"Darkness" In the Journal of George Fox

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Even a casual examination of *The Journal of George Fox* makes it obvious that the concept of the light was central to the religious thought of George Fox. Hardly a page goes by without some use of the term. Unfortunately, Fox’s use of “light” is highly varied, opening a variety of possible interpretations of, and consequently, disagreements on the core meaning of his message. This paper attempts to provide a clearer understanding of Fox’s message by examining his use of light’s antonym, “darkness.”

In everyday language, “light” and “dark” are direct opposites, but in exactly what ways they contrast with each other is not always so obvious. Terms may be used to express a number of ways of opposition. For example, two terms may be complementary, as in the two sides of a coin; or antagonistic, as with political opponents. When considering physical light and physical darkness, a third meaning comes to the fore for the contemporary reader in that we may simply consider “darkness” as the absence of “light.” When looking at the use of “light” and “darkness” in the writings of early Quakers, however, this may not be the appropriate conception of the relationship between these terms. Beyond obvious changes in writing styles and vocabulary, the meanings of some words in common usage—both then and now—have also changed. In particular, the ways in which “light” and “dark” were understood may now be different from the ways they are now understood. This change in ordinary meaning may carry over into our understanding of the theological use of these words as well.

Our understanding of physical light owes much to the work of three of George Fox’s near contemporaries. Rene Descartes (1596-1650), Christian Huygens (1629-1695), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) laid the basis for the modern study of optics. One of the results of their work was a consolidation of the idea that darkness was simply the absence of light, not a thing in itself. While this understanding of darkness would not necessarily have been shared by earlier writers in science or theology, it tends to be nearly universal
among modern readers. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, the elimination of other ways of comprehending natural darkness changes our understandings of the meaning of spiritual darkness, and consequently, of spiritual light.

Unlike the word “light,” “dark” and “darkness” are relatively rare in The Journal of George Fox. “Dark” occurs 25 times and “darkness” 66 times in the entire volume. “Light,” on the other hand, seems to be used on nearly every page—often more than once. The nature of this “light” was a matter of dispute at the time, leading both Robert Barclay and William Penn to address the issue. In the Apology, Barclay cites John 1:9 (“That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”) in identifying the light directly with Christ (although he also speaks of the light as “the light of Jesus Christ,” “the implanted word and the seed of salvation,” the Gospel, grace, etc.). For Barclay, the light is not a metaphor for something else—it is “a spiritual, celestial, and invisible principle…in which God dwells as Father, Son, and Spirit.”

Penn similarly devotes a substantial portion of Primitive Christianity Revived to consideration of the nature of the “light.” Like Barclay, he allows himself abundant room for using the word in a variety of ways, but insists that the essential nature of “light,” as used among Friends, was “the same with the spirit”—that it was a spiritual reality. In developing his argument, Penn raised the question as to whether there are multiple non-physical “darknesses” within an individual: one a natural darkness (e.g., a mental endowment of the person) and another a spiritual darkness. He concludes that, except for the lack of physical sunlight within the human body, there is only one “darkness” and that it is “a spiritual darkness, viz. the clouded and benighted understandings of men [and women], through disobedience to the light and spirit of God…”

While both Barclay and Penn would acknowledge a debt to Fox in the development of this concept of the light, in looking at Fox’s own work, few if any definitions for his terminology are offered. As mentioned above, Fox uses “light” frequently and with a multitude of meanings. In all cases, when “darkness” is used, it is clear that it is in some sense the opposite of light.
METHODOLOGY

As a matter of methodology, all instances of the word “darkness” in The Journal of George Fox were examined. Fourteen unique phrases (e.g., “abide in darkness”) were identified, and at least one passage containing each of the phrases was selected for closer analysis.

It is immediately obvious that the Bible heavily influenced Fox’s use of “darkness,” as indeed his language in general. His meaning is often colored by the content of the scriptural texts to which he alludes—texts with which he believes his readers will be familiar (a familiarity that can no longer be assumed). As a first step in interpreting each selected passage, as many as possible of the scriptural references and allusions contained in it were identified, and these have been included as footnotes. Since the selected passages are only a sample, the references below do not encompass all those that Fox might have implicitly considered when constructing his own internal definition of “darkness.” The full set seems to include most, if not all, of the ways in which “darkness” was used in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament.

