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Michael Birkel

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MARGARET FELL, READING IN THE HEART

MICHAEL BIRKEL

In 1677 Margaret Fell composed a tract of nineteen pages, *The Daughter of Zion Awakened, and Putting on Strength: She Is Arising, and Shaking Herself Out of the Dust, and Putting on Her Beautiful Garments*.¹ An attentive reading of the text shows her associative way of reading scripture, one that focuses on the imagery of the Bible as a guide to interior experience and a vocabulary for the life of the soul.

The title itself is of course very biblical, drawing on Isa. 52:1, “Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city.”² The subtle shift from “Zion” in Isaiah to “daughter of Zion” in Margaret Fell’s title foreshadows how central female characters will be in the treatise that follows. After a selection of biblical quotations on the title page that extol Zion, or the daughter of Zion, and the deliverance that will proceed from her,³ the tract proper begins with an allusion to Psalm 50:2, which echoes themes of Zion and beauty, and which points toward emerging emphases on light and glory. The wider context of the quotation—and early Friends writings often rely on the reader recognizing such context—refers to even more themes that loom large in Margaret Fell’s text, including divine visitation and address, and conflict with God’s enemies. Psalm 50:1-3 reads:

The mighty God, even the Lord, hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined. Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him.

Immediately below are the words from Margaret Fell that are the focus of this essay. As is common in early Quaker writings, the biblical allusions are many, although here the focal imagery is drawn from Genesis 3 and Revelation 12.

Out of Sion, the Perfection of Beauty, hath God shined, in the Light of his Glorious Son, to recover, and to bring back, and to redeem his whole Body, which is his Church, out of all Nations, Kindreds, Peoples, Tongues, and Languages.⁴ Now the

Universal, Divine, Glorious, Infinite, Invisible God is shining in the dark Places, in the Hearts of Men and Women. There is a Day dawning in the Heart, and a Day-Star arising,⁵ which the Night hath been over since Adam; even the Everlasting Day is dawning in the Hearts of Men and Women: Glorious Praises to the Highest for ever...So this Light, that lights every Man that comes into the World, this is the true Light that shines in the dark Heart, and this is the true Day that dawns in the Heart; and Christ Jesus is the Day-Star that ariseth in the Heart. And this is the true Seed, and this is the blessed Seed, that hath the Promise and Word of the Eternal God joined and fixed to it, That he should bruise the Serpent's Head, who hath set Darkness in the Hearts of People...And God hath not only put Enmity between the two Seeds, but he hath put Enmity between the Serpent and the Woman, Gen. 3...So this Enmity, that God hath put between the Serpent and the Woman, there is no reconciling of it; for where there is any part of the Serpent's Seed or Spirit, it is smiting and striking at the Woman, and contemning her Weakness. For when the Woman, being with Child,⁶ cried and travelled in Birth, pained to be delivered, then behold the great red Dragon appeared, having seven Heads; and ten Horns, and seven Crowns upon his Head; and the Dragon stood before the Woman, which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her Child as soon as it was born. But she brought forth her Man-Child, which is to Rule all Nations with a Rod of Iron,⁷ and her Child was caught up to God, and to his Throne, and the Woman fled into the Wilderness, where she had a Place prepared of God, &c⁸. So God always provided for the Woman, that she was nourished and preserved from the face of the Serpent. And the Serpent will not yet cease to cast out Waters as a Flood after the Woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the Flood...But the Eternal Word and Promise of God stands upon the Head of the Serpent, which is, that the Seed of the Woman should bruise the Serpent's Head; and this is perfectly fulfilling in this our Day: For the Head of the Serpent is now coming to be bruised by the Seed of the Woman, Christ Jesus...And now, in these last Days, since there hath been a falling away, and a Night of Darkness, and a Night of Apostacy from the true, spiritual and glorious Appearance of the Resurrection of Jesus, in the Apostles and Primitive Christians Days; since which time the Woman, that brought forth the Man Child, hath been fled

into the Wilderness, a place prepared of God for her, and had the two Wings of the great Eagle given her: But she is now returning out of the Wilderness, leaning upon her Beloved⁹; and the Holy City, New Jerusalem, is coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a Bride for her Husband, having the Glory of God¹⁰; and her Light is like a Jasper-Stone, most precious, clear as Chrystal, which shines forth in its Glory.

In addition to the imagery of the woman and the serpent, a central role is played by 2 Peter 1:19, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.” Once again, the wider context of this verse contains themes and images that shape Margaret Fell’s writing. Verse 17 of 2 Peter 1 repeatedly refers to divine glory. The following verse refers to “coming down from heaven,” which appears at the end of the passage from Margaret Fell under consideration here. Perhaps more important, 2 Peter 1:20-21 refer to scriptural interpretation, insisting on the necessity of being moved by the Holy Spirit.¹¹ As is found in other writings by Margaret Fell,¹² she is less interested in arguing about that need for the movement of the Spirit than she is in demonstrating that motion of the Spirit. Like some other early Friends, Margaret Fell preferred showing over telling.

Returning to verse 19 of 2 Peter 1, Margaret Fell is herself speaking “a more sure word of prophecy” in her tract. 2 Peter speaks of the light shining in a dark place and a day star, a source of light, shining in the heart. The phrase “in the heart(s)” appears seven times in the passage here under study.¹³ If repetition is an indication of the importance of a phrase or concept, then “in the heart” is central to Margaret Fell’s point in this tract.

