

Quaker Universalist Fellowship

A QUAKER APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

by Henry Joel Cadbury

◆ 1953, Guilford College. Reprinted by permission.

INTRODUCTION

A long generation has passed since Henry Joel Cadbury, then Hollis Professor of Divinity, Harvard University and one of the eight translators of the *American Standard Revised Bible*, delivered the 1953 Ward Lecture at Guilford College (Guilford NC). Liberal Quakerism, under the influence of the egalitarian revolutions that began in the 1960s, has undergone substantial changes. But Cadbury's lecture, *A Quaker Approach to the Bible*, remains a vital exposition of what might be called a Quaker distinctive, a way of distinguishing the Religious Society of Friends from other religious bodies rooted in the Christian tradition. This Quaker distinctive was first seen in one Samuel E. Fisher, Quaker and author of *A Rustic Alarum to the Rabbles* which Christopher Hill has called the most radical *Bible* criticism of the 17th century.*

For people raised in one part of the Judeo-Christian tradition seeking some understanding of another part, a natural opening question is, What does the Bible mean to you? A thoughtful answer may elicit dismay, enlightenment, or no more than mild interest. We think Cadbury will enlighten many.

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is a body within the Religious Society of Friends committed to seeking out and making known the commonalities between Friends and people of other faiths. We sponsor this reprint because questions about the Bible continue to be asked, and time has proven Cadbury's answer timeless. We hope our decision will be of help to those seeking to understand Quakers and their ways of thinking about the divine spark in all of us.

QUF is especially grateful to Guilford College and the Ward Lecture Committee for granting us permission to reprint this important lecture.

Kingdon W. Swayne, clerk
Publications Committee

**The World Turned Upside Down*, Christopher Hill (London 1972), pp. 186-207.

A QUAKER APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

Henry Joel Cadbury

In the Society of Friends unanimity is not expected and certainly it does not exist on such matters as the role of the Bible in religion. This paper is therefore not called *The Quaker approach*. Another reason is that whatever viewpoint is characteristic of Friends, whether ancient or modern, it is no monopoly of theirs, but rather is widely shared. For the ancient period this has been shown by numerous modern studies, notably by Rufus M. Jones and Geoffrey F. Nuttall. The latter, in his book on *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* arranges Seventeenth Century English religious thought in such a way as to show how Quakerism had much in common with all Puritans but stood rather to the extreme of a graded spectrum. Probably the same holds true today. William James was right in saying, So far as our Christian sects today are evolving into liberality, they are simply reverting in essence to the position which Fox and the early Quakers so long assumed. This lecture may therefore be found acceptable to Christians of many other churches, while presenting the kind of viewpoint to the Scriptures that is congenial to the genius of the Quaker tradition.

At first sight, the Quaker view of the Bible seems to be one of less regard for it than is found in other groups. This is due to various historic influences, but principally because other sources of revelation have been recognized by Friends. The moment any new or unfamiliar source of authority is admitted, the traditional sources seem to be belittled or to be actually attacked. In so far as Quakerism has emphasized the contemporary presence of the Holy Spirit, the immediate guidance of God, or the universality of the saving Light of Christ, all outward and traditional media of religion appear to suffer some eclipse. The historical Christ and the historical revelation, the church and its sacraments and its clergy, and even its sacred book by sheer contrast with the core of Quakerism acquire an appearance of inferiority. At this point our forefathers three centuries ago were merely carrying forward by logical steps what the Reformation had begun but had left unfinished. Perhaps the question that really needs explanation is why Friends did not proceed still further.

With regard to the Scriptures, Friends used various contrasts. Many of these were not unique in their day. They were parallel to the spiritual wing of Protestantism in seventeenth-century England with its anticlericalism, its emphasis upon religious experience, and its revival of belief in the Holy Spirit. The scriptures appear relatively external, literal, traditional. Paul himself had contrasted the letter and the spirit. While the kinship between experience today and that of the classical past was accepted, emphasis upon the past seemed to weaken the present. It was felt to be important to know the experience realized in oneself today rather than to recognize its validity in the past. The latter could even at times interfere with the former. Friends were concerned to point to the more significant channels of religious experience.

Fox, for example, at his first recorded public utterance, which led to his first imprisonment, contradicted the minister in the church at Nottingham for claiming that the sure word of prophecy mentioned in 2 Peter 1:19 was the Scriptures by which they were to try all doctrines, religions, and opinions.

