

2017

**Review of T. Vail Palmer, *Face to Face: Early Quaker Encounters with the Bible*. (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2016)**

Michael Birkel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Birkel, Michael (2017) "Review of T. Vail Palmer, *Face to Face: Early Quaker Encounters with the Bible*. (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2016)," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 129 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol129/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

REVIEW OF T. VAIL PALMER,  
*FACE TO FACE: EARLY QUAKER  
ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIBLE.*  
(NEWBERG, OR: BARCLAY PRESS,  
2016)

MICHAEL BIRKEL

At the present moment, when—as with early Friends when the monarchy was restored and a vengefully conservative Parliament set out to undo all the good work of Friends and other religious radicals during the Commonwealth—political forces are at play to reverse all the efforts of the past half century to further social justice, a book like *Face to Face* can revive hope in the mighty acts of God. This is good news.

It is very fitting for Vail Palmer's new book to be reviewed in the pages of this journal. He is one of the earliest members of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, from which *Quaker Religious Thought* emerged as its organ in 1959. Vail Palmer served as the editor of *QRT* from 1973-78 then shared that editorship with Dean Freiday from 1979-82, and over the years also contributed numerous articles to this journal. Vail Palmer can be rightly claimed among the founders, elders, and pillars of *QRT*.

Ostensibly, the book is a study of early Friends, most particularly George, Fox, Margaret Fell, and Edward Burrough, and their empathetic reading of Scripture. The book argues for a distinctive method of biblical interpretation, one that Vail Palmer feels was then largely lost as Quaker history ensued. The book explores succeeding Quakers and their use of the Bible, through the Hicksite-Orthodox separation of 1827-28.

Yet the book is more than that. Vail Palmer is among the last living members of that founding generation of QRT/QTGD. This volume can be regarded as a partial testament, a summing up of a life inspired by the message and personalities of earliest Friends. (I say “partial” because a second volume is promised.) This book, while based in careful research, is not a typical scholarly undertaking. I chose to read

and therefore to speak of this book as a theological memoir and as a love story, of sorts.

In his growing-up years, Vail Palmer was part of Concord Meeting in Pennsylvania. This monthly meeting was appropriately named in that became one of the first meetings to reconcile its Hicksite and Orthodox heritages and become a united meeting. Vail Palmer's life as a Quaker can be understood as rooted in such effort to transcend conflict and division among Friends. He was recorded as a minister among Quakers in Friends United Meeting, Friends General Conference. This recording was recognized among Evangelical Friends International. He was further recorded in his current congregation, Freedom Friends Church, a convergent community—which is a term that sums up quite a bit about Vail Palmer and his studies and labors among Friends. Along the way, he earned a Ph.D. in ethics and society at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and for some years he was a college professor of philosophy and religion.

Vail Palmer notes that this book began in 1991 when he offered to teach a course on how early Friends used the Bible for Reedwood Friends Church's Center for Christian Studies, but, as he also acknowledges, the quest that brought this book to fruition had its origins some forty years earlier. As a young person with spiritual longings, he came to love Thomas Kelly's *Testament of Devotion*, where he read "With urgent hunger we read the Scriptures...in order to find more friends for the soul," but he confesses as well that "I knew that however much I might love portions of the Bible, I could not sacrifice my intellect and accept everything in the Bible as literally true. And in my college days I assumed that becoming a Christian would mean swallowing biblical literalism."<sup>1</sup> He tells of the profound personal impact of the Biblical Theology Movement, which he discovered as a student, and how deeply he appreciates the work of Bernhard W. Anderson and G. Ernest Wright, who offered him a way to read the scriptures with mind and heart.

Vail Palmer mentions other writers who exerted a powerful influence on his own theological development. Karl Barth makes several appearances. D. M. Baillie's *God Was in Christ* led him "through a careful series of argument showing how the Christian faith involves a number of paradoxes, including the central paradox of grace—my experience that the good which I do is entirely my own responsibility and also wholly within the work of God's grace in me."<sup>2</sup>

In mid-century, when Vail Palmer pursued theological studies, the dominant voice in mainstream Protestant theology was neo-orthodoxy, championed by, among others, the brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr. Their thought opened new doors and was intellectually stimulating for more than a generation of North American religious leaders. This frame of thought was attractive to Vail Palmer as it was to many others in the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, who were not satisfied with the liberal, mystical interpretation of Quaker origins as articulated by leading Quakers Rufus Jones and Howard Brinton. The neo-orthodox position held to a less optimistic estimation of human progress than the liberal theologies of the turn of the century. This made sense to a generation that had just lived through the grim horrors of the Second World War, but the so-called Christian Realism of the neo-Orthodox had no sympathy or mercy for pacifism. I recall, years ago, meeting an elderly Mennonite religious scholar who asked me if I as a Quaker knew Wilmer Cooper, the founding dean of the Earlham School of Religion. When I told him that I did, he recounted how the students at Yale Divinity School from the Historic Peace Churches formed a kind of support group, to fortify themselves against the prevailing scorn for pacifism from the neo-orthodox faculty and their outspoken disciples. Just as, at Yale, the peace church members found comfort and support from fellow pacifist Roland Bainton, Vail Palmer was in some ways perhaps less prone to attack at the University of Chicago Divinity School than he would have been at Yale or at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where the Niebuhr brothers had their domain. Navigating the positive insights of neo-orthodoxy with a commitment to nonviolence was a serious challenge during the post-World War II golden years of white American Protestantism. With his background in philosophy and his focus on Christian ethics, Vail Palmer was up to the task.

