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## READING SCRIPTURE WITH DOROTHY WHITE

MICHAEL BIRKEL

Early Friend Dorothy White authored *A TRUMPET Sounded out of the HOLY CITY, proclaiming Deliverance to the Captives, Sounding forth the Redemption of SION, which hasteneth. And this is sent unto all her blessed Children, who wait for her Advancement; this Message of glad Tidings from GOD the Father of our Lord JESUS, is sent unto you all.* The text is a rousing piece, announcing hope to the suffering faithful. She wrote it in 1662, when the optimism of Quakers and radical Puritans for building the reign of God in England during the Commonwealth under Cromwell had been dashed by the persecution of Dissenters under the restored monarchy and a vengeful Cavalier Parliament. Friends suffered fierce persecution under a series of laws enacted to stamp out non-conformity to the Anglican Church. Despite these distressing external conditions, Dorothy White and other Friends retained hope, based on their internal experience of triumph of good over evil. In spite of the outward trials and persecutions Friends faced, the great and long-awaited act of redemption is beginning. “A Trumpet” draws freely on many biblical texts but repeatedly on the later chapters of Isaiah and on the book of Revelation, two texts written to offer consolation to the oppressed faithful, in order to offer comfort to Friends.

Here is a slightly abbreviated form of the text:<sup>1</sup>

And now is the glory of all nations come, and the bridegroom’s voice is heard in the land of the redeemed, who are come out again of Egypt, who are become the first fruits unto God, and to the Lamb. These shall arise in the glorious power. These shall mount upward, as upon eagle’s wings....

These shall come unto the holy mountain, where the feast of fat things is prepared...Mount Zion, where the Song of Moses and the Lamb is sounded before his throne, who hath now appeared in his eternal glory....

And so blessed are all whose feet are upon the rock, the foundation of God which standeth sure. I will make my people as Mount Zion, saith the Lord of holiness, and as the walls are

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about Jerusalem, even so is the Lord God round about his people. And blessed are they that dwell...under the over-shaddow of the Almighty in the day of trial that is coming on all flesh.

For God is coming to try all foundations of the sons of men, and tried stones are fit for the building of the house of the most High—living stones, elect and precious. These must be tried through the fire, for there is a fire in Zion for the purging and purifying of the daughter of Jerusalem. And she shall come forth shining in the glory of the Lord God, whose day of rejoicing is come unto such who have followed the Lamb through the washing of regeneration, who have been led through the great tribulation....

And now rejoice, thou barren womb, which hath brought forth the first begotten of God, for more shall be thy children than of her that was the married wife. For the vine shall yield its increase, and the blessing of the Lord shall multiply upon the works of his hands, his new creation. And the former heavens are passing away, and the new heavens are created again, wherein the Son of Righteousness shineth in his beauty, where the glory of the Lord filleth the earth.

And all must feel the overcoming life of love to overcome. That is that which must remain: love to the brethren. And this must convince the world that we are of God, because we love the brethren. And he that is born of Love, overcometh the world, and so in the faith that worketh by love, the victory is known. So by love we overcome, as we know it to overcome in our own hearts. And greater love hath no man received, than that love which God first manifested in the Light of his Son, who was and is the foundation which must abide forever.

So in that eternal love which hath no evil in it, is this gracious salutation sent, with the voice of glad tidings unto the poor in spirit, unto whom the day of deliverance is proclaimed. And this was upon me from God, to publish in this the day of his reign. So the grace of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, rest and remain upon you all who fear him.

Of the many things to notice about this rich composition, three merit particular attention: the density and complexity of Dorothy White's interweaving of biblical materials; how "A Trumpet" is organized by focal images; and finally, how Dorothy White saw herself

squarely in the succession of the biblical writers, inspired by the same Spirit that gave forth the Scriptures.

## 1. DOROTHY WHITE'S INTERWEAVING OF BIBLICAL MATERIALS

Almost anywhere in this text, we could cast our nets for biblical allusions and haul in a catch so full that our boat would nearly capsize. Let's settle for just two passages, beginning with the opening words of "A Trumpet":

And now is the Glory of all Nations come, and the Bridegroom's Voice is heard in the Land of the Redeemed....

Dorothy White's opening words hearken back to the prophecies at the close of the book of Isaiah (66:18), which speak of God's glory being revealed to all peoples, which for early Friends resonated with their experience of the universality of the Light of Christ: "I will gather *all nations* and tongues; and they shall come, and see my *glory*." The bridegroom is Christ—an echo of the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, from Matthew 25:6-7: "And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the *bridegroom* cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps."

But this cry in the parable is not the bridegroom's voice itself. That voice is mentioned in the Gospel of John (3:29), where John the Baptist speaks of Jesus as the bridegroom and of John's joy in Jesus' coming: "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the *bridegroom's voice*: this my joy therefore is fulfilled."