He reports in his *Journal*:

Now the Lord's power was so mighty upon me that I could not hold, but was made to cry out and say, Oh no, it is not the scriptures, and I told them what it was, namely the Holy Spirit by which the holy men of God gave forth the Scriptures, whereby [i.e., by the Spirit] opinions, religions and judgments were to be tried; for it led into all truth, and so gave the knowledge of all truth. The Jews had the Scriptures and yet resisted the Holy Ghost and rejected Christ, the bright, morning star.... As I spoke among them, the officers came and took me away and put me into a nasty, stinking prison.¹

Margaret Fell reports the first time she met Fox, hearing him speak at the church at Ulverson:

The first words he spoke were as followeth. He is not a Jew that is one outward... but he is a Jew that is one inward.... And then he went on, and opened the Scriptures and said the Scriptures were the prophets' words, and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it

from the Lord. And said, Then what had any to do with the Scriptures but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth? You will say Christ saith this and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God, etc.? This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart, and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat me down in my pew again and cried bitterly: and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves.²

It is interesting to know in these days of book-burning and even of Bible burning that the early Friends were suspected of such practices. I am not sure that it actually happened, or if so that more than one or two fanatical cases occurred. One rather ill-balanced Friend, John Pennyman, at least talked about burning a Bible in public and said he might do so if he was moved to do so by the Lord. The famous Henry Moore wrote, I do not think that it is so far from the spirit of a real Quaker to burn the Bible, whereas the letter of it is so little believed by them. For the unbelief takes away the very sense of the Bible, the fire consumes only the paper.³

Characteristic of the churchman of that time was the use for the Scriptures of the phrase the Word of God. This Fox and Barclay and others objected to, partly because the Scriptures themselves use that term of Christ. In our day more than ever, a Bible-centered theology loves to use that term.

Characteristic too of that time was the treatment of the Bible as the only rule of faith and conduct. The Quaker by denying its sole and ultimate authority seemed to others nothing less than blasphemous, while the rule which he claimed in its stead, the experience of present guidance, seemed to others much too subjective, untrustworthy and lacking in uniformity and precision. In spite of frequent charges of setting themselves up against the authority of the Bible, the Friends for many generations gave precedence to the source of inner guidance, first in the individual and then -- and this was an important check -- in the concurrence of the group of Friends. It was quite clear to them that the inner Light would never lead into obvious sin.

Two oft-quoted passages from George Fox indicate in different but charmingly naive manner how loose he sat to the current bibliolatry. The Scriptures were for him a confirmation rather than a source of truth. You can appeal to revelation in spite of them. Describing one of his early openings, he says, 'This I saw in the pure openings of the light, without the help of any man, neither did I then know where to find it in the Scriptures, though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it.'⁴

Later he writes An Encouragement to all the Faithful Women's Meetings in the World. After citing scores of examples from the Old Testament and the New he concludes, And if there were no Scriptures 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 righteousness and holiness, as they were in before they fell.⁵

What might be expected to result from the Quaker attitude toward the Bible has not always followed. One would naturally look for neglect and even hostility. Instead Friends have not infrequently respected and used the Bible as much as did their contemporaries and opponents. Neglect of the Bible among Friends has existed but rarely as a reasoned policy. They were never averse to using it in argument with those who professed belief in its authority. This was manifestly clear in the old debates, as when George Fox, confronted with persons who believed that women had no souls, no more than a goose, simply quoted the well known words, And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord. This use must not be regarded as merely accommodation to the opponents as an *argumentum ad hominem*. In fact, some of our Quaker beliefs seem at first sight to rest upon biblicism and a literalism that could carry conviction neither with ourselves nor with our opponents today. Our objection to oaths has never seemed to Friends to demand a more explicit reason than the two clear passages, one in Matthew and one in James, which forbid oaths. Friends of old made merry with the fact that they were ordered to swear upon a book that says Swear not

at all, and said that if Friends were imprisoned for refusal, the Bible itself ought to be imprisoned too. No matter what reasoned or concurrent or unconscious bases our Quaker pacifism has today, our predecessors in that faith, both Quaker and pre-Quaker, found sanction enough for it in the New Testament and even in the Old -- the Golden Rule and Thou shalt not kill.

