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# ELIZABETH BATHHURST AND TRUTH'S VINDICATION

MARY GARMAN

The contributions of such early Quaker women as Margaret Fell, Mary Dyer and Mary Fisher have now become familiar to us as coming from leaders in their own right, but women also contributed in ways theologically significant among the first generation or two of Friends. Elizabeth Bathhurst deserves consideration alongside such formidable Quaker apologists as Robert Barclay and George Keith, and while her writings are not as voluminous, they certainly merit special attention when considering early Quaker approaches to the Bible. In seeking to answer charges against Friends regarding matters of authority and their attitudes toward Scripture, Bathhurst not only outlined the Quaker approach to such matters, but she also witnessed effectively to that which the Scriptures claim about themselves.<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE LIFE OF ELIZABETH BATHHURST

Elizabeth Bathhurst was born in 1655 into what sounds like a family of religious seekers. Having been Presbyterians, she became a convinced Friend in 1678 along with her father, Charles Bathhurst, and stepmother, Grace Bathhurst, and her brother and sister. The story, told by John Whiting in *Persecution Exposed in some memoirs relating to the sufferings of John Whiting and many others of the people called Quakers for conscience sake, in the West of England*, was that some Quakers visited her family, “and sitting with them...the presence of the Lord was manifested among them, and a visitation of his living power was extended to them; the word of life was opened, the ancient path of the just.”(327) From this powerful encounter, they all had a sense of the time being nigh when they should turn from darkness to light.

We have very little personal information about Elizabeth, and what we do have is somewhat difficult to interpret, since much of it is written after Elizabeth's death in that seventeenth-century manner that emphasizes the sanctity and the purity of the deceased. For example, Whiting sums up his account of her life with the comment that “[And] sweetly did this handmaid of the Lord walk.” Her father,

in an introduction to *Truth's Vindication*, wrote that she was a sweet and pious child, and that "From her childhood she was much devoted to the Reading of the holy Scriptures, and other pious Books, of which she had deep Understanding." Her stepmother likewise wrote of her early interest in religious matters, describing her as a "Tender plant and Handmaid of the Lord."

We can begin to get a hint of her personality by noticing some of the events during her ministry among Friends. Shortly after her conviction she visited her former Presbyterian congregation to "proclaim [God's] universal love to them, in opposition to their doctrine of reprobation" [meaning: predestination]. She was jailed for a short time in Marshalsea after being ejected from the church for disrupting the church services. Undaunted, she published her appeal to them entitled *An expostulatory appeal to the professors*. The vehemence of her argument suggests that she translated her early piety into theological sophistication and evangelical zeal. In 1682 she traveled in the ministry to Bristol during the harsh persecutions there. Other journeys took her to Windsor, Reading, Newberry, Malbrough, and Oxford, where, others commented, she offered "Suitable and seasonable" Testimonies. She first published her major work, *Truth's vindication*, in 1679. It was revised a number of times, and published (posthumously) also under the name *Truth vindicated* in 1695.

The 1695 edition included a preface by George Whitehead, which seems to have been intended to add legitimacy to Elizabeth Bathhurst's treatise. Whitehead testified that he had known Elizabeth Bathhurst from her first conviction to the Religious Society of Friends. Referring to the second chapter of the prophet Joel, he connected that ancient power of the Holy Spirit to enable prophetic utterance with his hope that it would stir the hearts of those sons and daughters who read Elizabeth's book (Joel 2:28-32). He revealed the reasons for his sense of urgency: "because of the meanness or weakness of her Person" some people had doubted that such powerful theological ideas could have been written by her. Whitehead reassured Friends that he had seen the book "in her own Hand Writing," before it was printed, and he went on to praise her gifts of "Understanding, Life, and Utterance."

As we consider Elizabeth Bathhurst's approach to reading and interpreting Scripture, I invite you to wonder with me about what the Society of Friends—what *we*—lost when this promising young theologian died at age 30, just seven years after her ministry began. It is possible to glimpse, through the formalities of the seventeenth-

century language, the depth of her father's grief as he writes of his daughter (ten years after her death). He wrote that when she died, she "left a sweet savour behind her," and concluded that he "could say much more, but my loss of her after all; I say the deep consideration of it, sets the wound fresh a bleeding; deep sorrows can make no long discourses." I think we can also sense some of the sweet savor of Elizabeth Bathhurst ourselves as we see how she invites us to read, understand, and interpret the Bible.