FORMS OF DARKNESS

A detailed analysis of the fourteen forms lends itself to their being grouped into five more general categories. These include natural darkness, darkness as the opposite of spiritual light, darkness as a place, darkness as a substance, and darkness as a spiritual being, and considering each of them individually affords greater understanding of our subject.

Natural Darkness

It is somewhat surprising that the word “darkness,” in its ordinary sense of an absence of natural light, was used only twice in the whole of the Journal. While both are referring to a simple absence of light, one passage contains an interesting biblical reference:

The Lord brought over such a mist that we could see so little distance from us, that the very seamen confessed that if the Lord God was ever in any ship he was in this ship and that they were blessed for this man’s sake, for the Lord made darkness
our pavilion and so the presence of the Lord God was with us all along. (p. 662)

The word “pavilion,” as used here, connotes a physical shield that covers, conceals, and protects. In this passage, Fox is describing a time during a trip aboard a ship in the Atlantic when he was concerned that pirates might attack the vessel. The scriptural text to which Fox alludes is a song of David recounting how David was delivered “from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.” Fox here is not being metaphorical—he is reporting that God is literally protecting him (delivering him from his enemies) with darkness, just as he had protected David some 2,700 years earlier. Note also, that the use of the word “pavilion” gives this “darkness” substance—it is not merely a lack of physical light.

Darkness as the Opposite of Spiritual Light

In a number of other passages, “darkness” is used as the antithesis of “spiritual light.” In such a case, the meaning of each word is determined in part by the meaning of the other as well as by the context in which it is used. There are four constructions that support this sense of “darkness” as the opposite of a spiritual light. The first occurs several times and makes use of words attributed to Paul in Acts:

For in that day the Lord’s power began to spring, and I had great openings in the Scriptures. And several were convinced in those parts, and were turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, and his power they did receive and by it many were raised up to praise God. (p. 19)

“Darkness” is what people turn away from when they hear Fox’s words. It is linked with the power of Satan and, in this sense, it may or may not be a spiritual thing in itself. For Fox, Satan is not a metaphor, but a real being with real power. It is, however, not necessary to equate the “darkness” in this passage with Satan or that power. Other instances of the phrase “turned from darkness to light” are likewise ambiguous. “Darkness” in these instances may not be a distinct spiritual entity, but simply a metaphor. A similar meaning can be construed in the next passage:

Oh, therefore, you that know the light walk in the light! For there are children of darkness, that will talk of the light and of the truth, and not walk in it. But the children of the light love
the light, and walk in the light but the children of darkness walk in darkness and hate the light; and in them the earthly lusts and the carnal mind choke the Seed of faith; and that bringeth oppression on the Seed, and death over them. (p. 60)

To be “children of darkness” is to be separated from the “light,” but there is no necessity for that “darkness” to have any substance in itself. It may simply represent a negation—an absence of the corresponding “light.”

Similarly, the “day of darkness” in the next passage may also be read metaphorically:

And when the Long Parliament sat I was moved to send several papers to them and speak to them how the Lord was bringing a day of darkness upon them all that should be felt. (p. 349)

As in the text from Zephaniah, this may simply be another way of describing Judgment Day. As such, the “darkness” referred to is not a thing itself, but will be the dominant characteristic of that day for those who are not prepared.

In the fourth example, Fox’s warning to Oliver Cromwell may also be metaphorical:

And then I was moved to write to him and told him how he would ruin his family and posterity and bring darkness upon the nation if he did so. (p. 289)

This “darkness” (as suggested by the first of the scriptural texts noted) may be read as an enveloping black fog that spiritually covers the land; or as the contrast between England-as-it-was and England-as-it-could-be: a place filled with a love for God and love of God. As with the other passages considered under this heading, it is not clear whether Fox is thinking of “darkness” as a thing in itself or as an absence of “light.”

