

A Quaker Translator and the Blessed Bugbear of Biblical Authority

The question of the Bible's authority is a toughie for Quakers. Just imagine my dilemmas as a Quaker translator of the Bible and other sacred literature. Rather than start in right away on my reflections, let me just share with you three passages of the Bible that I particularly love; then I'm try to relate them to big ideas about authority.

These verses are from Chapter 12 of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and you'll all recognize the sounds of the King James translation:

12 Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

² While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

³ In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

⁴ And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

⁵ Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

⁶ Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

⁷ Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

⁸ Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

These further verses are from the start of Psalm 136. I'm going to sing the original Hebrew to a modern tune. We know that the songs were often performed, but none of the original tunes has survived:

1 Hōdū, hōdū, la-ahdōnai kee tōv

Kee leh-ōlahm, kee leh-ōlahm, hahs-dō

Kee leh-ōlahm, kee leh-ōlahm, hahs-dō

[Basic translation]

2 Hōdū, hōdū, lay-lō-hay ha-elōheem

Kee leh-ōlahm, kee leh-ōlahm, hahs-dō

Kee leh-ōlahm, kee leh-ōlahm, hahs-dō

[Basic translation]

3 Hōdū, hōdū, la-ahdōnay he-ahōneen

Kee leh-ōlahm, kee leh-ōlahm, hahs-dō

Kee leh-ōlahm, kee leh-ōlahm, hahs-dō

[Basic translation]

The following are verses from the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 10, and this translation from the Hebrew is a recent one of my own:

1 Pity the chisellers-in, inscribing outrage,

The busy drafters of anguish, decreeing evil,

2 Who pry the weak away from justice,

And tear due verdicts from my nation's poor,

Who make widows the snatch and grab of war,
And fatherless children armed men's free-for-all.

3 What will you do on the day it all comes home,
When desolation arrives here from a distance?

To whom will you run for help?

Where will you abandon your glorious holdings?

4 Why won't you crouch among the prisoners,

Or fall among the dead in battle?

Say what we will, God's anger isn't distracted.

His hand is still stretched out; it will act.

Why do I think these Biblical passages are so important? Why do I think they have merited all the effort put into them over the centuries, to present them in new languages, in new musical systems, in new cultures? Why, in short, do I believe that the text carries a sort of authority that at least demands to be heard?

I have to backtrack some distance in giving you an explanation. I'm a Quaker by longstanding conviction, but I'm the ultimate crossover

lecturer. I've spent time with Catholic and Evangelical Christians, with Mainline churches, and even with Polish Protestants amid the sea of Catholics in that country.

Overall, I've had an unwholesomely easy time talking to other religious groups about the Bible, because I always get credit merely for studying it and finding interesting things to say about it that those audiences don't know already—and it certainly isn't hard to find such things, as there's nothing between two covers that's as revered and yet as complex as the collection of eighty-one or fewer Books that we call the Bible. Hence in a typical church or a religious college or university, I tend to be pampered at the podium and never asked the question I should be addressing first, and urgently: "Why should we care about the Bible, and what can it do for us?"

I am very grateful for this opportunity to speak to you, because so many Quakers and honorary Quakers (a large and beloved group) will have this question in mind, and will demand of me a good effort at a personal response, if not at an intellectual *answer* that settles the matter for good and all—as a Quaker, of course I'm not going try for that.

If we look at Quaker history, the issue is obviously one of authority. As an almost defining trait, we Quakers have found and maintained our faith “experimentally” or experientially: through individual insight or revelation, or through the love and wisdom of whole communities.

This hasn’t, as a rule, left the Bible room to be an automatic or overriding source; it may come in secondarily, as an affirmation, but Quakers tend to be careful not to idolize it, not to take it for the Thing Itself; they follow George Fox, who wrote, “For though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I knew Him not, but by revelation [in this very passage, Fox uses the word “experimentally”], as He who hath the key did open, and as the Father of Life drew me to His Son by His Spirit.”

Now, Fox did know the Bible very well. Notice how he paraphrases famous verses (“Knock, and it shall be opened to you”: Matt. 7:7-8; Luke 11:0) in saying that the Bible doesn’t cut it for him. That someone adept in the scriptures demotes them in this way is very striking. Moreover, the famous “condition” that distressed him, and to which he was convinced that Christ Jesus alone could speak, is one that the New Testament doesn’t even

countenance, and in fact warns against: Fox saw sin all around him, but couldn't understand himself in these terms, as he recognized no dooming vices in himself and could deal calmly and effectively with temptation. In fact, before his great revelation he had kind of thought that he himself would make a better leader in the established church than the clergy who were there, but of course he was of the wrong social class and didn't have the necessary formal education.

Fox's "condition" was a thus really awkward one to be in during the seventeenth century in England, but he pulled a Jesus Christ who could speak to it straight out of the "ocean of light" above the "ocean of darkness" (a really radical re-envisioning of the picture of the created universe in the first verses of Genesis [where the ocean does not stay dark and chaotic, where the sky comes to share intermittent darkness, and where there's an ordinary atmosphere between the earthly waters and the mysterious waters of heaven]).

Just to illustrate the two basic different kinds of treatment of the Bible, the Fox-ish and the traditional, in the modern world: Sadie Stegmann, who was to become a very weighty Friend in South Africa, started out by doing the rounds of all the churches in Cape Town with her husband, looking for a

religious home, and finally condescended to attend a service in the run-down Quaker Meetinghouse, where the couple sat down and waited for the minister is growing irritation. Finally, on her own, Sadie realized why it was okay for the Meetinghouse to be run down and for no minister to appear. She then quoted the Bible to herself: “Thus saith the Lord, ‘The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where is the house that ye build unto Me?’” (Isaiah 66:1). But she had to experience that verse emotionally first; it came second in importance for her, and she might conceivably have done without it, say, by gaining a critical insight through someone else’s vocal ministry on that day. In any event, the Bible iced the cake of her conviction.

In contrast, an Evangelical lay preacher I listened to in a black South African township, a privileged white woman who had risked her life all through the struggle against apartheid to be with her African fellow-believers, had opened the Bible in a moment of extreme frustration and understood from the verse (I can’t remember which one) that God promised houses to her friends who were living in shacks, and that she must convey this promise to them. She was terrified of failure, and quailed at all the trouble it would take to build the houses under the conditions of a near civil war. But she obeyed the Bible; she and the prospective homeowners used to lie on the ground, pleading with

God to remember the promise given straight from the Bible, and finally the houses were built.

I find these two extremes of relationship to the Bible both daunting, because I simply don't have the faith or the character to live up to either of them. So here's my alternative set of ideas for how to cope with the text, and after discussing these ideas I'll go back to the three passages I quoted to you at the beginning of this piece. First, I ask where authority comes from among human beings.

Parents have it most conspicuously, but they don't *always* have *any*; to earn it, they have to give three things: they have to give consolation, joy, and a general view of the world—as well of course as the physical protection and nurturing that animal parents give, without inculcating any of those humanly luxurious abstractions, and without of course gaining any lasting authority.

Most human, unlike animal offspring, are born howling; they come, probably quite painfully, out of a warm, safe place, and they're evidently not reconciled to the idea of life on earth. Decent parents recognize the baby's loss and distress and rock it and sing to it and talk to it, as well as cleaning it and wrapping it up and feeding it; they do more than strictly necessary for the

physical survival of the baby, saying in effect, “Yeah, life is rough, as you’re finding out. We’d rather you didn’t cry, and we’ll try to get you to stop any reasonable way we can; but we understand if you can’t help it, and we’ll do our best to show you that we have genuine compassion, instead of just wanting you to shut up.”

The danger to human infants from predators alone must have given the birth cry, and the difficulty of silencing it, a high evolutionary cost; the bond that starts when the parents pay attention to the noise must have had a correspondingly high evolutionary benefit. At any rate, the lesson sinks in so deeply that a young toddler may move to comfort a crying stranger, or may make as if a toy needs comforting. Humans, in short, when their society works, enjoy communal mourning and consolation from the moment of their first breath; and those in charge take broad responsibility for this, so that comforting becomes traditional and institutionalized. Think of our disgust and horror when we read in the news that homeless and destitute people have been denied any formal observation of their passing, any dignified disposal of their remains, any way for their relatives or descendants to be informed. We don’t treat people that way, we say. Officials had no right to let that happen.

The bond to infants is enhanced when parents take on something that might be as challenging as comforting a crying baby: making it smile and laugh long before it gets any of their jokes. It must be both an instinct and a learned science to study the baby's face and its moods and find out what will bring it interpersonal joy and amusement. I don't have comprehensive knowledge, but I've never seen an animal parent—even in playful species such as dogs and cats—playing with its babies. It's humans who bring to the most basic bonding experience an imagination and a sense of humor. These are so important, and so incumbent on the more powerful to perpetuate, that they become regularized and institutionalized: we not only play but celebrate. Not having friendly common meals and happy holidays, not throwing a farewell party for each retiring employee, not observing any traditions to make a wedding special—we can physically live without any of this, but we would call the loss “life-denying” or “inhuman.”

