41, 372. See also Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, pp. 83, 87, 105, 134, 141, 1202-203.
- 14 Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, pp. 59, 158.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 54-55, 60-61, 95.
- 16 Ibid., p. 96.
- 17 Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 149, 160, 162, 349.
- 18 Ibid., p. 78, Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, p. 61.
- 19 Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, pp. 108, 137, 140-141, 156.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 135, 142, 168, 214, 257.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 141, 143, 152.
- 22 This description of “hell” as well as at least one statement referencing a heaven were edited out of the original edition of the *Journal*, while his correspondence featured a number of discussions of the afterlife. See, Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 177, 243-244; Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, pp. 87, 99, 110, 118, 261.
- 23 Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 57, 167.
- 24 Ibid., pp. , 199, 202-203, 240, 309; Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, p. 92.
- 25 Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, p. 93, Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 31, 36, 38, 64, 93, 113, 263, 309, 447.
- 26 A lengthy message of this nature sparked by a vision was eliminated from the original edition of the *Journal* in which a young man took ill and died shortly thereafter. See Buckley, ed., *Journal*, pp. 36-37, 233, 286.
- 27 Ibid., pp. 32-33, 47, 47, 91, 113, 430, 441. As an example of this misconception among early American historians, one scholar observed that “the Quakers did not believe in proselyting” unless by quiet example. James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 275.
- 28 Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, p. 78, 98, 170-171. It is interesting to note that the editorial committee of the original publication regularly removed Hicks’ statements that referenced the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. See *Journal*, pp. 210, 266, 292, 330, 362.
- 29 Buckley, ed., *Dear Friend*, p. 219.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 145-146, 156-157, 211, 222, 229.