As a matter of history it must be admitted that Friends made -- selectively, like other people -- a considerable use of the Bible, and as the Devil is said to do, could quote Scripture to their own purpose. In doing so they showed that they could not fully escape the practice of their surroundings and did not wish to do so. Where their environment was less Biblical than it was in seventeenth-century England, they consciously or unconsciously altered their behavior. And since it was part of their belief that saving knowledge was vouchsafed to people outside the pale of Christendom -- even to the heathen Turk or American Indian -- they adjusted their appeal to the conscience, or to that of God in every man. Fox even quotes the Koran instead of the Bible in writing to the Great Turk.

Of course, their opponents accused Friends of neglecting the Bible, and perhaps we are still suspected of unsound views regarding it. It was said in the old days that in Friends schools, instead of Bible reading, Fox's *Journal* held the place of honor. But this Friends denied. It seems shocking to some people no doubt that in our unprogrammed meetings the Bible is not in evidence, is not read aloud, and is sometimes little quoted. I am not defending this absence, still less the reduced practice among Friends of family Bible reading, as was once widely characteristic.

Perhaps this decline is not so recent as we think. Joseph John Gurney visiting in America in 1837 observed Friends here:

By far the greatest deficiency which I can see prevailing is a want of diligence and regularity in the family reading of Scripture. ... There are some things in the habits of the people unfavorable to this practice. They breakfast at seven o'clock in the morning and when one party has finished another sits down, and so on for a considerable time. The same is for tea or supper -- the six o'clock evening meal -- and also at half past one dinner. I fall into their hours and modes of living with little difficulty, and am in excellent health. As to wine or beer they are pretty nearly articles unknown. I think I shall learn to do without stimulus.⁶

One can understand Gurneys' nostalgia for the leisurely simultaneous meals at Earlham Hall, which permitted an orderly period of worship for the family and for a whole troop of household servants. But he understood the difficulties in the different American scene.

What Friends often thought of their opponents was that for all their use of the Bible they were the ones who neglected it. One recalls the words in the Gospel, Ye search the scriptures because ye think in them ye have eternal life, but ye will not come to me that ye may have life. With their belief in the continuing revelation of the Holy Spirit -- the same Holy Spirit that inspired the Scriptures -- Friends have appealed for the experience as well as for the knowledge of the Scriptures. Just as many Puritans hesitated to sing David's Psalms without sharing David's spiritual state, so Friends complained against taking the words of Scripture without knowing the experience first hand as stealing. We are all thieves, sobbed Margaret Fell, when she first heard the Quaker message.

In modern terminology, the danger of the outward Scripture is the danger of sheer nominalism. Taking their words and phrases as authoritative sometimes becomes a substitute for the experience itself, which they merely describe. Friends are only too aware of the ease with which verbal or mental acceptance can exist side by side with actual ignorance or practical rejection. Again in our time doctrines (what Fox called notions) can usurp attention to the detriment of the living experience -- profession for possession. Such fashions are sometimes even popular, as what is called today Biblical Theology. There is symbolism for us in the story of Sceva's sons in the Book of Acts. They undertook to cast out demons by pronouncing the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches. But the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know and Paul I know: but who are you? One recalls the disastrous outcome of this effort.

Such is the futility of attempting to make profit of others' authority.

It is not that the Bible is harmful in itself. It is misused as a substitute for what it bears witness to. Why trim yourselves with the saints' words, asked Francis Howgill three centuries ago, when you are ignorant of the life?⁷ And a more recent Friend has written:

Men substitute tradition for living experience of the love of God. They talk and think as though walking with God was attained by walking in the footsteps of men who walked with God.⁸

In a noteworthy and well written essay, William Penn, referring to the critics of Quakerism in his day says:

With loud voices and clamorous tongues they thus exclaim against us, after this unruly and unjust manner, the Quakers deny the Scriptures; the Quakers say it is dangerous to read them; but I say in their name, Blessed are they, who reading, truly understand and live according to them.⁹

William Penn continues by pointing out that respected representatives of orthodoxy have clearly understood, like the Quakers, that the Scriptures are of no value unless you share by experience -- experimentally is the seventeenth-century word -- the same things done in you by the Spirit. In the same way the Scriptures are to be understood only in so far as one is himself in the Spirit which gave them forth. One of the curious non-Quaker testimonies to this effect that an earlier Friend quotes is a conversation in Amsterdam with an unnamed Jew, who appears with great probability to have been the now famous Baruch Spinoza.¹⁰