Finally, human parents start communicating very soon to a child how they think the world at large should be run. For example, we stop young toddlers from hitting when hitting for them is a mere reflex, and we carry straight through, as they grow up, with an insistence that not hitting is a norm, one they will come fully to understand and embrace; and our assumptions are usually borne out. In contrast, you can *train* a dog to do or not do a lot of

things, but the experts are adamant: dogs have no interest in our views on, say, the sanctity of mail carriers, pot roasts, and shoes. But our human longing for the big picture is so strong that many who have the chance spend their lives trying to understand the Supreme Being and worship properly, or to understand some part of the world mainly out of fascination with it. And we tend to delight in worshipping and learning together, as long-enduring institutions witness.

So at least in these three things outside of strict survival needs, mourning, celebrating, and judging/learning, human authority seem to be about impulses more or less built in. So I don't think that the question of the Bible's authority needs to be a question of intellectual freedom vs. received ideas, or collectivism vs. individualism, or traditionalism vs. progressive culture. We can more simply, broadly, and comprehensively start to address the question of the Bible's authority by giving real and serious consideration to whether the Bible can help us do the fundamental things we WILL do anyhow and somehow NEED to do.

The Bible's origins seem to me to recommend it strongly for these purposes. Its own books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell a historically plausible and well-supported story of how and why traditional oral material and scattered

documents both old and new came together in the first authorized version of Jewish scripture, and was received enthusiastically and used from then on for consolation, celebration, and the teaching of norms. Around the time of the Babylonian defeat of Judea and the destruction of the First Temple in 587 B.C.E., the ordinary people of the land (the *am ha'artez*) lost everything. Babylon even took away their leaders and their scholars in a series of exiles, and left what must have been a hopeless and devastated land worked by peons under foreign rule. But after the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E., the exiles were allowed to return and to lead in rebuilding the nation. The Temple was rebuilt, but more importantly, the returnees brought scrolls they had been working on, and made a gift of them to the population in general. The people were thus consoled for their losses, urged to celebrate their purposes and identity as a nation, and given the nation's first comprehensive set of rules for living—not that these specific ordinances ever proved more than sporadically and variously enforceable; it was more the phenomenon of written law—which could be debated and adapted, and above all made permanent and accessible to all—which was transformative. The loss of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. and the extirpation of Jews in Palestine was survivable for the Jewish community; the loss of scripture would not have been.

Early Christianity was another moment of loss and purposelessness into which a collection of books, the New Testament, intervened. The Roman Empire had brought relative peace, but at the cost of massive slavery and displacement, and a single centralized, highly materialistic culture had steamrolled many vital local ones. The Christian stories and then the written books of the New Testament gave a powerful chance to say, “No, this is *us*; we are human beings with minds and emotions and ethics. We are not machines of mercantile production, for the benefit of the Roman Empire.”

The same kind of awakening happened in the Renaissance in Western Europe, when the retrieval of the Bible in its original languages, Greek and Hebrew, and its translation into languages in current popular use put the authority of consoling and celebrating institutions, and the power of interpretation and the establishment of new norms, into many more hands than previously. I’m convinced that our modern consciousness came mainly from here: because we had the book for our own use, we had the authority to shape our lives and our society as we wished.

I’d like to close with a translation from my book *The Face of Water*. This is a scene from the New Testament Book of Revelation, Chapter 7. Notice how this passage mourns, celebrates, and teaches at the same time. I can’t convey the

full poetic power of the words. But I can assert that, as a rudimentary choice, we tend to let into our lives the books we can love that way we love our parents, because they open up for us the beauty of the special human experience. Can the Bible be one such book for you?

9 Next, with my own eyes I saw a giant crowd, of countless people from every nation and tribe and community, and speaking every language in the world, and they stood facing the throne, and facing the little lamb who sat on it. They were draped in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands.

10 And with a giant voice they shouted these words: “Salvation belongs to our God, who is sitting on the throne, and to the darling lamb.”

11 And all the angels stood in a circle around the throne, the elders and the four strange animals with them, and they all fell on their faces in front of the throne, prostrating themselves to God, **12** with these words:

“Truly, blessing and glory and wisdom and all good gifts and honor and power and strength belong our God, age after age and forever—truly!”

13 And one of the elders responded, speaking to me with these words:

“These whom you see draped in their white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” **14** And here is what I said to him: “But *you* know, my lord.” And he said to me:

“These are the ones coming out of the great ordeal,

But now they have washed their robes;

But now they have bleached their robes white in this little lamb’s blood.

15 Because of this they stand facing the throne of God,

And they serve him all day, and they serve him by night in his temple.

And the one sitting on the throne will build a shelter over them in the desert.

16 “They will never go hungry any more; they will never be parched any more;

The sun’s heat will not assault them, no burning heat will hurt them.

17 “Because the tiny lamb there in the middle of the throne will be their shepherd;

He will lead them on the paths to springs flowing with water that gives them life,

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”