

2014

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Recommended Citation

Palmer, T. Vail (2014) "Review of Paul Buckley, The Essential Elias Hicks," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 123 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol123/iss1/16>

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REVIEW OF PAUL BUCKLEY, *THE ESSENTIAL ELIAS HICKS*

T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

Paul Buckley, *The Essential Elias Hicks*. San Francisco, Inner Light Books, 2013. Introduction + 132 pages, ISBN 978-0-9834980-9-4 (paperback), 978-0-9834980-8-7 (hardcover).

Paul Buckley has recently edited excellent critical editions of *The Journal of Elias Hicks* and of a selection of *Letters and Essays of Elias Hicks*. These volumes were extensively discussed in issue number 119 of *Quaker Religious Thought*. He has followed these up with a brief summary of Hicks' life and an interpretation of Hicks' thought in *The Essential Elias Hicks*. These three books add up to a monumental contribution to our understanding of a critical period in Quaker history; they should be read by everyone who has a serious interest in figuring out what Quakerism is all about and how it has come to be what it is today.

The Essential Elias Hicks is especially needed, since there are only two previous book-length studies of Elias Hicks. *The Life and Labors of Elias Hicks* is essentially a hagiography, written by Henry W. Wilbur, an uncritical admirer of Hicks, and published in 1910 by the Hicksite Friends General Conference. Bliss Forbush made a serious attempt at a scholarly study of Elias Hicks, published in 1956 by Columbia University Press, but, as Paul Buckley wryly and correctly observes, "an underlying bias is revealed in his title, *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal*. Elias Hicks was not a liberal." (p. xxiv)

Quaker assessments of Hicks have ranged from Walter Williams' "His teachings included no atonement for sin, ... teaching humanism rather than the Christian religion,... destructive teachings,"¹ to Larry Ingle's "Fundamentally Hicks was correct.... His theology did not differ in any substantial way from that of... John Woolman, or... George Fox."² Paul Buckley steers wisely between these extremes. No interpreter of human affairs can achieve total objectivity; I am convinced that we are best served when a historian or critic makes clear his or her own standpoint or bias. Paul Buckley did very well by

heeding his wife's advice (p. xx) and including in nearly every chapter a section on "Things I Believe But Can't Prove!"

Along with many others, I had found it difficult to fit Elias Hicks' thinking, and particularly his interpretations of the Bible, into a consistent system. Buckley discovered a key which goes far toward bringing his theological ideas and biblical comments together into a fairly clear, comprehensive pattern:

In Hebrews, Elias Hicks found a key to unlock the rest of the Bible.... He turned to chapter nine, which is bracketed by two retellings of the promise of a new covenant found in chapter thirty-one of the book of Jeremiah: ... Hebrews 8:10-12 and Hebrews 10:16-17.... For Elias Hicks Hebrews is the heart of scripture and what lies between these two verses is the heart of that heart. (pp. 43-44)

Through chapters on God, Jesus, Salvation, and True Christianity, Paul Buckley spells out how Elias Hick's theological views (including even his adoptionist Christology) can be organized through this key.

One statement truly took me aback. In seeking an explanation of why the respective editorial committees removed so many accounts of dreams and visions from the Journals of John Woolman and Elias Hicks, Buckley suggests that it was because of a "general, negative attitude towards mystical experiences in the Religious Society of Friends of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries." (p. 23) What?!!! Wasn't this the era when mysticism and mystical experience were most widespread and flourishing among Friends — as typified by the publication and popularity of *A Guide to True Peace* — the Quaker reprint of writings by three French and Spanish mystics? Perhaps a better explanation would be that quietist Friends were suspicious of excesses of emotion in religion: religious experience must be *solemn*. The ideal quietist mystic was Thomas Kelly's "dour old sobersides Quaker whose diet would appear to have been spiritual persimmons"¹³ — which I am reminded of when I look at the painting of Elias Hicks on the front cover of *The Essential Elias Hicks*. Here's hoping that this was an "idealized" portrait — that Elias, atop of his dreams and visions, really could crack a smile....

Paul Buckley states flatly "that Elias Hicks was a biblical literalist." (p. 41) Elias would have been horrified by that statement. In an 1824 letter to Edwin A. Atlee, he insisted:

In conversation with hireling teachers,... I have given it as my opinion, that so long as they held the Scriptures to be the only rule of faith and practice,... so long the Scriptures did such, more harm than good; but that the fault was not in the Scriptures, but in their literal and carnal interpretation of them.⁴

— a clear rejection of biblical literalism. Buckley correctly observes that Hicks' approach was "an affirmation of what was generally known and believed" (p. 42) about the Bible. Several alternative summaries of "what was generally known and believed" could characterize ways in which Elias Hicks approached and used the Bible:

(a) He often used the Bible as "a handbook, a collection of resources and guidelines for salvation and Christian living."⁵

(b) He "several times made use of the Bible as a sourcebook for statements, from which he could deduce doctrinal truths."⁶

(c) He frequently used the Bible like "a lawyer dealing with a legal code or constitution."⁷

Buckley claims that "Hicks would have none of " (p. 73) various Christian explanations of the atonement (including ransom and forensic theories). Following a relevant quotation, he appropriately summarizes Elias Hicks' understanding of atonement: "Christ died outwardly, pointing the way for each person to inwardly die to sin," (p. 74), but he fails to note that Hicks' position matches one widely-held Christian view — the moral-influence theory of the atonement.

One final word: Buckley has produced an excellent and important work, which I highly recommend.

ENDNOTES

1. Walter R. Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, edited reprint with epilogue (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1987), pp. 166-167.
2. H. Larry Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation*, 2nd edition (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998), p. 92.
3. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 92.
4. In Henry W. Wilbur, *The Life and Labors of Elias Hicks* (Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1910), pp. 230-231.
5. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., "Early Friends and the Bible: Some Observations," *Quaker Religious Thought*, No. 80 (March 1993), p. 48.
6. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., *Friends, God, and the Bible: As Seen Through a Glass, Darkly*, unpublished manuscript, in process, p. 196.

7. Brian D. McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*, 1st trade edition (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), p. 204.