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REVIEW OF DAVID LEWIS, *A WORD FROM THE LOST: REMARKS ON JAMES NAYLER'S LOVE TO THE LOST AND A HAND HELD FORTH TO THE HELPLESS TO LEAD OUT OF THE DARK* (INNER LIGHT BOOKS, 2019)

CAROLE DALE SPENCER

James Nayler has been an enduring enigma to historians. He's been considered a madman and a saint. A variety of perspectives and interpretations, often conflicting, from political, sociological, psychological, theological, and literary standpoints have been offered; but one undeniable fact about Nayler that historians can agree on is that he was a charismatic figure. His charisma rivaled George Fox in the earliest period of the Quaker movement. But he was largely lost in the dustbins of Quaker history until the twentieth century, when four modern biographies were written as well as numerous scholarly articles in Quaker journals. And he continues to generate interest in many Quaker circles.

The writing of this book attests to an interesting phenomenon—liberal Quakers seem to find Nayler more relatable and inspirational than evangelical Quakers, even though Nayler's language is thoroughly Christocentric and biblical, and his thought steeped in reformation theology. In *A Word from the Lost*, David Lewis clearly finds Nayler inspiring and relatable, particularly so because he first met Nayler as a revolutionary leader in Christopher Hill's Marxist interpretation of the early Quaker movement, *The World Turned Upside Down*. Though Lewis no longer sees Nayler as a political revolutionary, he continues to find Nayler a fascinating spiritual guide for contemporary Quakers, especially his own branch, Britain Yearly Meeting. Identifying with British Quakers in the post-modern world, he cleverly entitles his book *A Word from the Lost*.

Lewis includes some of his own spiritual journey in his writing, one aspect of his work that makes it a pleasure to read. Almost all Quakers (who aren't "birthright") love to tell how they discovered Friends, and Lewis is no exception. It was Hill's book that led him to visit a Quaker meeting as he humorously describes: "My reading of *The World Turned Upside Down* brought me to the Friends Meeting in Rochester, Kent, where I found around six Friends, all about thirty years older than me and none of them revolutionaries. I should not have been surprised."

While this book is deeply personal, a testimonial of sorts, Lewis also provides valuable, comprehensive historical research on Nayler's life and context, demographic, economic, social, religious, political, military, even noting the effects of climate change on the period. He also offers an insightful critique on British Quakerism in his "translation," as he terms it, of Nayler's words, to speak to contemporary post-Christian Quakerism.

Lewis has combed through most of the secondary literature as well as the primary literature on Nayler. The volume is scholarly and well-documented, and provides an excellent background to understanding early Quaker history and its relation to the Civil war and the social and political currents of the early movement. Importantly, he also reminds us that Quaker outward testimonies, ideas, and positions were already well-established among religious radicals before the arrival of the Quakers, so that Quakers were lumped together by the establishment with all of the religious radicals of the time. Quakers were radical dissenters, he asserts, but they were not revolutionaries. They did not wish to abolish property rights.

As the sub-title informs, *Remarks on James Nayler's Love to the Lost*, the focus of this volume is Nayler's most comprehensive and systematic theological text, *Love to the Lost*. Lewis explores and interprets it section by section interspersed with chapters on Nayler's life and context. He looks for threads and links to Nayler's thought in later Quaker disciplines, and assesses how the Society of Friends has "moved away from, or beyond, his writings." Lewis, metaphorically calls *Love to the Lost*, "the Quaker ship before the barnacles, fresh from the shipwright's bench."

Lewis admits that the theological concepts are not familiar to him, and the language of the mid-seventeenth century is often a struggle to unravel, yet something in the passion and authenticity of Nayler's faith speaks to him, nonetheless. When Lewis quotes from *Love to the Lost*, he often adds biblical references to Nayler's prose showing how dependent on scripture it is, and also demonstrates his own familiarity with the Bible.

In a short review it is not possible to discuss all the themes in this book. I'll limit my comments to several theological themes that are related: the Fall, Redemption, Jesus Christ, and Resurrection.

Lewis' first commentary on *Love to the Lost*, concerns the Fall, Nayler's explanation of how humans, created in unity with God and all creation, arrived at their lost state of dis-unity, and how they can return to Eden, a symbol of our re-union with God.

Nayler does not use the Calvinist terms "original sin" or "total depravity." Quakers challenged the predominant theology of the time that humans were born sinners, rather we become sinners when we sin, but the Light within us (which in "Concerning the Fall" Nayler calls "the hidden wisdom") can bring us back to unity with God if we open and become obedient to it. Lewis notes that unlike the usual narrative of the Fall, the woman is not blamed; in fact, Eve is never mentioned.

Lewis appreciates the symbolism and the poetry in the creation myth as Nayler unfolds it, and he interprets it metaphorically as a psychological understanding that can still have meaning for modern Quakers. Lewis calls this loss of our original unity with God, the loss of our "spiritual intelligence," expropriating Nayler for contemporary secular Quakers.

