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Response to Stephen Angell and Jim Le Shana

Paul Buckley

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RESPONSE

PAUL BUCKLEY

Both reviewers highlighted adoptionism as an important aspect of Elias Hicks' beliefs, and I think rightly so. This is one of his most unorthodox opinions and one that deserves closer attention.

Steve Angell gave a good historical account of adoptionism and, while it is possible that Elias Hicks came to know about adoptionism from something he read, I believe his espousal of this concept was the product of a largely self-educated mind trying to make sense of the whole of the New Testament. Let me sketch out what I believe were the major elements in his interpretation of scripture.

To begin, Elias Hicks accepts the Bible as a true account of events from the creation of the world up to the time of the Apostles. He is aware of scriptural inconsistencies and the likelihood that errors were introduced into the text over the course of centuries of copying and translation, but his attitude seems to have been that the resulting disputes touch on nothing essential to his faith—nor ought these to be points of dispute within the Religious Society of Friends. He willingly accepts that different people have different interpretations of scripture, but seems to wish they would treat these as nothing more than interesting items for discussion. The problem, as he sees it, is that some always will insist that others accept one particular interpretation and are willing to engage in persecution to enforce those beliefs. This is, of course, not unique to Friends, but rather a recurring theme in the history of human religious societies.

Next, I believe Elias Hicks particularly valued the Epistle to the Hebrews—especially chapters eight and nine—as a key to understanding scripture. The contrasts Hicks makes between the shadows of the Old Testament and the corresponding substance in the New Testament echoes the way these terms are used in Hebrews. Three verses strike me as being central to understanding how Hicks read scripture and, therefore, Jesus' mission.

Hebrews 8:7: “For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second.”

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Hebrews 9:10: “Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.”

Hebrews 9:15: “He [Christ] is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

As Hicks reads the gospels, Christ had two distinct missions. The reason for the first mission is explained in Hebrews 8:7. A New Testament was needed because of the failure of the Jews to live up to the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Jesus came to fulfill and end the covenant with the Jews. In Matthew 3:10, John the Baptist speaks of cutting down every tree that does not bear good fruit—clearing the way for the new—and five verses later, Jesus continues the theme when he says he has come to fulfill all righteousness. The baptism that immediately follows is that fulfillment—it’s the final act of submission by which Jesus demonstrated that it was possible for a human being to live faultlessly under the Law of Moses.

For Hicks, justice is an essential characteristic of God. If the requirements of the first covenant had been too demanding for a mere human to meet, then God would have been unjust in imposing them. When Jesus fulfills those requirements, he proves God’s justice and the Jews failure. But if he does so as the divine Son of God, it isn’t sufficient—of course God can live a faultless life. On the other hand, if Jesus was merely human until after his baptism, the difficulty is eliminated. A fully human Jesus fulfilled all the requirements and rituals of the first covenant—all the “meats and drinks,” all the “carnal ordinances” listed in Hebrews 9:10. He then submitted to baptism—the last of the “divers washings” and the final ritual. In so doing, Jesus completes his first task as an outward, fully human messiah for the Jews.

With the descent of the Holy Spirit and the declaration voiced from the heavens, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17), Jesus is adopted as the true, fully divine, but still fully human, Son of God and embarks on his second mission—to inaugurate the new and everlasting covenant.

For Hicks, one essential aspect of that mission is to sweep away all the outward rites and rituals—both personal and corporate—of Hebrews 9:10. Hicks understands the Pauline contrast of spirit and

flesh (see, for example, Romans 8) as distinguishing between true and false religion. On one side stand true Christians (i.e., Quakers) “who walk not after the flesh” (Romans 8:1). On the other, he finds both Jews *and* those who call themselves Christians but still depend on outward rituals.

In Hebrews, the fleshly priests of the first covenant are supplanted by Jesus, the eternal, spiritual high priest. In Hebrews 5:7, it says “in the days of his flesh ... [Jesus] offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death”. But God did not save him and in his final act of faith, Jesus is “obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:8) and he does this “to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” This last is from Hebrews 9:26, and Hicks looks back eleven verses to see that the sins that were put away are identified as “the transgressions that were under the first testament.”

This interpretation accepts the facts of the gospel, but of course, sees different meaning in those events. In keeping with his understanding of true Christianity as entirely inward, the physical crucifixion could only be understood as the outward capstone on an outward covenant. At the same time, Jesus’ acceptance of crucifixion was the perfect example for the true Christian—obedience even unto death. And just as Jesus died outwardly for outward sins, we must die inwardly for our sins. When we thus die to our own wills, we are saved by our faith—faith made manifest in total submission to the will of God. Outwardly, this may appear to be salvation by works, but critically, the works are not those chosen by the individual—those, no matter how good they may appear would have no spiritual merit (*Letters*, pp. 115-118). We are saved only when, out of faith alone, we freely choose to do that which the Inward Light of Christ directs us to do.

I won’t say that this is an entirely consistent interpretation of the scriptures. Elias Hicks never attempted a systematic explanation, nor can I be sure that I have been completely accurate in my attempt to reproduce his thinking, but I believe that only by looking for the scriptural basis for his beliefs can we make sense of this man.

ENDNOTE

1. Paul Buckley, ed. *Dear Friend: Letters and Essays of Elias Hicks*. San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2011.