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TEXT AND REVELATION—GEORGE FOX'S USE OF THE BIBLE

RONALD D. WORDEN

Two very strong impressions emerge from study of George Fox's *Journal, Doctrinal Books and Epistles*,¹ and reflection on his use of the Bible. On the one hand, he was thoroughly familiar with the biblical story, content, teachings, imagery and related forms of expression; especially, perhaps, those parts favorable to his understanding of the Christian gospel of redemption from sin and its call for holy living. On the other hand, he placed the greatest importance upon direct, immediate revelation, the speaking of the Holy Spirit or the Light of Christ within his heart. He saw this both as the source of and the controlling influence upon his own spiritual experience and his religious thought in general, and he extended these impressions as also applying to others. A proper understanding of the relationship between these two aspects of Fox's use of the Bible—the textual and the revelational, or, content familiarity and experiential engagement—will be a necessary component of a twenty-first-century Quaker perspective on biblical hermeneutics if it is to have some basis in Fox's use of the Bible. Are these two aspects complementary, or are they in tension? Do they raise issues for us that did not yet concern seventeenth-century Christians?

Both aspects are apparent in the account in Fox's *Journal* of his profound and decisive religious experience in 1647 when he hears the voice that said, "There is One, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition."² His description certainly highlights a direct and immediate experience of God apart from the traditional "means of grace," but it is couched in biblical terms throughout:

Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give Him all the glory [cf. Gal. 6:14, and the Bible throughout]. For all are concluded under sin [Gal. 3:22], and shut up in unbelief [Rom. 11:32 Geneva Bible],³ as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the preeminence [Col. 1:18], who enlightens [cf. Jn. 1:9; Eph. 1:18], and gives grace, faith and power.⁴

The continuation of this report is a kind of synthesis of biblical words, expressions and allusions, but the emphasis is upon the direct and unmediated experience of grace and love:

...When I was in the deep, I could not believe that I should ever overcome; my troubles, my sorrows, and my temptations were so great, that I often thought I should have despaired, I was so tempted. But when Christ opened to me how He was tempted by the same devil, and had overcome him [cf. Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13], and had bruised his head [cf. Gen. 3:15, understood as a messianic prophecy]; and that through Him and His power, light, grace, and Spirit, I should overcome also [cf. 1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Jn. 5:4], I had confidence in Him. Christ, who had enlightened me [cf. Jn. 1:9], gave me His light to believe in, and gave me hope, which is Himself revealed in me, and gave me His Spirit and grace, which I found sufficient [cf. 2 Cor. 12:9] in the deeps and in weakness. Thus in the deepest miseries, in the greatest sorrows and temptations that beset me, the Lord in His mercy did keep me.⁵

In his familiarity with the Bible Fox represents, as perhaps few others did, realization of goals for translation expressed by Erasmus and Tyndale.

“I would,” said Erasmus, “that all private women should read the Gospel and Paul’s Epistles. And I wish that they were translated into all languages...I would that the husbandman at the plough should sing something from hence, that the weaver at his loom [Christopher Fox, George’s father, was a weaver] should sing something from hence, that the traveller might beguile the weariness of his journey by narrations of this kind.”⁶

But Fox clearly and frequently chooses to emphasize direct and immediate revelation. The account of his 1647 experience says, “For though I read the Scriptures that spake of Christ and of God, yet I knew Him not but by revelation, as He who hath the key did open, and as the father of life drew me to His Son by His Spirit.”⁷ A corollary of his view on immediate revelation is the necessity that the one who reads and interprets Scripture must be guided, “illumined,” by the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles who originally wrote the Scriptures, as Fox emphasized in his *Journal* in 1657, with reference to his last meeting in Scotland.

I turned the people to the Spirit of God, which led the holy men of old to give forth the Scriptures, and showed them that they must also come to receive and be led by the same Spirit if ever they came to know God, and Christ, and the Scriptures aright.⁸

Occasionally, Fox seems so concerned to drive home the necessity of the Spirit's guidance in understanding Scripture that his way of putting it might seem to imply that the Scriptures in their subordination to Christ and the Spirit are something less than fully inspired. The *Journal* reports an argument with a priest, "who was a Baptist and a chapel-priest," at Grayrigg and again at Kendal, in which Fox claimed that Scripture was "the words of God, but not Christ, the Word."⁹ But Fox is not trying to show that the Bible is erroneous or fallible, but rather that Christ the Word is so much more than the words of the biblical text. It is a proper understanding of the meaning of the Bible, and an experience of the Christ of the Bible in one's own life, that is at stake. People can have the words of the Bible, but no real experience of God:

Now the pharisees had the scriptures of the Old Testament, as you have of the new. These wise learned men, that had their Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, who made a great talk that Christ was to come then, as you do now, that his is come, but it is clear, as Christ saith, neither you nor any others can know him, but by revelation, as Peter, and Paul, and Simeon, knew him by revelation and the rest of the disciples, whom Christ calls babes. Nay, further, in Luke ii. 32. Simeon saith, speaking of Christ, that "he was a light to be revealed to the Gentiles, and the glory of my people, Israel."¹⁰

Peter, Paul and Simeon knew Christ by revelation (i.e. the activity of the Spirit), and Fox and his contemporaries should also know Christ in that way. Yet throughout this document, which emphasizes the necessity of direct revelation through the Spirit, Fox makes his points by citing Scripture.

And the apostle saith to the Ephesians, Eph. i. 17, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory might give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, through the knowledge of him, that the eyes of your understandings might be enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what is the riches of his glorious inheritance in his

saints.” Now here all you that deny revelation, may see what the apostle prays for, “the spirit of wisdom and revelation;”...¹¹

Both Fox and his contemporary opponents, Anglican, Puritan, Baptist or otherwise, assumed the truth of biblical statements, taking the biblical narratives and instruction more or less at face value. It was not over the inspiration of Scripture as such that they disagreed, but over the possibility of direct revelation in their own time. This is an extremely important issue, transcending the particulars of interpretation and getting to the heart of human-divine communication. Openness to encountering the Living God is what Fox saw as a necessary condition for understanding the Scriptures, which the Holy Spirit had inspired in the first place.

So the scriptures, which were given forth by divine inspiration of God, is [sic] known again by divine inspiration of God. And they that deny divine inspiration of God nowadays, know not the scriptures, that were given forth by inspiration, and therefore they are all in heaps about them and are not like to know them but by that spirit that gave them forth, that key that will open them, and that tongue of the learned and without it they cannot read the book, though they have all the languages upon the earth, but have not the spirit of inspiration nowadays, as they confess...for the apostle saith, turn away from such; for they keep people always learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.¹²

Modern biblical criticism lay in the future. Hermann Samuel Reimarus was born in 1694, three years after the death of Fox.

“Before Reimarus,” it has been suggested, “no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus”; and so “there had been nothing to prepare the world for a work of such power as that of Reimarus.”¹³ By the time that power had become evident, the question of “the humanity of Jesus Christ” was transformed from a problem of Chalcedonian christology to a task of historical-critical research into the biography of Jesus. Once that happened, the modern period had begun.¹⁴

The issue for Fox was not the truth of biblical statements, but rather that the “mere letter” of this truth was not life-giving. He concludes his report of a debate with a priest in Norwich in 1659 as follows:

So I showed the people that as the holy men of God, who gave forth the Scriptures, were moved by the Holy Ghost, did hear and learn of God before they spake, so must they all hearken and hear what the Spirit saith, which will lead them into all truth, that they may know God and Christ, and may understand the Scriptures.¹⁵

In a document on the Internet, George Amoss has collected a series of seven quotations from George Fox about the latter's views of the Bible.¹⁶ A brief introductory statement describes them as "passages...that explain his [i.e. Fox's] view of the Bible and indicate the basis for his hermeneutic, or principle of interpretation." Except for number 6, the quotations are otherwise given without commentary or explanation.¹⁷ The interpretations of similar quotations given above would apply in a similar way to Amoss' seven passages. His first is the passage from the *Journal* about the experience of 1647 treated above. Many of the others emphasize the necessity of the Spirit's leading, but not, it seems, to the point of denigrating the reliability and authority of the Bible. Amoss introduces number 6 by saying, "In Epistle CCCXX,¹⁸ after many pages of scriptural references which he adduces to confirm the validity of women's meetings and ministry, Fox makes this remarkable statement:"

And if there was no scripture [that is, no scriptural warrant] for our men and women's meetings, Christ is sufficient, who restores man and woman up into the image of God, to be helps-meet in the righteousness and holiness, as they were in before they fell. So he is our rock and our foundation to build upon.

Fox is not overriding Scripture here, but combining scriptural concepts in a new way.

It goes without saying, of course, that Fox did not expect to produce additions or supplements to the Bible, adding to the Canon, as it were (as a student once suggested). In all of his emphasis upon the continuation of inspiration, there is no hint of that. When he writes "concerning them which deny Inspiration nowadays,"¹⁹ he is referring to the inspiration needed for his contemporaries to truly understand Scripture as the prophets and holy men of old wrote it.

A couple of points about Fox's manner of citation may be of interest. Sometimes he weaves biblical terms, images (e.g. "light," "seed"), expressions, and/or allusions into his own statements with-

out attribution. At times he quotes with a vague reference to the location of the passage, or cites a prophet or evangelist only by name, or cites words from, say, the Sermon on the Mount, introduced only by, “Christ says.” Sometimes the chapter and verse references are exact, and sometimes the quotation is from, say, “the fifth of John.” In the first one hundred pages or so of the *Journal* in Newman’s edition, chapter and verse references are scarce, but they gradually become more numerous.²⁰

Another interesting question would be, which version of the Bible did Fox use? Some assume that Fox would have used the Geneva Bible,²¹ as did many Puritans and Separatists of his time. The Geneva Bible was the Bible of Shakespeare²² and of the typical seventeenth-century Puritan household.²³ But this author has found passages where the wording, sometimes including significant key words, varies between that of the Geneva Bible of 1560²⁴ and the Authorized or King James Version.²⁵ With the passage of time and various challenges, Fox’s use of the Bible became more sophisticated. He probably came to appreciate the availability of more than one translation. In 1679 at Swarthmoor with more time to study and write, and a realization that “his books would have more credibility if based on research,” he referred to the Koran in a pamphlet he wrote to a Muslim, and he began to study Hebrew.²⁶

The relationship among Fox’s perspectives on the Bible is perhaps best reflected in the ordering of propositions in Robert Barclay’s *Apology*,²⁷ where Proposition 2, “Concerning Immediate Revelation,” precedes and prepares for Proposition 3, “Concerning the Scriptures.” Dean Freiday’s paper deals with the views of Robert Barclay, but it should be noted here, as Fox emphasized frequently in debate and polemical writings, that the possibility of direct divine inspiration through the Holy Spirit is, for Fox, a precondition for both the inspiration of the Scriptures as written by prophets and apostles and for properly appropriating the Scriptures in application to contemporary situations (his and ours). Revelation thus underlies the inspired text, and proper readings of the text lead to ongoing experiences of revelatory address. For us it is a kind of inspiration that does not supercede the Bible, but interprets it for us and acquaints us with the divine author.