## II. "TRUE RELIGION IS OF GREAT ANTIQUITY"

To grasp Elizabeth Bathhurst's approach to Scripture it is helpful, I think, to see how it fits into her theology as a whole. One of the main charges against Quakers was that they had invented a new religion. She challenges this claim and argues that Friends represent that truest and most authentic religion, which she refers to as "a living faith." To prove this claim she cites the stories of Abel and of Abraham as biblical examples of how God showed God's preference for those who have a "Living Faith," and she connects their stories with that of Christ, although "he was not come in the flesh then." (HIPS 343) In a breathtaking opening section of her treatise she demonstrates how she reads the Bible: moving from the stories of Abraham and Abel, who were faithful to an Inward "Witness" that was available to them, to Paul's epistle to the Romans and his teachings about the meaning of the crucifixion. She declares that the same Spirit continues to be present, calling all people to authentic religious life, to the "old, True religion."

She argues further that she intends, because of that Spirit, to answer the false charges that have been made against "this People amongst whom I now walk." She does this, despite her sense of unworthiness, because she sees that they are being persecuted in two ways: by the "Prophane" (that is, the civil authorities) on one hand, and by the "evil Surmisings and severe Censurings from Professors" (that is, other believers) on the other hand. She feels a responsibility to do this, she confesses, because in the past she has kept silent while others have been attacked (HIPS 346).

In addition to the charge that Quakers deny the Scriptures, she spells out the other theological accusations that have been made against them: denying "the Man Christ Jesus" as the one who offers himself and thereby saves humanity; denying the resurrection of

Christ's body and of those who believe in him. She goes on to list other false charges that had been made against Quakers; they had been accused of holding "very dangerous opinions" about certain key theological doctrines: Original Sin, the Sacraments, free-will and inherent righteousness, and the questions of the fall from grace. Lastly, they are accused of pleading "perfection" [by which I think she means the possibility of perfectibility] and that they "reckon themselves Infallible for all this" [here I think she means that Friends claim that they know the True Way].

These matters become her outline for Part One of her treatise, *Truth's vindication*. In Part Two she spells out in detail what it is that Friends believe, and in Part Three she focuses mainly on the ways Friends have come to know this truth, and on the practices of Friends. She also adds a letter addressed to "the late Convinced of Truth." My point is this: she begins with a focus on the Scriptures and how to read them because that charge against Friends has priority for her. The rest of her whole argument hinges on establishing for her readers that Friends, rather than denying Scriptures, regard them as central to the life of faith.

### III. "PUBLICATIONS IN TESTIMONY OF THAT CREATING WORD OF POWER"

Bathhurst claims that Quakers have been wrongly accused of three specific offenses in relation to Scripture: that they do not own the Scriptures, that they do not believe that they are the word of God, that they do not believe them to be the Rule of Life. She answers each charge in turn, and in doing so demonstrates her biblical hermeneutic.

She begins her argument by answering those who claim that Friends do not "believe the scriptures," and she goes on to answer the next charge, that, even if they do "believe them" do not regard them as the "word of God" but rather as part of "moral history." She challenges both of these claims and declares that the Scriptures are "owned of them, and are believed by them, and are Practiced amongst them" (HIPS 352).

She goes on to spell out in greater detail how the Scriptures indeed have authority for Friends, and in citing 2 Tim. 3:15-16 she reminds her readers that nowhere do the Scriptures claim *for them-*

*selves* that they are “The word of God, the rule of faith and life.” Instead, she claims, both the Hebrew Bible and the Second Testament argue that behind the words of Scripture there is the Word of God, the Impulse of the divine, the Inspiring power. She argues that God’s Word is eternal, contrasting it with the Scriptures, which “had their beginning in time” (HIPS 350). Since God’s eternal and Divine Word (according to the prologue of John’s Gospel, Jn. 1:1-18) was present in the beginning and throughout the history of God’s interactions with God’s people, then this, she argues, is what the ancient prophets meant when they declared that “the Word of God” gave them utterances to deliver to God’s people.

What is striking is her intellectual commitment to theological unity: for Elizabeth Bathhurst, God is *at work* in the world, and that work has to do with the redemption of creation. She sees this happening in the events around her, and she also experiences this redemption in her own life. She refers to this as the awareness of the Divine Principle in all things, and the singlemost and clearest evidence she has that God desires to move toward humanity in love and in judgment is the presence of Christ, alive in the world. For her the Scriptures are “Publications in Testimony of that Creating Word of Power,” but they are not themselves the power. What Quakers have perceived, she argues, is that true followers of Christ must “distinguish between the Declaration and that which is Declared of.” The Scriptures, for her, are records of the power of the Word to inspire and teach (HIPS 351). The Scriptures bear witness to the Word of God, and it is important to distinguish between “the written *Words*, the *Writing* or Letter, and the *living Word*, which is a *quickenning Spirit* (HIPS 351).

