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SAMUEL FISHER: 17TH-CENTURY QUAKER BIBLICAL SCHOLAR

TIMOTHY W. SEID

Any inquiry into the early history of the Quaker movement would certainly focus on the life and writings of George Fox, and one could not fail also to notice the impact of William Penn on American colonial life. Further study would bring out the place that Margaret Fell had on early Quakerism and might include individuals such as James Nayler and Robert Barclay. Only careful study, however, will bring out of the shadows of history the lesser lights of those who incidentally appear in the more popular writings. But are they really “lesser” lights? One of these individuals, whose name is indeed listed along with more notable Quakers by several early writers, is Samuel Fisher.2 Dean Freiday rightly accords him a special place of prominence among Bible interpreters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and this essay will explore his contribution as a biblical scholar within the Society of Friends, and beyond.

Samuel Fisher began his public ministry as an Oxford-educated clergyman.4 Adept as a scholar of Hebrew and Greek, Fisher nevertheless left the university to pursue parish ministry. He soon found that he could not continue to receive wages to preach the gospel offered freely by Christ. As he supported himself, his wife, and two children by raising livestock, Fisher first became a Baptist preacher and then, under the tutelage of William Caton and John Stubbs, was convinced of the truth of Quaker teaching. After a time, Samuel Fisher also began traveling in the ministry to such places as Dunkirk in Flanders, the Netherlands, Rome and Constantinople. Back in England, Fisher spent most of the last five years of his life in prison. He was finally imprisoned in the “White-Lyon-Goal in South-wark” at the end of 1663 and remained there until his death in the sixth month of 1665.

Fisher wrote his major work in 1660, titled *Rusticus ad Academicos* (from the country folks to the academics). In this wryly titled document, Fisher reveals not only why he deserves recognition among the founders of the Society of Friends, but also why he merits consideration among the pioneers of biblical criticism.
If one were to survey the field of modern biblical criticism, at the beginning would appear the name of Spinoza, who published the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670. Not only does Fisher’s work predate Spinoza, it appears possible that Samuel Fisher had contact with Spinoza in Amsterdam sometime in the 1650s. The facts that Fisher was doing in England what Spinoza was doing in Amsterdam, and that Fisher and other Quakers seem to have had an influence on Spinoza, warrant Fisher’s inclusion in the history of biblical criticism.

Fisher should not be mistaken, however, as one who sought to destroy the Scriptures; but, as he writes, “They [Quakers] seek...to manifest it [Scripture] to be what it really is, and no more than what it is, to you and others, who not only call it, but count it to be what it truly is not.” Quakers, according to Fisher, are the “true Friends” of Scripture. Although today we would consider Fisher to be the intellectual employing the science of historical criticism, he saw himself just the opposite. To Fisher, the biblical literalist John Owen characterized the one who “interposes and opposes it self against the Light and Power of God, in a shew of Science, falsly so called.” On the contrary, he sees himself as the rustic, the “Country Correcting the University and Clergy,” in spite of his own great erudition.

Fisher, therefore, is not to be seen as a great humanist who is exposing the errors of Christianity. His purpose in the *Rusticus* must be made clear. In order to defend the character of Quaker preaching as and about immediate revelation from the Spirit of God, Fisher denounced the attacks of churchmen who claimed that the completed canon of Scripture consisting of the 66 books was the only authoritative and infallible Word of God as evidenced by its preservation of every jot and tittle in manuscript transmission. This, he felt, was unsupported by the textual facts.

One of these churchmen was the Puritan theologian John Owen, one time dean of Christ Church, Oxford and then vice-chancellor of Oxford. A prolific author, Owen had just completed a work on the Scriptures. Fisher’s *Rusticus* is in large part a response to several of Owen’s writings.

To begin with, the fundamental issue is one of semantics. Fisher points out the ambiguity of Owen’s many terms to describe Scripture: “sure Word of God, infallible guide, Trusty Teacher, Supream Judge, perfect Rule, firm foundation, stable Standard, Fixt, unerring, unalterable measure, and such like.” Fisher first wants to know if the term *Scripture* in this sense refers only to the original writings or...
whether it extends also to the transcriptions as well as to the translations. A very practical point that Fisher keeps coming back to is that if faith is dependent on the infallibility of the Scriptures in the original languages, how does that help the average person who does not know Hebrew or Greek? If the term Scripture refers to the transcriptions and translations, then it is absurd to apply such high language to them. Fisher was writing at a crucial time for the study of the ancient texts, as well as for their translation into English, and he was undoubtedly aware of the textual difficulties presenting themselves to Bible translators of his day and otherwise.