NOTES

1. Available in the eight volume set: George Fox, *The Works of George Fox* (Philadelphia: Marcus T. C. Gould, 1831; reprinted, New York: AMS., Inc., 1975), cited henceforth as the *Works*. The *Journal* comprises vols. 1-2; *The Great Mystery*, vol. 3; *Doctrinal Books*, vols. 1-3 = *Works*, vols. 4-6; and the *Epistles*, vols. 1-2 comprise vols. 7-8 of the set. The *Journal* is available in many editions, including the Newman ed. (see footnote 2, below), and an abridgement by Rufus M. Jones available on the Internet and in the public domain, scanned and edited by Harry Plantinga <www.ccel.org/f/fox/autobiography.html>.
2. Henry Stanley Newman, ed., *The Autobiography of George Fox from his Journal*, second ed. (London: S. W. Partridge and Co., and Leominster: The Orphans’ Printing Press, n.d. [Preface date, 1886]), 6.
3. The chapter and verse scripture references in square brackets in the above quotation are added here. The wording of the phrase from Rom. 11:32, “shut up in unbelief,” reflects the wording of the Geneva Bible (*The Geneva Bible; A facsimile of the 1560 edition*, with an introduction by Lloyd E. Berry, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), where the Authorized or King James Version (AV) has “concluded them all in unbelief” with “shut them all up together” as the marginal reading.
4. *Journal*, Newman ed., 6-7.
5. *Ibid.*, 7. Again, the scripture references in square brackets are added.
6. John Brown, *The History of the English Bible* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1911), 39-40. Brown puts the Tyndale quotation in the setting of the family of Sir John Walsh at the Manor-house of Old Sodbury in Gloucestershire, in conversation with one of the “diverse great beneficed men, as abbots, deans, archdeacons and other diverse doctors and learned men.” Will Durant quotes Tyndale as follows:

Early in his student days he [Tyndale] had planned to translate the Bible, not from the Latin Vulgate as Wycliff had done, but from the original Hebrew and Greek. When an ardent Catholic reproved him, saying, “It would be better to be without God’s Law”—i.e., the Bible—“than without the pope’s,” Tyndale answered: “If God spare me life, ere many years I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scripture than you do.”

Will Durant, *The Reformation; A History of European Civilization from Wycliff to Calvin: 1300-1564*. The Story of Civilization: Part VI (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 533. Durant’s Note 42 refers the Tyndale quotation to Chas. Beard, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century in Relation to Modern Thought and Knowledge*, London, 1885, p. 305. Compare the quotation by William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (2nd ed., rev. by Henry J. Cadbury; Cambridge: at the University Press, 1955), 17.
7. *Journal*, Newman ed., 7.
8. *Ibid.*, 164.
9. *Journal*, Newman ed., 66-67. The time is apparently late in 1652. Fox “told them I owned what the Scriptures said of themselves, namely, that they were the words of God, but Christ was the Word.”
10. George Fox, “Concerning Revelation, Prophecy, Measure, and Rule; and the Inspiration and Sufficiency of the Spirit,” a document on *The Quaker Writings Home Page* <<http://www.angelfire.com/mn2/qwhp/gf5228.htm>>.
11. *Ibid.*

