

# FRIENDS AND THE BIBLE

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The Jewish and Christian writings in the Bible are part of the Quaker "religious" inheritance shared with other churches. Because of their long currency they have entered the general cultural stream, even on a secular level. Although they represent a great variety of views, they have often been treated as a homogeneous whole. Actually, those who used them did so with an unconscious selectivity—ignoring parts and emphasizing parts.

When Quakerism began in England three centuries ago, the Bible had lately come into very common circulation in English translations and was widely read and quoted. Most Protestant groups attributed to its words a finality and infallibility that more thoughtful examination would have rejected. The common desire for an external authoritative standard was too strong. Thus, in religious controversy, each group professed to find support somewhere in the wording of scripture.

The Friends fell into the same habit, but they were restrained in part by their belief in the contemporary revelation of God's will parallel to that which was described in the Bible. George Fox is quoted as asking in the church at Ulverston in 1652: "You will say Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?" Hence the Friends refused to make the Bible the final test of right conduct and true doctrine. Divine revelation was not confined to the past. The same Holy Spirit which had inspired the scriptures in the past could inspire living believers centuries later. Indeed, for the right understanding of the past, the present insight from the same Spirit was essential. By the Inner Light, God had provided everyone with access to spiritual truth for today.

This approach to the Bible seemed blasphemous to the traditional Christians, and the Quakers were often reproached for belittling the scriptures. They quite willingly denied the Bible the right to be regarded as the only and final rule. Yet they recognized in the Bible some positive worth, and in debate and for their own edification they cherished it and encouraged their children to become acquainted with it. Hence, in spite of their

apparent downgrading of the Bible, they continued to receive from it instruction and guidance.

Such a stance is difficult to maintain. This is because of the extreme variety in the Bible's contents. Much of it is quite foreign to our present ways of living and thinking. If it is to be our only guide it plainly is silent on many urgent questions. It is far from an adequate set of rules. But we have learned that fixed and universal rules are not to be expected. The Bible itself suggests that the old laws are not intended to be permanent. In fact, when correctly understood and its parts arranged in order of date, the Bible is a monument to the development of religious and moral understanding. Loyalty to the Bible involves loyalty to its evidence of growth and change. It is a mirror of what is to be our own maturing experience. Covering well over a thousand years, it bears witness to what may be called either God's continuing revelation or the progressive discovery of God.

One congenial element in the Bible is its ethical emphasis. Not all religions nor even all the biblical materials make moral behavior an essential element of religion. Certainly the New Testament and the prophetic strands of the Old Testament combine moral concern with the other strands of religion. Here, too, the development recorded

incidentally in scripture points to the expectation of further progress in subsequent generations. It indicates a directive more than the last word.

Not all Friends have achieved an ideal relationship to the Bible. Old patterns of misuse or sheer neglect prevent the most beneficial use of the book. What Friends acknowledge as "biblical illiteracy" is too prevalent, and the cure is not easy.

How can a modern Quaker hope to acquire some of the values of the Bible? Obviously, sometimes values are plain in a given passage or text, but in others they are obscure. One must not expect them to challenge us by a simple reading. We come to the Bible with doubts and problems. The answers are not always easily found. There is no index to simplify our search.

What answers we get are rather an unexpected by-product of familiarity with the Bible and of understanding of the questions that its writers considered. To transpose from these to our own approach requires some patience and imagination. The desire for plain, direct answers may often lead only to quite forced and unrealistic misuse of the Bible. But saturating ourselves in a spirit of earnest concern, like that of the writers and heroes of the Bible, may in due time contribute to a parallel achievement and growth.

There are many values in the Bible beyond the simple meaning of single texts. As I wrote some

years ago, of one of them, "Further, the Bible is a training school in discrimination among alternatives. One of the most surprising facts is that it is not on the whole a peaceful book—I mean a book of peace of mind. The Bible is a 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 recurrent villain in the story from first to last, and the hero is the challenger, like Job, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul."