1-1-2001

Can There Be A Quaker Hermeneutic

Hugh S. Pyper

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol97/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
CAN THERE BE A QUAKER HERMENEUTIC?

HUGH S. PYPER

Firstly, I want to express my thanks to my colleagues for such thought-provoking papers. Every one of them stimulated me into asking questions and would be the starting point for a prolonged conversation. In the space allotted to me, however, I cannot take up all the points in each case that would be interesting to explore. What I will do is to tease out a few questions that came to me as I looked at these papers as a whole, which may feed in to a wider discussion as to whether there is—or could be—or should be such a thing as a “Quaker hermeneutic.”

One thing that struck me is how little any of the papers presented here deals with Friends’ sustained interpretation of particular texts. This is not a deficiency in the papers. It reflects the fact that what early Friends do not do with the Bible is add yet another coherent alternative reading of the text to the plethora generated in the century and a half after the Reformation. Unlike most protestant groups, their message is not simply that they alone have finally read the Bible aright after centuries of everyone else’s misinterpretation. Their claim is more radical.

Friends’ use of the Bible is the product of a context, one vividly if somewhat polemically described in Christopher Hill’s fascinating book The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution.1 There he depicts a society that was passionately engaged in redefining and redescribing itself in a debate that was underpinned and pervaded by the Bible—a “biblical culture,” as Hill sums it up in the title of his first chapter.2 Every aspect of political and social life was affected by such disputes. Biblical interpretation was not an academic pursuit, or even a purely theological interest, narrowly defined; it was the currency of political and social discussion. Quaker apologists entered an ongoing argument, and whatever new thing they offered had to be couched in terms of that argument.

Central to the weightiest of arguments was the question of authority, which is inextricably bound up with the great intellectual quest of the age, the search for the ground of certainty. Authority
must be grounded on truth, and could only merit respect if it offered an infallible and certain account of the truth. Descartes and Spinoza, in their different ways, enshrine a geometrical model of truth, where what was sought was a general account of knowledge that would be as unambiguous, as demonstrable and as universal as the axiomatic systems of Euclid. It is in this context that a Quaker exegete such as Samuel Fisher states as his first principle that “The foundation of the faith must be something that is infallible, firm, fixt, certain, stable, sure and inalterable.”

In itself, this was not a matter of controversy, but the agreed ground for the staging of the argument over authority. Infallibility was everyone’s goal. The question was, where it was to be grounded. For much of Protestantism, the ground of certainty was the Bible, but this begged important questions. Which Bible did we mean, and which reading of it? For instance, Samuel Fisher’s formidable opponent, the great Puritan academic John Owen, sought to guarantee biblical infallibility by asserting the immutability and inspiration not just of every letter, but of every vowel point in the Masoretic Hebrew scriptures, thus laying himself open to Fisher’s erudite but obsessive refutation.

Fisher uses his considerable learning to show that by its very nature as text. Subject over the ages, therefore, to miscopying and misreading, the Bible cannot fulfill the conditions for the foundation of belief. It is not and cannot be fixed and unalterable. The conclusion he wants to draw is that the foundation of certainty, and therefore of truth, lies elsewhere. He goes so far as to say “The Bible is not worth a pin, as to Salvation, without the Faith. But Faith is thereto sufficient and was so, before the Bible was”—or the patriarchs before Moses were lost.

This concentration on demonstrating the fallibility of Scriptures through uncovering their textuality leads to other important moves. Fisher makes the following interesting distinction: “As written in the Spirit, the Holy Scriptures may be said to be Homogeneous Writings, all of one kind; but in respect of the several businesses written of therein, they are as Heterogeneous a body or bulk of as various writings as any extant in the world beside them.” Truth, by common consent, must be unitary as well as immutable. Where there is contradiction, we have neither clarity nor truth. As text, the Scriptures are inherently various and ambiguous, tied to the complexities of lan-
guage and the multiplicity of authorial intent. It is the Spirit that pro-
vides unity, and therefore, certainty.