Then she turns her attention to the third charge: that Quakers do not regard the Scriptures as the Rule of Life. As before, she argues that such a charge is totally without foundation. Since Friends are a people who own and believe and “Practice” Scripture, this means that they consider the Scriptures to be “profitable, for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, for Instruction in Righteousness” (HIPS 351). She goes on to express her gratitude for the ways that Scripture has preserved the stories of the lives of people of faith—these stories offer instruction, inspiration, and wisdom for the present day. She makes a fascinating move in her argument at this point: first, she reminds her readers that the Scriptures themselves point always beyond themselves toward God. She introduces something of a trinitarian argument here: in regarding Scripture, Friends “dare not

ascribe them that Glory which is due to God, nor exalt them above his Son Christ Jesus, not prefer them in his Spirit's stead." (HIPS 352)

Clearly, the Bible is important to Elizabeth Bathhurst, but she is also aware of the potential problems resulting from regarding its authority too highly. First, she reminds her readers that God, in God's infinite mercy, wants nothing more than the salvation of humanity. It follows that this loving God would not leave humanity dependent solely on a source of salvation (the Scriptures) that is "subject to Concealing, Mis-translation, Mis-interpretation, False-Application." She suggests further that, since large numbers of humans exist without knowledge of the Scriptures, our loving God would not ascribe to Scriptures the only means for coming to know God, for that would mean unjust abandonment of some of God's people. Finally, she reminds her readers that there are a number of human questions on which Scripture is silent, which argues against their status as the sole authority on human affairs. All three of these problems are resolved for Elizabeth Bathhurst by her reminder that there is an "inward Oracle (which is a Measure of God's Spirit)" which offers us access to God's wisdom, guidance, and love.

#### IV. "FOR HIS SPIRIT IS NOT INSEPARABLE FROM THE SCRIPTURES"

In Part Two of her treatise, Elizabeth Bathhurst elaborates on some of the points she makes in Part One. In particular, she spells out in more detail her view that God loves all of humanity, not just those who are Christian and who have access to the Scriptures. She reminds her readers that God has left a Witness in each conscience, and that this witness is a spiritual manifestation of God's "Son, the Saviour of the World." She illustrates her point about the many ways this Witness can be known by listing some of the ways that Scripture names this saving power: Word, Law, Grace, Spirit of God, Light of Jesus, New Covenant, Light to lighten the Gentiles, Rod, Staff, Shepherds' Crook, Word nigh in the Heart and in the Mouth, the Sure Word of Prophecy, the Manifestation of the Spirit, Shield, Buckler, Strong Tower, Armour of Righteousness (HIPS 400-1). What she does here is to weave together biblical strands that testify to the presence of God's saving love in a multitude of situations and circumstances.

The advantage of thinking of Christ in this way is that we can then enjoy the “divers Names” of Christ that have come to us in Scripture, and we can acknowledge that a measure of Christ’s Light is available to all humans, and that “we know his Presence fills Heaven and Earth....” We can, she argues, affirm that Christ is “continually at the Right Hand of God.” Elizabeth Bathhurst, in other words, affirms both the full humanity and the full divinity of Christ: the Light of Christ is extended to each of us as part of God’s promise, and no matter how dimly it shines, through it we are offered love and hope. Toward the end of this section of her treatise she writes, “in the tender Bowels of his Love, which he hath shed abroad in my Heart,” and extends an invitation to all, reminding them that “none of ye were absolutely excluded from eternity; well knowing that a measure of his Grace hath been freely tendered to every one of you: because his Love extendeth Universally, and he is crying, *Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the Waters of life*” (HIPS 412-413).

What becomes clear from this passage and others is this: Elizabeth Bathhurst perceived that Friends do not so much believe *in* the Bible as they *believe the Bible*; that is, they listen to what the Bible says about itself, about God, and Christ, and about the way the three point to Truth. What they hear is that the words of the Scriptures, which are inspired by God, point beyond themselves toward that eternal power. She concludes that Quakers believe in Scripture “so far as Scripture it self requires Faith in itself,” and in so doing believes that the truth of the Scriptures—and about Friends—will itself be vindicated.

## NOTES

1. Her extensive essay, “Truth Vindicated,” is now available in *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker Women’s Writings, 1650-1700* (henceforth, HIPS), edited by Mary Garman, Judith Applegate, Margaret Benefiel and Dortha Meredith, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Press, 1996, pp. 339-423.