**Darkness as a Place**

The last passage in the previous section could also be considered as a use of “darkness” as a place. A more explicit example is:

There is no justification out of the Light, out of Christ. Justification is in the Light; here is the doer of the will of God, here is the entering into the kingdom. Now believing in the Light becomes a child of the Light, and here is received the wisdom.
that is justified or her children.\textsuperscript{21} Here believing in the Light, you shall not abide in darkness;\textsuperscript{22} but shall have the Light of life\textsuperscript{23} and come every one to witness the Light\textsuperscript{24} that shines in your hearts….\textsuperscript{25} (p. 175)

This “darkness” is the spiritual realm in which people dwell before they are justified. It need not be a place that is filled with a thing called “darkness,” but merely shadowed from the “light”—i.e., there is no need for the darkness to have a separate reality. Similarly in the next example, the “darkness of their hearts” may not be filled with a thing called darkness. Notice, however, that it is a definite place within which the light can exist and from which the light can shine out:

So this light shone in the darkness of their hearts\textsuperscript{26} and the darkness could not comprehend it;\textsuperscript{27} but where God had commanded it to shine out of darkness, in their hearts it gave them the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus their saviour.\textsuperscript{28} (p. 303)

The included allusion to the Gospel of John introduces another element: “the darkness could not comprehend” the light. This does not mean that the darkness did not understand the light in some intellectual manner. In seventeenth-century English “comprehend” meant “include, contain, or encompass.” This “darkness” may be a real place—but one of limited capacity—too small to contain the full extent of the “light.”

\textbf{Darkness as a Substance}

A usage that lies somewhere between a sense of “darkness” as a place and “darkness” as a substance is found in the following:

I felt something of darkness\textsuperscript{29} in the house before they came, something of a great darkness.\textsuperscript{30} (p. 375)

“Darkness” here is a thing that could be felt—like the darkness that covered Egypt. This is darkness that has some form of spiritual physicality. It is tempting to apply modern terminology to this reference, calling it a paranormal experience, but in the seventeenth century, such would more likely be viewed as witchcraft than a spiritual gift. Fox is reporting an encounter with a spiritual substance—one that anyone could encounter. He identifies that substance with the horror that fell upon Abram. This is “darkness” as a thing in itself.

The next instance is actually two short pieces of text separated by almost two pages, but clearly referring to a single concept. The first
half is familiar to many Friends, but it is the second half that provides an interesting nuance in understanding this particular use of “darkness”:

I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness....For I had been brought through the very ocean of darkness and death, and through the power and over the power of Satan, by the eternal glorious power of Christ. Even through that darkness was I brought, which covered-over all the world, and which chained down all, and shut up all in the death. (p. 19, 21)

“Darkness” is an ocean and “Light,” an ocean. Not two watery oceans, one of which is illuminated, but two real, spiritual oceans—each with real, spiritual substance—and Fox “had been brought through” the darker one. Even more than in the last passage considered, it is clear that here “darkness” has real substance.

While “ocean” is not a word found in the King James Version of the Bible, “sea” occurs, but always to refer to a real, physical body of water. In no verse is there reference either to a sea of light or of darkness. This vivid image may be original with Fox and represents for many modern Friends one of his most characteristic sayings. It presents darkness as an opposite of light, but not as the mere absence of light. Darkness is a substance as spiritually real as the light with which it is contrasted.

This corporeality is nearly as tangible in the next passage to be considered. At least four scriptural texts are being called upon (and provide coloring) in this short expression:

But Oh, the body of darkness that rose up against the Truth, who made lies their refuge. But the Lord swept them away, and in his power and truth, light and life, hedged his lambs about and did preserve them as on eagle’s wings. (p. 504)

This “body of darkness” has more than an inert spiritual mass; it is an entity that rises up against the Truth and is then swept away. This is the picture of body in motion, although not necessarily a living one. It may be analogous to a force of nature: a tide or storm of darkness. Darkness, then, as a living being, becomes fully manifest in the last set of passages to be considered.
Darkness as a Spiritual Being

God is my witness, by whom I am moved to give this forth for the Truth’s sake, from him whom the world calls George Fox; who is the son of God who is sent to stand a witness against all violence and against all the works of darkness, and to turn people from the darkness to the light, and to bring them from the occasion of the war and from the occasion of the magistrate’s sword, which is a terror to the evil doers who act contrary to the light of the Lord Jesus Christ. (p. 197)

While a force of nature might be described as having effects or of producing changes, this passage speaks of “works of darkness.” Only living things create “works”—this is a depiction of darkness as a motivated spiritual being. These are intentional acts of a sentient being—Fox apparently sees these “works of darkness” as willful and malevolent.