This is where the arguments of such unlikely bedfellows as
Hobbes and Spinoza, not to mention the later Catholic apologist
Richard Simon (whose *Critical History of the OT* appeared in 1678),
coincide with Quaker interests. All were concerned to show that
the biblical text could not be the touchstone of truth by demonstrat-
ing its heterogeneity. This allowed them to argue for another source
of authority—in Hobbes’ case, the monarch—for Spinoza, reason—for
Simon, the Catholic Church—for Friends, the immediacy of Christ’s
teaching. It is in this way that these writers become the forerunners
of modern critical readings of the Bible that read it as one would any
other text. Fisher’s declaration explicitly compares the Scriptures with
other writings in their heterogeneity.

This attitude toward the textuality of the Bible is of a piece with
Friends’ attitude to the outward elements of the sacraments, some-
thing they also shared with the Spiritual reformers. Ultimately, the
elements are dispensable as they serve at best as material markers of
presence. So too, useful and instructive as they are, ultimately, the
words of Scripture too are dispensable. Fisher’s own favorite
metaphor for the relationship between the Word and the Scripture is
that of the candle and the lamp: the lamp contains the light but is not
the source of it. What is authoritative is not the words but the Word,
not the outward form of the Scriptures but the human-divine
encounter to which the Scriptures bear witness.

Indeed, this means that too much study of the Scriptures can be
a snare. In his *Journal* Fox warns those who have come close to the
Word in Scripture and yet fail to take the final step of acknowledging
that they are under the judgment of what they read. The closer they
come, the harsher their judgment. Isaac Penington confesses falling
into the danger of a wrong reverence for the Bible in his Testimony:

...I looked upon the Scriptures to be my rule, and so would
weigh the inward appearances of God to me by what was out-
wardly written; and durst not receive anything from God imme-
diately, as it sprang from the fountain, but only in that mediate
way. Herein did I limit the Holy One of Israel, and exceeding-
ly hurt my own soul, as I afterwards felt and came to under-
stand.
Here we find a familiar distinction among Quaker writers between the inner and the outer, brought into relation with the Bible. In essence, this distinction is nothing new to the seventeenth century. As Doug Gwyn points out, it has biblical roots going back at least to Paul’s distinction between those who are Jews outwardly and those who are Jews inwardly (Rom. 2:29).8 Behind that verse may lie Psalm 51:6: “Behold thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom,” a text that Fox himself alludes to in this context.9

For Penington, the text of the Bible represents the outer form, which, without due care, becomes a snare and distraction from the inner reality. Henning Graf Reventlow traces interestingly the history of such a “spiritual” strand of Christian understandings of the Bible,10 claiming it can be found from at least the tenth century on, coming to the fore in the hermeneutics of Joachim of Fiore. Penington’s distinction between the outer words of Scripture and the Inner Word of God is itself no novelty. Indeed, it is a commonplace of the spiritual reformers of the sixteenth century. Hans Denck, writing in 1528, clearly sets out a position close to that many early Friends adopt a century later:

I hold Holy Scripture above all human treasures, but not so high as the Word of God, which is living, powerful and eternal …Therefore salvation, too, is not tied to scripture, however useful and good scripture may be to that end. The reason is that it is not possible for scripture to make an evil heart better, though it may become better informed.11

Denck’s declaration reveals another feature, which Reventlow argues is characteristic of such spiritual interpretation throughout its development. Denck looks for conformity between the Christian’s life and the spirit of the text, not for verbal assent to Scriptural propositions. The model here is James 1:14-16, a text Fisher cites as a summary of his own condition.12 In that passage, James speaks of the word as a mirror, and insists that the proper response to it is not understanding or interpretation but action; the true interpreter is a doer, not just a hearer. The word is to be lived out. Again, this is to be found in Quaker writings on the Scriptures. We find it in Fox when, for instance, he chastises those who condemn the sinners of Scripture but fail to see, not just their own sin, but their own participation in that same sinful nature. True reading is when readers are able to say, in Fox’s words “I, I, I, it is I myself that have been the
Ishmael and the Esau.” What Anthony Thiselton calls the “hermeneutics of self-involvement” could hardly be more forcefully stated!

The distinction between the Word and the words, and the summons to a transformative rather than simply intellectual engagement with Scripture, are therefore nothing unique to Quakerism. What is distinctive, but even so perhaps not unique, in Quaker writings is that this sense of the Word as mirror in James is tied to the conviction that Christ is come again as teacher. Fox draws here on Hebrews 1, with its claim that in the latter days God speaks through the Son, not through the mediations of prophets. He also refers to 1 John 2:27, which assures us that “the anointing that you have received from him abides in you and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.” There is no need for teaching or for others to interpret the Bible for the believer; the spiritual anointing of the present Christ is enough.