That commitment to ethics is a prominent stratum in *Face to Face*. Although the book's focus is biblical interpretation, time and again Vail Palmer returns to ethical issues and how they are supported or complicated by the biblical heritage. As one might expect, the peace testimony is one such issue. Another is the testimony on equality and women in ministry. Of particular note is the book's exploration of war tax resistance among Friends, a story that Vail Palmer narrates with acumen and with passion.

The goal of biblical study, according to Bernhard W. Anderson, is "to enter sympathetically and imaginatively into the community and to relive its sacred history." As Vail Palmer puts it, the "basic aim of

biblical criticism is *empathy*.” His study of early Friends and scripture led him to the realization that they “expressed and embodied the very empathy that the biblical theologians recognized as the goal of biblical scholarship.” The foundational themes of the Biblical Theology Movement included the notion of salvation history, through the “mighty acts of God.” These look to a final act, the “day of the Lord.” The second major theme was covenant: the mighty acts of God are covenant-making events.<sup>3</sup>

Through the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, especially T. Canby Jones, who popularized the early Quaker idea of the Lamb’s War, and Rob Tucker’s development of its social and political possibilities in his 1967 essay in *Quaker Religious Thought*, “Revolutionary Faithfulness,” Vail Palmer came to recognize the early Quaker movement as a “mighty act of God” that generated a covenantal people of radical equality, revolutionary community, and radical ethical discipline, embodied in the peace testimony.<sup>4</sup> Such were the implications of the conviction that Christ had come to teach his people himself. Returning to the language of biblical theologians, this was realized eschatology. Such a vision requires a people, and George Fox’s seeing a great people to be gathered when he was atop Pendle Hill was the event, according to Vail Palmer, when his temptation to despair was vanquished. The early Quaker movement fulfilled the deep need for authentic community.

*Face to Face* offers attentive readings of passages from George Fox, Edward Burrough, and Margaret Fell, enumerating scriptural references and allusions, which are legion. Vail Palmer argues that their use of the Bible aspired to reading it from within, attending to a passage’s context, and identifying with characters and their situations. Early Quaker community resembled that of the first disciples because Friends had “internalized the life of the early church with such deep empathy.”<sup>5</sup> Their “affective spirituality” that embraced the metaphorical and symbolic language of scripture opened the way to an empathetic entry into the biblical world. Vail Palmer argues that the early Friends did not demonstrate a consciousness that they were reading in this manner. That proved the undoing of this empathetic practice, because they could not pass it on to succeeding generations, or even recognize that the latter were reading scripture differently. William Penn and Robert Barclay wrote in another tone, for the most part, and used scripture largely as a handbook from which to derive religious teachings rather than as a narrative of experiences

to enter into. Thus they argued for women's equality based on the principle articulated in Gal. 3:28: in Christ there is neither male nor female.<sup>6</sup> George Fox and Margaret Fell, for their part, made their case by reference to specific female characters from the Bible, with whom they showed empathy. This keen observation is one of the most important insights in this book. Robert Barclay approaches the first generation method of reading the Bible when he describes scripture as a looking glass in which we discover a correspondence between the conditions and experiences of biblical persons and those of our own.<sup>7</sup> This example of empathy, however, is the exception in Robert Barclay's otherwise "pedantic scholarly tone."<sup>8</sup>

The book moves on to explore, again with exemplary attention, insightfully selected passages from Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay (both radical antislavery writers—disturbingly so for most of their contemporaries), Anthony Benezet, John Churchman, Samuel Fothergill, Abraham Schackleton, Job Scott, Henry Tuke, Elias Hicks, Stephen Grellet, William Savery, and John Comly. Here again *Face to Face* demonstrates painstaking care to these chosen texts, with many astute observations. The book argues that, aside from rare moments of empathy, all these Friends, read scripture differently from the earliest Friends. Vail Palmer's conclusion is that by focusing on scripture as a doctrinal handbook or set of ethical rules, rather than seeking to experience the transformative power of the Bible through empathy, Friends paved the way for emphasis on creed, which, as in the ancient church, led to strife and division.

The book offers a compelling thesis, argued with much evidence and conviction. It is thoroughly grounded in primary texts and a careful reading of secondary literature on Quakers and the Bible.

As with any lengthy, complex book, much can be discussed or even debated, though this is not meant to be a review of a book that Vail Palmer did not choose to write. Still, some questions arise, most of which are intended to point toward further work to be taken up by others. A good book, even in its omissions, opens the way to additional study.