In typical Quaker fashion, Margaret Fell identifies the Light with the Seed, which takes her to Gen. 3, particularly verse 15, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” It is Christ the Seed who will bruise the serpent’s head, but it is the enmity between the woman and the serpent that becomes Margaret Fell’s focus. The image of the woman and the serpent serves as a pivot point in her text. It immediately takes her to the twelfth chapter of Revelation, where the enmity between the woman and the serpent takes on a cosmic role. There the serpent is cast to earth, persecutes the woman who has given birth to the Messiah, and pours out water

to flood her. The earth opens up, swallows the flood of water, and helps the woman.

Who is this woman? In Gen. 3, it is of course Eve. As for Rev. 12, in medieval interpretation, the woman clothed with the sun was Mary. Protestants, however, resisted readings and held that the woman was a symbol for the church. Margaret Fell herself held to such a reading, as she notes in her 1664 *Epistle to all Friends Prisoners*.¹⁴ In *The Daughter of Sion Awakened*, at some level, the precise identification of the woman is not so important because the woman is within. She says as much about the first woman, in Gen. 3. After a lengthy rehearsal of the history of the enmity of the two seeds, Margaret Fell writes:

Here the precious Seed hath actually suffered and been oppressed all along by the wicked Seed of the Serpent; so that the faithful Word of the Lord is fulfilled, which said, it should bruise his Heel; as may be clearly seen through the Scriptures of Truth, and may also be read in every Heart and every Bosom of every Man and Woman (upon the face of the whole Earth) which lies in the Fall, and in the Disobedience, and under the Curse.¹⁵

The concept of reading within the bosom is encountered elsewhere in Margaret Fell's writings. In her letter to William Osborne of 1657, she writes of another biblical passage (Isa. 58), "And this thou must read in thy own bosom."¹⁶ It is within, therefore, where the enmity, birth, strife, and victory that Margaret Fell speaks of take place. The scenario of redemption is, as she noted, in the heart.

The story of the woman and the serpent does ultimately have a happy ending for the woman. She who "brought forth the Man Child" and then fled into the wilderness "is now returning out of the wilderness, leaning upon her Beloved; and the Holy City, New Jerusalem, is coming down from God out of Heaven prepared as a Bride for her Husband," with glory and resplendent light, clear as a crystal (Rev. 22:1-2, 10-11).¹⁷ The woman in the wilderness of Rev. 12 now becomes the woman in the wilderness of the Song of Songs: Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved (8:5)? Again, we see an image—the woman and the wilderness—as a pivot point in her associative reading of the Bible. The intimate image of leaning upon the beloved is a reminder that the Song of Songs was historically understood allegorically as telling the love story between God or Christ and the soul. This woman is within, the New Jerusalem is within. Jerusalem is the home of Zion, which calls us back to very beginning of this tract: Out of Sion, the Perfection of Beauty,¹⁸ hath

God shined, in the Light of his Glorious Son, to recover, and to bring back, and to redeem...in the heart.

A central function of scripture, for early Friends, was to provide the language for understanding spiritual experience. Early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay wrote, “This is the great work of the Scriptures, and their service to us, that we may witness them fulfilled in us.”¹⁹ Margaret Fell’s *The Daughter of Sion Awakened* shows us vividly how this works.

ENDNOTES

1. A recent scholarly (and quite brief) discussion of this text is by Paul Salzman, *Reading Early Modern Women’s Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Paul Salzman considers this a tract on Jewish conversion to Quakerism (p. 125), but, while the tract retraces the history of conflict with the serpent and the lengthy legacy of apostasy, it seems more accurate to regard it as a general summons to the Light. Other writings of Margaret Fell that are aimed specifically at a Jewish audience, such as her 1656 tract, *A Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham*, are noticeably reticent to focus on New Testament sources, and these are at the heart of the text under discussion here. I prefer to see the text as one that cries out for a feminist theological reading.
2. Biblical citations throughout are from the Authorized or King James Bible.
3. The biblical sources cited are Micah 4:8, Ps. 110:2, Zech. 2:10-11 and 9:9, Matt. 21:5, John 12:15, Rom. 9:33 and 11:26, and 1 Pet. 2:6.
4. Rev. 5:9, “And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.” It is worth noting how, this soon in her tract, Margaret Fell is already pointing to the book of Revelation.
5. 2 Pet. 1:19.
6. Rev. 12.
7. Rev 2:27, “And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers.”
8. The etc. omits the 1260 days. This lessens the sense of an external, physical apocalypse.
9. Song 8:5, “Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?”
10. Rev. 21.2, “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”; Rev. 21:10-11, “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.”
11. 2 Peter 1: 17-21, “For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

12. See *The Messenger that Goes Before: Margaret Fell as Spiritual Nurturer*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2008.
13. Margaret Fell makes use of 2 Peter 1:19 elsewhere in her writings. See *Brief collection of remarkable passages and occurrences relating to Margaret Fell* (London: J. Sowle, 1710), pp. 11-12, 64, 147, 371.
14. In *Brief Collection*, p. 299.
15. *The Daughter of Sion Awakened, and Putting on Strength*, p. 8.
16. “So my dear heart, low in the fear of the Lord wait, and keep the fast to the Lord, that the heavy burden may be undone, and the bonds of wickedness undone, and the oppressed may have freedom, and the hungry may have bread, and the soul that thirst may be satisfied. And this thou must read in thy own bosom.” Spence Manuscript 3:47, edited in Elsa F. Glines, *Undaunted Zeal: The Letters of Margaret Fell* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003), pp. 241-242. A lengthy treatment of this letter is found in *The Messenger that Goes Before*.
17. Margaret Fell’s use of a female character, clothed with the sun, upheld by the moon, and crowned with stars, as central to this writing, may well have been an empowering image for Quaker women at the time.
18. Note how the theme of beauty is echoed in the phrase “prepared as a bride” in Rev. 22.
19. Robert Barclay, *Apology for True Christian Divinity*, London, 1678, Proposition 3: Section 5.