Important though these texts are, the key to Fox’s understanding, I would contend, is Jesus’s own hermeneutic example in the Synagogue at Nazareth, as Luke reports it (Lke. 4:20-21). Having read from the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus “closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down: and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” The book is closed; the congregation waits in expectant silence for the word, and the word is one of present fulfillment—present both in time and space.

This is what Doug Gwyn has called the “apocalypse of the Word”: Christ come “today” as present teacher, obviating the need for a learned tradition of interpretation. Gwyn takes issue with those who see Quaker interpretation as opposing Word and Spirit. On the contrary, he argues, Quakerism actually restores the link between Word and Spirit in the person of Christ. It is rather the Protestant tradition that, by identifying the Word with Scripture rather than with Christ, sets up the opposition. When Quaker preachers such as Dorothy White use biblical texts they are not “interpreting Scripture,” they are articulating a lived experience where the words of the Word become again their words. They are testifying to the power of transformation presently at work in their lives and not expounding a promise extracted from the text that can be judged objectively.

This Quaker hermeneutic of presence and transformation seems to me to be a particularly pure and unabashed form of what Jacques Pyper: Can There Be A Quaker Hermeneutic

Published by Digital Commons @ George Fox University, 2001
Derrida calls “logocentrism.” At the heart of everything is the immediate presence of the Word. This presentness of Christ and his immediate teaching makes speech suspect—and writing doubly so. Any intervention of a system of signs leads to the need for interpretation, and therefore to ambiguity and uncertainty, or a multiplicity of meanings, which can only confuse and mislead. Hence we become mindful of the basis for Friends’ appeal to the operations of the Spirit in silence; hence, too, their rejection of the oath, also prominent in James, and among earlier spiritual reformers. The oath is the tacit admission of a gap between intention and action, where more or less sincerely, divine intervention is called on to assure the hearer that future action will accord with present promise. The oath institutionalises this breach between intention and action, which early Friends hold can be eradicated—one implication of their insistence on human perfectibility.

This is also why these early writers give us no articulate account of Quaker hermeneutics in the sense of a developed procedure and philosophy of interpretation. How could there be a set of rules that would lead to the illumination of the soul with the presence of the Word? Even to seek such a mechanical solution to the problem of understanding misses the point entirely. That is not what Quaker writers are offering when they refer to the biblical text. What interpretations of Scripture they offer are polemical, showing their opponents, to whom this was the touchstone of theological validity, the consistency with Scripture of the Quaker position. They explicitly reject any standardized appeal to Scripture as the grounding of Quaker insights as there is no critical procedure by which a reader can mechanically extract the Word from Scripture. To seek a Quaker hermeneutics is, from this point of view, a contradiction in terms, which exemplifies the very trap of supposing that more assiduous and subtle understanding of the biblical text will in itself accomplish saving transformation.

On the other hand, the Quaker identification of the Word and the Spirit carries its own difficulties. However much Friends assert the difference, formally the Quaker appeal to immediate revelation and the Enlightenment appeal to reason are very similar. The crunch comes when Quakers disagree on the content of the immediate revelation. What court of appeal is there beyond a private sense of conviction? At that point, some publicly defensible common standard, either reason or the Scriptural text, has to step in as arbiter.
Depending on which approach is chosen, any number of points along the spectrum between liberal and evangelical Quakerism will be the result.

Neither of these exactly reflects the approach early Friends stood for and that is perhaps inevitable. Bound as it was to a Cartesian and Spiritualist dualism, that approach may be inherently untenable in the modern, or postmodern, world. Yet beyond the dualism evident in the writing of Fisher or Barclay, there is another less articulate recognition of the fundamental Trinitarian insight of the Word Made Flesh standing in relationship to, but distinct from, the Spirit. While affirming the unity of divine action, the Word is the Son and as such is distinguishable from both the man Jesus and the Spirit. Keeping those distinctions—and continuities—clear is a prerequisite for any truly nuanced understanding of Scripture as Word made text.

NOTES