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REVIEW OF T. VAIL PALMER, JR.,
*A LONG ROAD: HOW QUAKERS
MADE SENSE OF GOD AND THE BIBLE*
(NEWBERG, OR: BARCLAY PRESS,
2017)

ISAAC BARNES MAY

T. Vail Palmer, Jr.'s *A Long Road* provides a nuanced and comprehensive overview of the thought of two centuries of Quaker Biblical scholars and theologians, focusing on the careers of individual religious leaders to chart the trajectory of a movement. The introduction positions the book as building on classics of Quakerism like Rufus Jones's *Faith and Practices of the Quakers*, John Punshon's *Portrait in Grey*, Walter Williams's *Rich Heritage of Quakerism* and Carole Dale Spencer's *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*, but the Quaker work that Palmer's book most closely resembles is Wilmar C. Cooper's attempt to document a systematic Quaker theology in *A Living Faith*. The book's format and close kinship with earlier scholarship can also be a limitation, however; this is a history of familiar English and American weighty Friends that tries to see their continuities with George Fox and the early Quakers.

Palmer has worked as a professor of religion and holds a doctorate from University of Chicago Divinity School. *A Long Road* reflects that training and experience; it is not an introduction to Quaker beliefs and history, but rather concerned with the nuances of what weighty Friends thought on issues like the atonement and higher criticism. This is the middle entry in Palmer's planned trilogy on the Bible and Quaker theology. The first volume in the series, *Face to Face: Early Quaker Encounters with the Bible*, focused on Friends in the seventeenth century. *A Long Road* chronologically covers schisms in the early nineteenth century until the last quarter of the twentieth century. The final volume in the series will discuss Quaker scholarship on the Bible from the 1970s onward and outline Palmer's own theological views. This book contains four chapters, along with an introduction and epilogue. Many of the events and figures depicted here will be very familiar to readers of *Quaker Religious Thought*; for

example, chapter two, “Friends and the Bible: A Nineteenth Century sampler” has sections on John Joseph Gurney, John Wilbur and Lucretia Mott, alongside slightly less prominent figures like Jonathan Dymond and Elias Hicks’s second cousin, Edward. The third chapter juxtaposes the rise of holiness and evangelical Quakerism with the Manchester Conference and the birth of liberal Quakerism.

The book’s greatest contribution, and the reason it will likely be an enduring resource for scholars, is because each chapter provides accessible short biographies of the lives of numerous Quaker Biblical scholars and theologians and has useful summaries of the arguments of their major published works with well-chosen quotations. It bears some resemblance to Gary Dorrien’s three volume trilogy *The Making of American Liberal Theology* in its format, but unlike that work, it is purely devoted to the figures brought together by membership in a religious group rather than united by shared theological convictions. While there have been historically-based reference sources about Quakers, such as *The Historical Dictionary of the Friends (Quakers)* or the brief biographical dictionary at the end of Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost’s *The Quakers*, Palmer’s work fills a particular need for a theologically-focused resource.

For the most part in this volume Palmer tries to avoid being constructive theologically. It is mostly a study of the past rather than an attempt to outline a clear vision for the future of the Religious Society of Friends. Yet Palmer’s own perspective is still evident at many junctures in the text. Theologically he could be labeled a post-liberal, criticizing what he sees as the liberal and evangelical extremes of Quaker theology for having sacrificed the vision of the early Friends. He regards the Richmond Declaration of Faith as the “final dead end of the Gurneyite deviation from the original Quaker understanding of revelation and creeds” (pg. 34), while the opposite “final dead end of the Hicksite deviation” is seen in the life and work of Arthur Morgan, the former President of Antioch College and a member of Yellow Springs Monthly Meeting, who was a religious naturalist and non-theist. Palmer is able to draw upon the scholarship of Thomas D. Hamm and Spencer for insight into Friends’ turn towards evangelical and holiness theology, but his sally against the leftmost edge of religious liberals is less well supported.

At various points Palmer also engages in a common tendency in Quaker scholarship: for authors to try to win theological battles within the contemporary Religious Society of Friends by looking back at the

first Friends and arguing that they held views similar to their own. In the first two chapters Palmer carries on an argument for a moderate post-liberal Quakerism by reading many of the figures of nineteenth and twentieth-century Quakerism through the lens of the first generation of Friends, seeing the early faith of the movement as normative. The first chapter, for example, tries to compare John Joseph Gurney's views on the nature of revelation to Robert Barclay and Fox, finding fault with Gurney for seeing revelation as promoting specific doctrines and moral principles, rather than immediate knowledge of God. Elias Hicks and his followers come in for a milder critique for holding a moral influence theory of the atonement; Palmer observes that "in their deviations from the core of the original Quaker position, I can still hear a few echoes of George Fox's insights" (pg. 44). Departing from Fox's worldview is almost always depicted a flaw. Because Palmer wrote the entire preceding book in the series on the early Friends, there is an obvious use in seeing the continuities and changes among Quaker beliefs. But there is a risk in measuring later Quakers by these standards. As Palmer admits, the early Friends were hardly uniform in their religious thought, nor were the views of even a leader like Fox always representative of the movement, so it is not clear what criteria scholars should use to establish which view among them was the "original Quaker position." Positing a core of traditional Quakerism, which can be either embraced or flouted by later generations, may also err in assuming that there is a discernible essence of Quakerism that can be isolated and recovered in the first place.