The immense *Biblia Polyglotta* published in 1657 in London contained the first systematic collection of variant readings for the New Testament. It included those of the newly discovered Codex Alexandrinus, along with the variants from fifteen other authorities, as well as the variants from the 1550 Greek New Testament of Stephanus. This heightened awareness of problems in the manuscript transmission only exacerbated the existing lack of faith in the text of the English Bible.

The Authorized Version (King James Bible) had been published in 1611. The various editions subsequently in circulation contained numerous errors. For example, one edition, dubbed the “He” Bible had “he” instead of “she” in Ruth 3:15. The most blatant example was the so-called “Wicked Bible” of 1631 which reads in Exodus 20:14 “Thou shalt commit adultery.” The effect of all this was a growing dissatisfaction and even antagonism toward the Bible in England, especially against those wanting to assert its divine—rather than human—origins and characteristics.

Besides the problem of ambiguity, Fisher also points out that Owen is guilty of “begging the question” when he equivocates in his use of the phrase “Word of God.” Certainly Fisher would agree with Owen on anything he might say exegetically about the word of God, but Owen switches his terms so that “Word of God” equals “Scripture” and then applies everything one can say about what God says (e.g. His veracity, omniscience, and authority) to the written text of Scripture. In the estimation of Fisher, Owen is not able to prove the two terms equal.

The religious interest of Owen and other reformers, however, should be kept in mind. Not only did Scripture become a primary basis for challenging churchly claims to divine authority, but it also was used to defend the reformers’ movement against pneumatic
challenges. By limiting divine revelation (Word of God) to the Scriptures, Owen is able to reject the preaching and prophesying of the Quakers, who claim God is speaking through them just as He did with the biblical prophets and apostles. Owen argues further that because God has seen fit to preserve the texts of Scripture and restrict them to the present collection of 66 books in the Canon, this implies the cessation of God’s revelatory work.

In response, Fisher first objects to Owen’s argument for the closure of the canon. What proof—scriptural or otherwise—is there that God determined to close the Old Testament by the Great Congregation of Ezra, or the New Testament by the councils and synods of the Church? These seem to Fisher to have been arbitrary decisions of human choice. Raising the stakes to an allegation of Owens’ going against the clear teaching of Scripture, Fisher exclaims facetiously,

Who was it that said to the Spirit of God, O Spirit blow no more, inspire no more men, make no more Prophets from Ezra’s dayes, and downward till Christ; and from John’s dayes downward forever? But cease, be silent, and subject thy self as well as all Evil Spirits to be tryed by the Standard, thats made up of some of the Writings of some of those men thou hast moved to write already, and let such and such of them as are bound up in the Bibles, now used in England, be the only means of measuring all Truth forever.

Secondly, Fisher spends considerable space arguing about the content of the Canon. He is not at all satisfied with the recent Protestant inclination to dismiss the apocryphal books from the Canon of Scripture. Nor does he agree with the doctrine of preservation as proof of the content of the canon, since there are books that the canonical Scriptures mention—some written by biblical authors—which were not preserved as part of the canon, itself.

Fisher considers the quality of the apocryphal books to be on par with the canonical texts. Their inclusion in the Septuagint meets the same criteria as the books that make up the Hebrew canon. They are referred to in the New Testament and have been preserved through the years by the Church.

Ezra and Jeremiah are biblical authors whose apocryphal books—Esdras and the Epistle of Jeremiah, respectively—are rejected. On the New Testament side, Fisher mentions the “Reply of Jesus to
Agbarus King of Edessa” and the Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans. How is it, Fisher asks, that some books of an author are considered inspired while others are not?