This joy in the arrival of the beloved echoes the Song of Songs (2:12), where the lover, understood by Dorothy White as Christ, the lover of the soul, calls to his beloved to arise and come away: "The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the *voice* of the turtle *is heard in our land*." This rich and complex interweaving of biblical allusions is akin to meditations on Scripture practiced in earlier Christian ages and suggests that early Friends read Scripture in a similarly reflective, meditative way.<sup>2</sup>

Our second example comes from later in the text:

and now rejoice thou barren Womb, which hath brought forth the first Begotten of God, for more shall be thy Children than

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of her that was the married Wife, for the Vine shall yield its increase, and the blessing of the Lord shall multiply upon the works of his hands, his new Creation; and the former Heavens are passing away, and the new Heavens are created again....

Once more, appropriate for Quakers suffering persecution and imprisonment, the text draws on the later chapters of Isaiah, which speak hope and comfort to a community suffering captivity. But there is a significant change: the progeny is divine. The believer, like Mary, gives birth to Christ. What Mary of Nazareth did historically, the faithful accomplish inwardly:<sup>3</sup> “Sing, O *barren*, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for *more* are the *children* of the desolate *than* the children of the married wife, saith the Lord” (54:1).

This image of fecundity continues, from child-bearing to agricultural productivity to blessings multiplying to a new creation. The image of the fertile vine draws on the prophet Zechariah, in another text of comfort and promise: “For the seed shall be prosperous; the *vine* shall give her fruit, and the ground shall give her *increase*, and the *heavens* shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things” (8:12).

Since this follows so closely on a reference to Jesus, there may also be an allusion here to John 15:1-11 in which Jesus says of himself, “I am the vine” and speaks of bearing much fruit. There are places where the book of Revelation itself echoes the book of Isaiah. Dorothy White’s words draw on both sources: “For, behold, I *create new heavens* and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind” (Isaiah 65:17); likewise, “And I saw a *new heaven* and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away;...for the *former things are passed away*” (Revelation 21:1, 4).

So here again we see a poetic, imaginative reading of Scripture. Dorothy White shows us an impressive ability to interweave biblical images as though they were conceived of together originally. But is her organizational process simply random?

## 2. FOCAL IMAGES AND THE ORGANIZING WORK OF DOROTHY WHITE

Dorothy White subscribed to the belief that all the Scriptures were given forth by the same Spirit, so it was permissible to use the Gospel of John to explain the prophecies of Zechariah, or the book of Revelation to understand Isaiah. But far from arbitrary, her method is thoughtful and conscious. Her text is organized by dominant images, which suggests much about how she read Scripture.

Looking again at “A Trumpet,” we see how the image of bridegroom and lover are the center of gravity of the first sentence. Perhaps inspired by the verse following the reference to the voice heard in the land, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song 2:13), she moves to images of ascent. She may also have had in mind Isaiah 60:1, “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.” In the Hebrew Scriptures one comes up “out of Egypt,” and pilgrimages ascending the hill country near Jerusalem would have heightened such associations graphically. Dorothy White then clusters several biblical passages, demonstrating her sensitivity to original meanings of the text. The faithful shall rise until they reach the heavenly throne.

The image of ascent continues, with the focus now on Mount Zion. Just as the earthly Zion, beloved of Isaiah, was the site of the Temple, where God chose particularly to dwell, so also the heavenly Zion, favored in Revelation, is where God’s presence is experienced. Isaiah speaks of a festival and feasting, Revelation of a celebration and singing.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to their height, mountains are symbols of strength—mighty rocks and firm foundations. The image of the mountain makes a transition from ascent to security and protection, drawing on a composite of biblical sources from Psalms, 2 Timothy and Luke.<sup>5</sup> But, as 1 Peter reminds her, foundations can be tried, and the themes shift to trial and tribulation.<sup>6</sup> But trials give way to victory and rejoicing, and rejoicing takes her once again to Isaiah and the passage already discussed, “Rejoice, thou barren womb.” This is the pivot to a new dominant set of images: fertility, fecundity, and the regeneration of the cosmos itself.

Finally, the language of fertility and creativity yield to the language of love, a love that is willing to lay down its own life, which is

just what so many early Friends were doing at that time. The inner experiences described by Dorothy White so eloquently and with such poetic biblical language did not end with individuals in isolated mystical heights. The love of God experienced within issued forth naturally into love of others; hence her emphasis on love in community. This brings us to the end of her text, where she closes with a reference to her spiritual credentials, or perhaps more precisely, her lineage.