It has not followed from the Quakers' approach to the Scriptures that they have thought meanly of knowledge of the Bible, both technical and popular. They have insisted that such knowledge did not of itself equip men for the service of God. Hence in the early days their strong words about theological schools, which they consistently call by the term -- the Scriptural term -- a cage of unclean birds, with their emphasis upon the Biblical languages, Greek and Latin and Hebrew. Fox reminds his readers that knowledge of these languages is associated with the unsavory figure of Pilate who used them in the inscription on the cross. What the Friends criticize in such learning is again in its substitution for the real essence of the Scriptures. James Naylor comments on the requirement for professional ministers of such a pitch of learning and so many years at Oxford or Cambridge and there to study so long in books and old authors. And all this to know what unlearned men, fishermen, ploughmen and herds-men, did mean when they spoke forth the Scriptures, who were counted fools and madmen by the learned generation.... And when you have brought them to this height of learning, yet the scripture is a book sealed to all their wisdom and learning.¹¹

Yet like so many of their contemporaries the early Friends were well acquainted with the Scriptures, encouraged like knowledge in their children, and to this day have cherished both a simple and a more advanced study in the field. Some of the early Friends had before they joined the Society a really extensive theological education¹² -- Barclay, Fisher, Keith, and Penn, for example. This they used to good effect. I expect only in our time has such equipment by several members of the Society been matched.

Of Quaker Biblical scholars through the three centuries I cannot here speak. Even the simple-minded have brought to the book curiosity and concern -- interest in its history and contents. I am personally glad that George Fox is on record as recommending the translation of the New Testament into every man's language and mother tongue,¹³ and for a man of so limited opportunity he shows unexpected interest in comparing the English translations available to him.¹⁴

Holding, as they did, that the revelation of God was not limited to Scripture, early Friends were not impressed by the arbitrary limits of the Bible canon. In using the Old Testament apocrypha they were not unlike other Protestants of their day, for the Protestant aversion to those books has increased more recently. Friends' curiosity about still other books, lost or

professing early date, was a natural expression of their feeling that Divine revelation neither began with Moses nor ended with the Apostles.¹⁵

This approach to the Bible may be stated positively in various ways. One way we might name Operation Mirror. Robert Barclay wrote:

God hath seen that herein we should see as in a looking-glass the conditions and experiences of the saints of old, that finding our experiences to answer to theirs, we might be time more confirmed and comforted and our hope of obtaining the same end strengthened.... This is the great work of the Scriptures and their service to us, that we may witness them fulfilled in us, and so discern the stamp of God's Spirit and ways upon them by the inward acquaintance we have with the same Spirit and work in our hearts.¹⁶

Or one might name this approach Operation Dictionary, though the dictionary, like the Bible, is often misunderstood. The dictionary is not the authority which dictates how words ought to be used. It is rather the record of how words are used and what they commonly mean. In like manner, the Bible is not the dictator of our conduct and faith. It is rather the record of persons who exemplified faith and virtue. It does for religion that which the dictionary does for speech. Its value consists in its agreement with experience, or with truth, as Friends used to use the word. What is true in the Bible is there because it is true, not true because it is there. Its experiences answer to ours, that is, they correspond to ours. This is the repeated discovery of generations of Bible readers. I meet that in Scripture, said Coleridge, which finds me.¹⁷

We rarely go to the Bible to look up an answer to a question directly. In that respect it is not as convenient as a dictionary. I don't know that any index could be devised to make the Bible yield easy answers to questions we set it. In a much richer way, it brings answers to questions we are not directly asking, and so it can keep on doing if we have ears to hear and eyes to see through all the changing circumstances of our life.

Such an approach to the Bible is not easy to exploit to the full. At best the Bible is a difficult book, often confusing, often ill-edited, often obscure. When I hear people talk about the simple gospel I wonder if they are not people easily satisfied. I think I sympathize a bit with Dr. Samuel Johnson, when Mrs. Knowles, a Friend, justified the move of young Jenny Harry from Anglican to Quaker with the words, She had the New Testament before her. Madam, said Johnson, she could not understand the New Testament, the most difficult book in the world, for which the study of a life is required.

But to appropriate the Bible, or rather to have it appropriate us, is far more exacting, as it is far more rewarding than some other ways of using the Bible. We do not depend on some kind of magical effect, expecting a text here and a text there to operate like medicinal pills in almost supernatural manner. We must have much more range and perspective.