If the fundamental quality of Scripture is its preservation down to every jot and tittle, then how is it that documents mentioned in Scripture were subsequently lost? Fisher lists the Old Testament books such as the Book of Nathan the Prophet, the Book of Iddo, the Book of Shemaiah and others, challenging the certainty of Owens’ claims with the facts of the text. Then, there is the part of Jeremiah cited by Matthew 27:9, 10 that does not appear in any of our copies of Jeremiah (actually a loose quotation of Zech. 11:13). Likewise, in the New Testament, Owens’ view becomes challenged by the prophecy of Enoch spoken of in Jude 14 (now recognized as from 1 Enoch), the earlier epistle Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9), the first epistle written to the Ephesians (Eph. 3:3), the epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16), and all the other correspondence of Paul, who was far more voluminous than what we have in the Scriptures. If John Owen wants to apply Matthew 5:18, “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled,” to the canon of Scripture, then he must explain why some texts are included and others are left out. Again Fisher cries out:

Ah poor man! It pities me to see how ye Dream together in the dark, and mope up and down in your own misty Imaginations about your Original Texts and external Letter, leaving the Original Truth it self, which was before your Texts were ever talk’d on, or had a being in the World, turning your backs on that internal Light in the Heart, which all the tendency of your Letter is to turn men to, and from which your Scripture Originally had its being.

Fisher next turns from the issues of canon to the state of the text, itself. Since Owen applies Jesus’ words to the entire canon of Scripture, he must prove that the text has been preserved down to the minutest detail. Owen then interprets the “jot and tittle” to refer to the Hebrew punctuation. It is understood that the modern Hebrew texts contain the vowel points, which were added by the Massoretes much later than biblical times. Yet Owen insists that they were added in the time of Ezra and were part of the original manuscripts. If they were added at the time of Ezra, then they were a novelty and not coeval with the original manuscripts. Fisher is incredulous that
Owen has placed so much importance on the presence of the Hebrew vowel points.

Ye must, to the shame of your selves, and the Shaking of your Kingdom in the very Foundation thereof, confess and grant, as ye are loath to do, which yet is no more then the Truth, viz. that if the Points be but Novel, your (professedly) uncorrupt Copies are not a little corrupted, and different from what the first Originals were, thorow the Failings of Transcribers, and so fail-ing in your (falsly so called) Foundation, must be forced to begin again, and lay the true one with the Quakers, which is that of Christ himself, the Light, which rather than do, since you have so much persecuted and disowned them, ye will rake your Brains to the Bottom to find something to say against the Truth.34

With regard to the New Testament text, Fisher only specifically mentions the variant in Luke 6:5, 6.35 This obviously is based on Codex Bezae, which had been presented to the library at Cambridge in 1581 and had begun to be used in English translations in the early seventeenth century. What Fisher describes is a conflation resulting from the translator inserting a verse consisting of the variant between verses 5 and 6, which normally appear in the textual tradition. In Codex Bezae, this verse appears after verse 4, verse 5 is moved to follow verse 10, and verse 6 is altered grammatically to follow the unique variant.36

Having shown the weaknesses in Owen’s claim for a closed canon and a perfectly preserved text, Fisher proceeds to make the case for Quaker preaching. He boldly asserts, “For there are many in England at this very day, Speaking, Reproving, Writing, and Prophecying from the same Light, and by the same Spirit, that the Scriptures came forth from, and as themselves have received and heard from the Voice and Mouth of God.”37 Although Fisher had a great impact on the Society of Friends for some time, his works were never reprinted.38 It is high time his contribution to Quakers and to the field of biblical criticism gets the recognition it deserves!

NOTES


3. Fisher is the only Quaker featured with an entire chapter dedicated to his contribution by Freiday in his *The Bible—its Criticism, Interpretation, and use—in 16th and 17th Century England*.

4. Samuel Fisher was admitted to Trinity College, Oxford, in 1623 as an undergraduate commoner and left in 1627, after taking his degree. His low social class is evident in that he only paid 30 shillings in “caution money,” “which was at the lower end of the scale of charges, depending on the social class of the student.” Trinity College Archive, “Re: Samuel Fisher,” archive@trinity.ox.ac.uk (Oct. 6, 2000).

5. Hugh Barbour has aptly noted this: “Fisher was the most thorough and imaginative Bible scholar among early Friends, being an Oxford man. He runs wild and spends 160 pages attacking the inerrancy of scripture by skillful but redundant argument about Hebrew vowel points and Greek manuscript variants. Yet he presents the meaning of the biblical canon and sources in mature ways which anticipate modern scholarship.” *The Quakers in Puritan England*, p. 158.


7. *Works*, p. 402. Quotations from the primary sources will preserve the original spelling and italics.

8. *Works*, p. 401. Fisher states that “Scriptures...are truly owned, valued, used, known and practised only among the Quakers” (*Works*, p. 233). Later he writes, “I love the Bible as much as I do any Book in the World,...and in a right way Honour it as much as any man does; and as for the holy Truth that is declared in it, I have bought and paid so dear for that, that no less then All that I had in the World, is gone for the sake of it” (*Works*, p. 352).