12. *Works*, vol. 5 (*Doctrinal Works*, 2), 246. The subsection, separately entitled “And now concerning them which deny Inspiration nowadays,” is found on pages 245-6, and clearly refers to the inspiration of Fox and his contemporaries, not to the initial inspiration of Scriptures as written by prophets and apostles; the latter is assumed. The larger section, pp. 217-253, concludes with the note, Worcester-Prison, the 9th day of the 11th month, 1676. Each subsection is initialled, “G.F.”
13. Marginal note in Pelikan (see below): Schweitzer (1961) 13-14.
14. Jaroslav Pelikan. *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*. The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, 4 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985 [hardback 1983], 361-2.
15. *Journal* (Newman ed.), 175. Note the unreferenced use of 2 Pet. 1:21 and John 16:13 in the above quotation from Fox. The occasion was a Friends meeting in Norwich in 1659; the Mayor had a warrant to apprehend Fox, but was persuaded not to use it. “Several priests were there, and professors, and Ranters.” One of the priests named Townsend “stood up and cried ‘Error, blasphemy, and an ungodly meeting!’” The above quotation concludes Fox’s account of the debate in which the priest admitted, “Yes, David and the prophets did hear God before they did pen the Scriptures, and felt His presence in silence, before they spake them forth.”
16. George Amoss, “George Fox’s Teaching on the Place of Scripture,” on the *Quaker Electronic Archive & Meeting Place* <www.qjs.net/~daruma/index.html>. The URL for the document is <www.qjs.net/~daruma/foxbible.html>.
17. Cf. four papers at the related Internet site <www.qjs.net/~daruma/bible.html>.
18. “An encouragement to all the faithful women’s meetings in the world...” *Works*, vol. 8, pp. 92-116. The quotation is from p. 115. The comment in square brackets in the quotation, “that is, no scriptural warrant,” was added by Amoss.
19. *Works*, vol. 4, pp. 245-6. Compare the document “Concerning Revelation, Prophecy, Measure...” cited above (footnote 10).
20. In the Newman edition of the *Journal*, the first parenthetical chapter and verse Scripture reference occurs on page 58, in a context with other undocumented scriptural allusions. In time, and perhaps with experience in confrontations and debates, exact Scripture references become more numerous (perhaps with the help of later editors). In a short paper entitled “Christ’s Light” (*Works*, vol 4, pp. 303-4), Scripture references are given in footnotes using various typographic symbols, including the asterisk (*), dagger (†), double dagger (‡), section marker (/), parallel lines (||), paragraph marker (¶), and double asterisk (**). But references of this type are rare, even in the *Doctrinal Works*.
21. So Harold B. Kuhn in a lecture on Friends History during the author’s student days at Asbury Theological Seminary.
22. F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible; A History of Translations from the earliest English Versions to the New English Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 82.
23. John Brown says (op. cit., 81-82):

For nearly a hundred years the Geneva Bible was the favourite version of the common people. Several reasons would account for this. For one thing, being in quarto shape, it was more easy to handle than the big folios which went before it. It was also easier to read, the type being in Roman and Italic, not Gothic; and easier for reference, retaining as it did the divisions into chapters and verses made by Estienne for the New Testament and by others for the Old Testament. It retained also the marginal notes of 1557; indicated by accentual marks the pronunciation of proper names; and in addition had woodcuts and convenient maps and tables. But most of all, next to the Bible itself, its notes and comments made it a welcome book to the devout men and women of Puritan days.

Between its publication in 1560 and the appearance of the Authorised Version of 1611 it went through sixty editions; and even after the Authorised Version had appeared, ten more editions were added to the sixty which went before. Right on to the days of the Civil War it continued to be the Bible of the Puritan household.

24. For the Geneva Bible of 1560, see note 3 above.
25. In citing Is. 49:6b, *Journal* (Newman ed.), 243, Fox has “to” and “earth” with the AV where the Geneva Bible has “of” and “worlde.” In citing Eph. 2:5-7, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 2, Fox has “dead by sins” and “through his kindness towards us in Christ Jesus” with the Geneva Bible where the AV has “dead in sins” and “in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.” In quoting Gal. 4:27, *Journal* (Newman ed.), 265, Fox has “thou barren that bearest not” with the AV for “thou barren that bearest no children” in the Geneva Bible. See also note 3, above.
26. H. Larry Ingle, *First Among Friends; George Fox & the Creation of Quakerism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 275. Ingle cites a pamphlet entitled *An Answer to the Speech or Declaration of the Great Turk, Sultan Mahomet*, published in London in 1688 (note 65) and for Fox's study of Hebrew, note 66 reads, “Manuscript fragments, n.d., Portfolio MS., XXXVI, 175, LSF.
27. Barclay, Robert, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (Philadelphia: Friends' Book Store, n.d.); available as *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, edited by Dean Freiday (The Hemlock Press; Sowers Printing Company; Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, 1967).