Men talk about the Bible as revelation. It is much more important to know from the Bible *how* God reveals than *what* God reveals, if we want to share its experiences and not merely its expressions. In the same way, one might rather aim to understand how Jesus thought than what he thought, if our wish is to learn to think for ourselves as he did.

To fail to make this approach is to be satisfied with the second best and automatically to exclude the very best. How much the Bible has to teach when taken as a whole, that cannot be done in snippets! There is its range over more than a thousand years, giving us the perspective of religion in time, growing and changing, and leading from grace to grace. There is clear evidence of the variety of religious experience, not the kind of straightjacket that nearly every church, even Friends, has sometimes been tempted to substitute for the diversity in the Bible. To select from it but a single strand is to miss something of its richness. Even the uncongenial and the alien to us is happily abundant in the Bible. The needs of men today are partly to be measured by their difficulty in understanding that with which they differ. At this point the Bible has little or no service to render. It requires patient insight into the unfamiliar, and provides a discipline for the imagination such as today merely on the political level is a crying need of our time.

Further, the Bible is a training school in discrimination among alternatives. One of the most sobering facts is that it is not on the whole a peaceful book -- I mean a book of peace of mind. The Bible is the deposit of a long series of controversies between rival views of religion. The sobering thing is that in nearly every case the people shown by the Bible to be wrong had every reason to think they were in the right, and like us they did so. Complacent orthodoxy is the current villain in the story first to last, and the hero is the challenger, like Job, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul.

To grasp these wider meanings of the Scriptures will need more familiarity in the first place. How to recall our generation, both younger and older, to this literacy is an urgent problem. We shall need, however, more than superficial verbal knowledge. For many years I have been occupied with the translation of the biblical books from Greek to English. Few that have not tried it know the difficulty of this task in many facets and on many counts. That is, however, merely a transfer of words to words, from one language to another. Conscientious, technical labor is required if this translation is to be worthily performed. This approach I have been discussing goes much deeper than that. It is translation from the language of life, from words to flesh. I am impressed with the value here also of the conscientious effort no less than that of the linguistic translator. For such results from the Bible are intrinsic, not imputed. They are genuine not imitative, factual not verbal. They come unconsciously rather than as specifically sought, and they recognize rather than exclude the other media of divine revelation.

SUGGESTED READING

Books of Discipline of sundry Yearly Meetings.

Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, 1676 and later editions, Proposition III.

A Reasonable Faith, by three Friends. Revised edition, 1885, last chapter.

J. W. Graham, *The Faith of a Quaker*, 1920, pp. 137-143.

H. G. Wood, *Friends and the Scriptures*, 119261.

A. N. Brayshaw, *The Quakers: Their Story and Message*, Third Edition, 1938, Chapter IV.

Rufus M. Jones, *A Call to What Is Vital*, 1948, Chapter IV.

M. A. Creasy, *The Contribution of Bible Study to the Life of Our Meetings*, 1949.

C. M. Woodman, *Quakers Find a Way*, 1950, Chapter II.

A. W. Swayne, *The Use of the Bible in Religious Education* (with an up-to-date general bibliography of books for teachers and for children), 1951.

ENDNOTES

1. *Journal*, ed. 1901, i. 43.

2. *Ibid.* ii, 512

3. M. II. Nicolson, *Conway Letters*, 1930, 306.

4. *Journal* i. 34

5. Epistles, No. 320 (1676)

6. *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, xxxii, 1935, pp. 40f., a letter about Ohio Yearly Meeting.

7. Francis Howgill, *A Lamentation for the Scattered Tribes*, 1656.
8. William Charles Braithwaite, *Spiritual Guidance in Quaker Experience*, 1909.
9. *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication*, 1673 (Works, ed. 1726 ii 357).
10. See my article in *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* of the Warburg Institute, London, *i.*, 1941, pp.130 - 132.
11. *Works*, p.43.
12. There is an interesting statement of his problem by a Friend three centuries ago who apparently became one while actually training ministers at Trinity College, Cambridge -- James Jollie in *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, xxv, 1928, 54f.
13. *Gospel Truth Demonstrated*, p.742
14. See my George Fox and Seventeenth Century Bibles in *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, xxi, 1924, pp. 1-8.
15. See my essay Early Quakerism and Uncanonical Lore in *Harvard Theological Review* xl, 1947, pp 177-205
16. *Apology*, Proposition III, Sect. V.
17. S. T. Coleridge, *London Discourses*, 1. 102.