11. The full title of the work is *Of the divine originall, authority, self-evidencing light, and power of the Scriptures. With an answer to that enquiry, How we know the Scriptures to be the Word of God. Also a vindication of the purity and integrity of the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Old and New Testament; in some considerations on the Prolegomena, & Appendix to the late Biblia polyglotta. Whereunto are subjoyned some exercitations about the nature and perfection of the Scripture, the right of interpretation, internall light, revelation, &c.,* 1659.

12. The *Rusticus* is an apologetic against the writings and disputations of John Owen, Thomas Danson, John Tombs, and Richard Baxter.


17. Works, p. 403.


20. English Bibles contained the Apocrypha including the Authorized Version. Some editions, however, of the Authorized Version of the 1630s did not contain the Apocrypha. The Geneva Bible, published in Edinburgh in 1640, was the first English Bible to deliberately exclude the Apocrypha. The Westminster Confession of 1648 regarded the apocryphal books as “of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings” (Works, p. 271). Because of Fisher’s defense of the Apocrypha, he was often labeled a Papist.

21. They had authority long before the apostles’ days, exhibited the special care and providence of God in preservation, were kept by the Church, translated into various languages, and publicly allowed to be read (Works, p. 272). Fisher particularly likes the books of Esdras, Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon.


25. Fisher’s argument for giving credence to other writings of biblical characters besides their canonical scriptures leads him to the ultimate test: a document purported to have been written by Jesus to Abgar (Fisher renders it “Agbarus” indicating his working with the Latin text). This text appears only in Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History (ca. 325). It is interesting to note that William Caton also took an interest in Eusebius in his work An abridgment of Eusebius Pamphilus’s ecclesiastical history in two parts: …whereunto is added a catalogue of the synods and councils, which were after the days of the apostles; together with a hint of what was decreed in the same, London, 1698.

26. Fisher believes this document to be the one Paul refers to in Col 4:16 and discusses it at length (Works, 281-86). Interest in these apocryphal texts in the seventeenth century is further attested by the anonymous document, Something concerning Agbarus, Prince of the Edesseans with his epistle to Christ, and Christ’s epistle in answer thereto: also Paul’s epistle to the Laodiceans, with the manner of his death and his exhortation to his persecutors: a catalogue of those Scriptures mentioned, but not inserted in the Bible: as also how several Scriptures are corrupted by the translators, with the difference between the old and new translations, London, 1663, 1675, 1698.

A similar interest is shown by Henry Clark, who sounds very much like a Quaker, in his work, A rod discover’d, found, & set forth to whip the idolaters till they leave off their idolatry (wch [sic] yet remains in the rulers of England, their ministers, and the people, who follow their ways) which doth consist in the houses of high places, falsely called churches, the two universities Cambridge and Oxford (and their ministers, which are made by man, and not of God) and their ministers maintenance (not the ministers of Christ) which is portions of lands, tythes, offrings [sic], oblations, obventions, and great houses for a certain dwelling place on the earth, and forms of oaths, all which is the fruit of idolaters, and the abomination of the heathen, and likewise here is described the true magistrate and his work, and the way (for he who is not) to become such a one, and likewise the way for all people to come out of their idolatry, to worship the true God in spirit and in truth: unto which is prefixed the epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Laodiceans, London, 1659.
27. Works, p. 275.
29. Works, p. 278.
30. The irony of this whole discussion is that the jot and tittle do not actually refer to Hebrew vowels.
31. Another characteristic of the Hebrew manuscripts that Fisher makes use of against Owen’s theory is the Jewish scribal practice of copying errors from the exemplar manuscript, leaving them in place (Heb. Kethibh) and writing the correction in the margin (Heb. Qere). It’s difficult to support unadulterated transcriptions when the “errors” are marked explicitly in the text. Works, pp. 305, 359.
32. Johann Buxtorf, a Hebrew scholar at Basel (1630), like his father before him, had championed the view that the vowel points were inspired.
34. Works, p. 306.
35. Works, p. 286.
36. Braithwaite attributes the *Something concerning Agbarus*, mentioned above, to Fisher. In that tract, the author names the English text as the Hollybush Latin-English Testament of 1538 (Beginnings of Quakerism, p. 291).
37. Works, p. 557.