Palmer argues that the high number of biblical scholars in the Religious Society of Friends and robustness of Quaker biblical scholarship is evidence of "a vitality that supports the claim that the Quaker vision is indeed a restoration of the earliest Christian vision" (pg. 250). Palmer's book is an excellent study on how a group of Quaker intellectuals creatively adapted their understanding of the Bible to fit with modern philosophy and the findings of historical criticism; his own account seems to suggest this is a narrative of religious development (or perhaps progressive revelation) and undermines the idea that Quaker Biblical scholarship was a restoration of Fox's Quakerism. The issue with idealizing the past as the greatest and purest period in Quakerism and Christian theology is that it undermines the idea that religious thought can and should accommodate changing historical circumstances.

Palmer's focus on the need to "restore" the vision of early Quakerism does factor into one major aspect of the book, the strong emphasis on Quaker views on the atonement. In his introduction and first chapter, Palmer develops an argument that he made in a 2011 *Quaker Studies* article, that the understanding of George Fox and early Friends on Christ's sacrifice closely resembles the Christus Victor position. Christus Victor is an alternative to forensic and moral influence theories of the atonement that can be traced back to the Church Fathers, but was only definitively formulated as an idea in 1930 by Swedish Bishop Gustaf Aulén. It asserts that Christ, in death, managed to defeat the powers of evil, thereby allowing for the salvation of Christians. Palmer pays close attention to how closely later Friends either adhered to or rejected Christus Victor. He is quite critical of evangelical Friends like John Joseph Gurney for having wholeheartedly embraced penal substitutionary atonement and liberal Friends like Elias Hicks who embraced moral influence theories. A key failure of nineteenth century Friends, according to Palmer, is that they "lost sight of the original Quaker understanding of the atonement" (pg. 44).

It is questionable historical practice to describe the atonement theology of seventeenth century Friends with a theological label that was articulated almost two centuries later. The matter is further complicated by Palmer's suggestion that a "satisfactory theory" of how Christus Victor operates only arose in the twenty-first century with the writings of two theologians: Mennonite J. Danny Weaver and Methodist R. Larry Sheldon (pg. 11). Palmer wants to evaluate the theology of nineteenth and twentieth-century Friends against that of Fox, but it is easy to conclude that he is viewing Fox through a thoroughly modern lens. One of the key lessons of historical criticism of the New Testament was to be critical of producing studies of historical Jesus that conveniently portrayed him as thinking exactly as the author did. We should be equally wary of the same trend towards early Quakerism.

Yet even when dealing with a difficult topic like the atonement, readers who are not fully persuaded by Palmer's argument about what should be normative Quaker theology can easily conclude that he has done a useful service by documenting what Quakers have believed. Simply charting these differences shows us why the schisms and divisions of the nineteenth century were so heated. There is a vast, perhaps unbridgeable religious gulf between a modernist like Rufus

Jones, who believed that Christ's contribution was almost entirely in the example of his life, and a contemporary like the exponent of holiness theology David Updegraff, who firmly held to the idea that Christ's death was necessary to appease God.

Palmer's overviews of notable Friends also capture the breadth of Quaker thought even among close religious allies. The fourth chapter of the book, on "Quaker Bible Scholars," focuses on a number of late nineteenth and twentieth-century Friends who were influential in the academic study of the Bible. On the surface these figures, including J. Rendel Harris, Henry Cadbury, H.G. Wood and Alexander C. Purdy, are very similar; they are English and American men with graduate educations in philosophy or religion, but they offer very different understandings of the Bible. Particularly interesting is a comparison of H.G. Wood's focus on a socially progressive vision of Jesus, with that of Henry Cadbury, who believed that the historical Jesus was an apocalyptic figure not interested in politics and offering little guidance for modern life. Cadbury would eventually go so far as to question whether God participated in history at all, while for Wood, God clearly was revealed in Jesus's life as well as in certain moments and texts. Because twentieth-century Quaker beliefs vary so much, examining the personal theological views of a few people, as *A Long Road* does, may be the best way to begin to understand it.

While *A Long Road* advances our understanding of Quaker theology, it only does so for a narrow subset of Quakerism. The book's subjects are also entirely Anglo-American Quaker leaders, which is concerning because Palmer's account continues into the 1960s and 1970s, well after Quakerism had spread beyond Britain and the United States and was on the way towards becoming a majority African movement. The figures chronicled in the book are also almost entirely male; the only two women profiled are Lucretia Mott and Caroline Stephens. Quakers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century had a greater number of visible women in leadership than most other English and American religious groups, so this omission is especially unfortunate.

A Long Road is a worthy addition to the canon of Quaker scholarship. It is among the most helpful works published that addresses modern British and American Quaker religious thought after the 1930s. The book's greatest limitation is that it is mostly refinement on the work that has come before, and like much of that earlier Quaker scholarship, it is a denominational history that is concerned with arguing over the

essence of Quakerism. It is hard to escape the fact that Palmer's fourth and last chapter is the history of a small group of elite, academically-trained Quaker Biblical scholars written by another such scholar, whose professional and religious circles overlap with the people he is writing about. Yet being written by a Quaker scholar "insider" for an audience of "insiders" also means that anyone invested enough to be reading the book reviews in *Quaker Religious Thought* will likely find the book speaks to many of their research interests. After having finished this volume of Palmer's trilogy, I look forward to the next volume of the series.