### 3. HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

The final sentence of “A Trumpet” echoes the language of many New Testament Epistles.<sup>7</sup> Just before that, the claim that the text was written “with the voice of glad tidings unto the poor in spirit” seems quite revealing. Dorothy White here identifies herself as an heir to the biblical prophets, inspired by the same Spirit that gave forth the Scriptures. Not surprisingly, the prophetic book quoted is Isaiah (61:1), where the prophet is likewise called upon to speak words of comfort to those suffering imprisonment.<sup>8</sup>

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the poor; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

The deeper resonance of this biblical echo, with its message of freedom to the captives, must surely have been a welcome word to imprisoned Friends. Yet it is also important to realize that Dorothy White was claiming the same prophetic authority for her own words. Even more telling, these words of Isaiah are cited by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke to establish his credentials as he begins his public ministry. “A Trumpet” shows Dorothy White as heir to Moses, Isaiah, and John the revelator. She saw the correspondence between Isaiah the Israelite prophet and the early Christian visionary John who authored the book of Revelation, and she saw external parallels between their days and her own: outward oppression and hope for liberation. She found parallels in the inward life: the movement from interior bondage to freedom.

## CONCLUSION

How can we describe Dorothy White's approach to Scripture? Her method of reading may seem "hidden in plain sight," but by unraveling the biblical strands in this excerpt from "A Trumpet," we find a layeredness of meaning in the document that points the way forward. This process of exploring the biblical sources evident in "A Trumpet" suggests how she approached the act of reading Scripture, as an intricately woven text, inseparably interwoven also into her own life. Her reading of Scripture shaped her understanding of events in her personal life, and her personal experiences in turn gave shape to her reading of Scripture. The relationship was rich and complex. Writings from later periods in Quaker history suggest that the way of reading the Bible that we find in "A Trumpet" endured at least until the late nineteenth century. At that time the theologies that accompanied the evangelical revivals and the rise of liberal theology among different branches of Friends cast, for different reasons in each group, suspicion on this traditional approach to reading Scripture. But the spiritual vitality of Dorothy White's writings invites contemporary Friends to consider reviving this invigorating practice. When we take the Bible personally, and seriously, we find ourselves not only reading Scripture with Dorothy and other saints of old; we find ourselves opened to inspired readings of the inspired writings.

## NOTES

1. Dorothy White, *A TRUMPET Sounded out of the HOLY CITY, proclaiming Deliverance to the Captives, Sounding forth the Redemption of SION, which hasteneth...*(1662) from *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker's Women's Writings 1650-1700*, edited by Mary Garman et al. (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1996), pp. 147-148, with some modernization of orthography.
2. In the medieval period this practice flourished in the monastic tradition and was known as sacred reading or *lectio divina*. For a classic introduction to *lectio divina*, see Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks* (edited and translated by James Walsh and Edmund Colledge [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978]). The *Twelve Meditations* of Guigo, found in the same volume, also show a remarkable similarity to Friends' meditative reflections on Scripture. For Guigo's thirteenth meditation, see my "A Meditation on the Magnificat Attributable to Guigo II" (introduction and translation from Latin), *Magistra: A Journal of Women's Spirituality in History* 1/2 (Winter 1996), 249-265. The relationship between *lectio divina* and Friends' practice is the subject of a larger study currently under way, in which I expound on the value of such a meditative approach to Scripture for Friends today.
3. The phrase "the first begotten of God" may be a confluence of Luke 2:7, "And she brought forth her *firstborn* son," John 1:14, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt

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among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only *begotten* of the Father) full of grace and truth.”

4. And in this *mountain* shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a *feast* of wines on the lees, *of fat things* full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. (Isaiah 25:6)

And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. And they sing the *song of Moses* the servant of God, and the *song of the Lamb*. (Revelation 15:2-3)

It might be worthwhile to quote the text of that glorious song, since it was clearly in the mind of Dorothy White as she wrote. Note the themes of holiness, glory, and the coming of all nations—all of them encountered in “A Trumpet.”

Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest. (15:3-4)

5. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my *feet upon a rock*, and established my goings. (Psalm 40:2)

Nevertheless the *foundation of God standeth sure*, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. (2 Timothy 2:19)

He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the *foundation on a rock*: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock. (Luke 6:48)

They that trust in the Lord shall be as *mount Zion*, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever. As the mountains are round *about Jerusalem*, so the *Lord is round about his people* from henceforth even for ever. (Psalm 125:1-2)

He that *dwelleth* in the secret place of *the most High* shall *abide* under the *shadow* of the *Almighty*. (Psalm 91:1)

6. To whom coming, as unto a *living stone*, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and *precious*, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual *house*, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

The reference to 1 Peter marks the shift to themes of trial: the firm foundation is needed to withstand exterior persecution, just as it was for the interior purging in the Lamb’s War. The cross precedes the crown.

*These must be tried through the fire, for there is a fire in Sion for the purging and purifying of the Daughter of Jerusalem,*

Again from 1 Peter,

That the *trial* of your faith, being much more *precious* than of gold that perisheth, though it be *tried with fire*, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. (1:7)

7. See, for example, Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Colossians 1:2; 2 John 3.
8. She interweaves Isaiah 61:1 with the first Beatitude in the Gospel of Matthew (5:3), “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”