The Fall, of course, ties in with Nayler's chapter "Concerning Redemption." If we are lost, how are we found? Lewis admits redemption is his most difficult theological concept to understand, consequently it's his shortest chapter. How do we become reunited with God? What role does Christ play? What does salvation mean to contemporary Quakers and how does it come about?

Since we are all born with the seed of Christ, we have free will to choose our destiny, and salvation, however we understand it, is

not dependent on a predestined fate, known as Election. From my perspective this belief places Quakers in the Arminian theological camp, but Lewis disagrees. He contends that Nayler writes against Arminianism, which Lewis understands as meaning we are saved by our own effort. Here I would differ with Lewis' understanding of Arminianism as the doctrine that we are saved by our efforts or justified by our works. Rather Nayler is building on the Arminian critique of Calvinism, which challenged predestination and was universalistic in scope, contending for a free will that works with grace to choose the gift of atonement. But what is atonement? In the section on redemption Nayler never offers a standard atonement theory, of which there are many versions. I would suggest he is preaching an incarnational theology, rather than the traditional Puritan substitutionary atonement. Lewis considers this theory the orthodox teaching, and quotes references from scripture that Jesus' death objectively atones for human sins (which many later Quakers did adopt, as Lewis shows). There are many metaphors to explain Christ's death on the cross in the New Testament and Nayler was familiar with them all, juridical, sacrificial, financial, even battle metaphors, and these metaphors have been developed into complex doctrines of the atonement. Nayler uses many of these images found in scripture, but his overarching emphasis is on "the Word made flesh," in other words the incarnation of God in a human being that allows humanity to become "partakers of the divine nature." Therefore Nayler's understanding of redemption is primarily through the incarnation. This is woven through many of his writings, adopting a pre-Anselmian and patristic divinization emphasis rather than the standard Puritan forensic atonement emphasis. But Nayler is most adamant, as Lewis shows, that it is not belief in a doctrine of atonement that saves us. I would add that Nayler's intimate experience of God was one of a mystical unity with the indwelling Christ, a redemption of complete transformation that gives power over sin and the devil. This moves us into the chapter on Jesus Christ.

It seems fairly undisputed that Nayler believed Jesus was both human and divine, and not just the human Jesus. Nayler's realization of the mystical nature of the incarnation was so

thrilling that he perhaps tended to underplay the humanity of Jesus and focus primarily on the indwelling of the Christ, thus opening himself, and Quakers in general to claims of heresy in the seventeenth century Puritan context.

My reading of Nayler has convinced me that he was the most incarnational early Quaker theologian. His incarnational Christology is the most arresting aspect of his writing. That he realized he had taken his Christology perhaps too literally in his entry into Bristol by relying on his “reason” is evident in his post-fall writings, but he never doubted Christ had been born in him, and should be born in everyone who is a true Christian. He believed his primary calling was to be a “sign” for the indwelling Christ and thus his ride into Bristol. However, his sign was largely misinterpreted as claiming to *be* Christ rather than a public expression of the indwelling Christ. George Fox’s theology was essentially no different, and he too was often viewed in laudatory language as a Christ figure. But the rivalry over their leadership allowed Fox and his circle to use the fallout of Nayler’s actions as reason to denounce him.

Nayler experienced, and attempted to have others experience, the God incarnated in Christ in a particular time and place, but also reborn in humanity, which for Nayler is true redemption. We are united with God, distinct from God, but not separated from God. Nayler experienced this paradox and tried to express it. But like all paradoxes it cannot be rationally expressed. His “error” was trying to express literally what is “unknowable.”

Lewis ends the commentary on *Love to the Lost* with a chapter on the resurrection. Lewis acknowledges that resurrection for British Friends today is largely understood metaphorically. Few believe in a physical resurrection of Christ, and many do not believe in an afterlife. He rightly interprets Nayler as also seeing resurrection metaphorically as an awakening to the new birth, we die to live, which Jesus also teaches. But Lewis feels “it is not clear whether Nayler believed in the physical resurrection of Jesus the man” and his message was that resurrection “awaits us in this life whether or not there is a next.” In my reading of Nayler I have

no doubt he believed in both a literal and a metaphorical resurrection, of Jesus and of humanity. That Nayler often writes metaphorically about Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection rather than focusing on the historical Jesus does not mean he devalued the human Jesus and the events of his life. Enemies of Quakers regularly accused them of that. But in my reading of Nayler and early Quakers, the literal was always the starting point, a basic assumption, but they realized it was just the beginning. One could believe in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus without it effecting any real change in a person's life. The deeper meaning that they preached could be found in the more than literal, the birth, death and resurrection that meant following the way of the cross in one's own life. This is reflected in a formulation that became a kind of early credo of Nayler's; "If I cannot witness Christ nearer than Jerusalem. . . I shall have no benefit by him," found in another of Nayler's pamphlets (*Saul's Errand to Damascus*, 1653).

Lewis' *A Word from the Lost* is a significant addition to the literature on James Nayler, his impact on the early Quaker movement, and his continuing relevance for contemporary Quaker spirituality. For Lewis it is perhaps the most inspired of early Quaker writing, and expresses for him the original vision of Quakerism that can be appropriated in different language by contemporary Quakers of many persuasions.