To be alive raises the question of the origin of this being. The created nature of “darkness” is evident in the next Journal passage:

Therefore be wise in the wisdom of God which is from above, by which all things were made and created, that that may be justified among you, and you all kept in the solid life, which was before death was, and in the light which was before the darkness was with all its works. (p. 281)

In other words, there was a time before which darkness did not exist. This precludes several interpretations of “darkness.” It cannot be the simple absence of light. For that to be the case there would also be a time before which “light” did not exist and Fox is clear in identifying the light with God. To Fox, “darkness” comes into existence—it does not endure from eternity; it is not equal to God.

The final example brings out one last attribute of “darkness.” In it, Fox refers to the “power of darkness:”

And such as report these things have striven by them to take away the life of the innocent from the earth, who wrestle with spiritual weapons and not with flesh and blood, but wrestle with the power of darkness that leads from God, who save men’s lives and bring them back again to God, and are in the love that thinks no evil, but loves enemies. (p. 381)

Again, design is implied. Darkness has power; it has strength as a being and it needs to be wrestled with intentionally.
CONCLUSION

The conception of “darkness” that emerges in Fox’s Journal is not simple. The word was used in a variety of ways, and while in some of these “darkness” is simply the absence of light, for others a more formidable subsistence was clearly indicated. In the most powerful of these, “darkness” was a living entity with dimension, mass, and intention. This active form of darkness implied a corresponding substantiality and purpose in the evil it represented. At its core, the image of darkness Fox carries may be well expressed in 1 Peter 5:8, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. . . .”

This represents a very different understanding of the nature of evil than is common today. This is easily seen by asking how an individual should deal with the situation of being “in spiritual darkness.” To people today, physical darkness is simply the absence of light. Consequently, when the word “darkness” is read as a metaphor for evil, it is correspondingly the mere absence of good. As such, just allowing oneself to be exposed to spiritual light—to be passively illuminated by it—is sufficient to be “in the light.” No particular effort is necessarily required.

While some modern Friends might find this analogy adequate, Fox plainly would not. To him, spiritual darkness was always more than the absence of spiritual light. In the most extreme case, spiritual darkness was a vicious and malignant being. This understanding of darkness requires a very different response when one is in spiritual darkness. Those who would wait passively for illumination become easy prey for the power of that darkness. For Fox, salvation required both actively opening oneself to the light, and just as actively, resisting the works of darkness. This call to action is at the heart of Fox’s message. If it is missed, the message is, at best, distorted; and at worst, lost.

NOTES
2. All references are to the King James Version of the Bible, and they have been included in the notes for the benefit of the reader.
3. Dean Freiday, ed., Barclay’s Apology in Modern English (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1991), pp. 6, 72, and 100.
4. Ibid., p. 89, 100, 106, and others.
5. Ibid., p. 101.
Ibid., p. 103.
6. Ibid., p. 82.
7. Ibid., p. 85.
9. Ibid., p. 238.
10. 2 Samuel 22:12 “And he made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies.”
11. 1 Thessalonians 2:19 “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?”
12. 2 Samuel 22:1
13. Acts 26:18 “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”
14. This phrase is used often in the Bible. Two examples: 1 John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” and John 12:35 “Then Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth.”
15. John 3:19-20 “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.”
16. Romans 8:6 “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”
17. Mark 4:19 “And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.”
18. Zephaniah 1:14-16 “The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers.”
19. Fox may be drawing on both Exodus 10:21 “And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt.” and Ezekiel 32:8 “All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord GOD.”
20. Luke 7:35 “But wisdom is justified of all her children.”
21. John 12:46 “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.”
22. John 8:12 “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”
23. John 1:7 “The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.”
24. 2 Corinthians 4:6 “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”
25. 2 Corinthians 4:6
26. John 1:5 “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”
27. 2 Corinthians 4:6
28. Exodus 10:21 “And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt.”
29. Genesis 15:12 “And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.”
30. Isaiah 28:15 “Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:”
31. 2 Corinthians 6:7 “By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,”
33. Job 1:10 “Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.”
34. Isaiah 40:31 “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”
35. 2 John 1:2 “For the truth’s sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever.”
36. Romans 13:12 “The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.”
37. Acts 26:18 “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”
38. Romans 13:3 “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.”
39. Ephesians 6:12 “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”
40. 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;”
41. Luke 6:27 “But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,”