*Face to Face* argues that "the basis of for the peace testimony of the earliest Friends" can be found in the "mighty imagery of the Lamb's War from the book of Revelation." (96) This is insightful, but perhaps not complete. After all, George Fox, when refusing the offer of a captaincy in 1651, declared "I knew whence all wars did rise, from the lust according to James's doctrine."<sup>9</sup> Could this be regarded as reading James 4:1 with empathy?

Is this practice of reading with empathy more pronounced in writings that Friends intended for other Quakers? Aside from Margaret Fell's *Women's Speaking Justified*, the book makes its case for empathetic reading based on epistles from George Fox and Edward Burrough. Was empathy more suited for writings that offered spiritual nurture? Even in the earliest writings, is a different approach to scripture employed in theological polemics? George Keith, for example, surely rivaled Robert Barclay in terms of scholarly pedantry and is renowned as a thoroughgoing polemicist, especially in his later years. Yet, when writing to encourage other Friends, shortly after his conviction, could he be considered to be reading the Bible with empathy when he wrote such passages as the following?

but the living Truth of the Living God, which hath been revealed to us, and which we have learned from the Spirit of Truth, and our Testimony among you hath been, that the Son of God is come, and his Kingdom revealed with power and great Glory, even the Kingdom of God, which is Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, and now hath the Sun of Righteousness arisen with healing under his wings, and the glorious light thereof hath shined forth upon the Earth, and the Inhabitants thereof, after the long dark night of Apostacy that hath been.<sup>10</sup>

Would further exploration confirm the book's claim that the earliest Friends were unaware that they were reading with empathy? How then to explain Robert Barclay's articulation of such a practice in the passage mentioned above about the looking glass?

While the book's commitment to equality of women is clear, only one work by a woman is considered, Margaret Fell's *Women's Speaking Justified*, along with a brief reference to the work of another scholar on Dorothy White. Through such important works as Mary Garman's *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker Women's Writings 165-1700* and the resources available through the Digital Quaker Collection, many long-neglected texts by Quaker women are available and merit the careful consideration that *Face to Face* has extended to its chosen texts. This may be an avenue for others to explore.

Under the influence of the Biblical Theology Movement of the middle of the last century, *Face to Face* does not show much positive regard for allegory. The reputation of allegory, however, has been under rehabilitation by scholars in recent decades, as scholars have come to new understandings about this method of approaching scripture. Further studies of Quakers and the Bible could be informed

by these developments.<sup>11</sup> I say this not to demean the Biblical Theological Movement but only to point out that all of us see on partially. Any system is incomplete.

*Face to Face* quotes frequently quotes passages from historical Friends that are, to say the least, generous in length. These long quotations may strike some readers as long-winded and in need of further editing. Recalling, however, T. Canby Jones's propensity to read from early Friends texts aloud at length (he did the same with the Bible), I suspect that both he and Vail Palmer shared a desire to draw the reader or hearer into the world of early Friends, into an experience of empathy. This requires patience, so readers should be forewarned. Empathy comes at some expense, though it is worth the cost.

I bring up the name of Canby Jones with purpose. Although mentioned only occasionally in the book, this friend and spiritual brother of Vail Palmer looms large in the background of *Face to Face*. Canby Jones was an evangelist for the revival of the Lamb's War among Friends. The two shared many interests and activities, including the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, the office of editor of *Quaker Religious Thought*, a shared admiration of Lewis Benson, and a radical Quaker ethics. Someday someone should write a piece that explores the common ground shared by these two significant Quaker leaders.

In short, a thought-provoking book suggests further possibilities.

As Vail Palmer advocates, reading the Bible with empathy opens the door to transformation and to community. It can bring people together in a way that endless conflicts over creed or biblical authority will not. To read with empathy is to encounter a power to save and to remake the world, to participate in the ongoing work of a mighty act of God, realizing eschatology. This book is a witness to that power, from a worthy elder.

And the love story? It is the story of the love that Vail Palmer has for the Bible and his love for the spiritual legacy of early Friends. As readers will discover, it is a marriage made in heaven.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Face to Face*, p. 9.
2. *Face to Face*, p. 29.
3. Quotations in this paragraph are from *Face to Face*, pp. 10, 11, 33.
4. *Face to Face*, p. 39.



5. *Face to Face*, p. 76.
6. It should be noted that this phrase has been more accurately translated as “male and female” in more recent versions.
7. Robert Barclay, *Apology*, Proposition 3, Section 5.
8. *Face to Face*, p. 106.
9. John L. Nickalls, ed., *The Journal of George Fox* (Cambridge: University Press, 1952), p. 65.
10. George Keith, *A salutation of dear and tender love to the seed of god arising in Aberdeen in two epistles...*(Aberdeen, 1665), p. 1.
11. See, for example, Brian E. Daley, “Is *Patristic Exegesis* Still Usable?: Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms,” *Communio* 29 (Spring 2002) 185-216.