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Tolstoy or Kierkegaard: Dilemmas of Quaker Biblical Interpretation

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The title ‘Tolstoy or Kierkegaard: Dilemmas of Quaker Biblical Interpretation’ is an homage to a book that had a lasting effect on me when I came across it: George Steiner’s *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast*. His title proposes a neat binary antithesis between the two most influential Russian literary figures of the nineteenth century. Steiner explains in the preface that the book, his first, was, as it should be, the product of compulsion. He wanted to share with others his conviction that, and I quote, ‘the reader’s inevitable preference of one master over the other will define a whole philosophic and political stance.’¹ Both are masters, he claims, towering over Western literature, but there is a choice to be made between them. Indeed, we have no choice but to choose; the preference of one over the other is ‘inevitable’.

That is quite a claim, but he is not the first or only one to make it. He quotes the Russian philosopher and theologian Berdiaev as saying ‘It would be possible to determine two patterns, two types among men’s souls, the one inclined toward the spirit of Tolstoy, the other toward that of Dostoevsky.’² Running through my mind as I tackled this topic, however, has been my own favourite take on the familiar ‘there are two kinds of people’ statement: ‘There are two kinds of people in the world: those who think there are two types of people in the world and those who suspect that things may be a bit more complicated than that.’

1 George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast*, London: Faber & Faber, 1980 [1959], p. i.

2 Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 10.

The bulk of what follows will be an exploration of how these two dichotomous statements relate to each other and how the contrast Steiner poses between these writers has fed into my understanding of the Bible and how it does what it does. But what, you may ask, is Kierkegaard doing here, apparently muscling out Dostoevsky? This is partly autobiographical, as my relationship to Kierkegaard as a teacher has been one of the longest and most productive, if sometimes fraught, of my life. That said, the parallels between Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's worldviews have often been pointed out. Although far from identical, when it comes to the contrast both Steiner and Berdyaev posit, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky can both stand in for the contrasting worldview to Tolstoy's. In any case, Steiner's title, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, carries echoes of the title of one of Kierkegaard's most iconic works: *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard is the great champion of the inescapability of choice, as we shall see.

The second part of my title, 'Dilemmas of Quaker Biblical Interpretation' takes me back to a response I wrote over 20 years ago to the papers collected under the title 'Uses of Scripture by Early Friends' in a fascinating issue of the journal *Quaker Religious Thought*.³ My response was entitled 'Can there be a Quaker Hermeneutic?'; in other words, can there be a distinctively Quaker approach to the interpretation of the Bible? I would have been just as happy to entitle it 'Should there be a Quaker Hermeneutic?' but, naturally, if the answer to the first question 'Can there be ... ?' is 'No', then the second question becomes redundant. A second strand of this discussion, then, will involve revisiting what I wrote 20 years ago to clarify how considering the dichotomy Steiner poses may help at least to address, if not answer, the question of whether it even makes sense to talk of distinctively Quaker biblical interpretation. This is helped by the fact that both Tolstoy and Kierkegaard have intriguing links to Quakers and their use of the Bible. The two worldviews that they represent have both impinged on Quaker biblical interpreters and so the dichotomy between them is part of the history of such interpretation.

In order, however, to forestall this paper becoming a convoluted exercise in self-reflection on its own title, we should proceed to the substance of the matter. Just what is the nub of the contrast between these worldviews? The explanation entails invoking another significant figure in Russian thought, the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. A fascinating, enigmatic and in some ways tragic figure, his work was under a cloud for much of his life in Soviet Russia, but was rediscovered in the 1960s. The book that made the most impact in Russia and then in the West was his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.⁴ In it, independently of Steiner, he drew a contrast between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. To reduce a very complex and

3 Hugh S. Pyper, 'Response: Can There Be A Quaker Hermeneutic?', *Quaker Religious Thought* 30/3 (1997), pp. 63–69.

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson; Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984.

sometimes contradictory body of thought to a slogan, he contrasted what he called the 'monologism' of Tolstoy with the 'dialogism' of Dostoevsky. In essence, he saw Tolstoy's novels as characterised by a single voice, that of the author. The characters within the novel are something like ventriloquist's puppets. They may appear to have independent existence, but, in the end, they all speak in the author's voice and the author insists on retaining absolute control of the story and its mode of telling.

The genius of Dostoevsky, however, according to Bakhtin, is that his characters have their own voices. There is genuine dialogue between them and the authorial voice disappears behind them. This reflects a view of how language and identity interact that contrasts with Tolstoy's.

The monologic view, which may seem like common sense, is that speech is controlled by the speaker. We think a thought, translate it into words and our hearers then decode it so that the thought becomes accessible to them. Of course things go wrong: we do not find the right words and people misinterpret what they hear. In this view, language becomes a problem. In an ideal world, we would be able to do without it through some form of telepathy. The same is true, only more so, of writing and texts. We need them pragmatically, but ideally we would do without the frustrations of deciphering and interpreting language which, in the absence of the speaker, becomes even more ambiguous and inadequate.

The dialogic view is that language is controlled by the hearer or hearers. This seems counterintuitive. Bakhtin points out, however, that we choose our words in anticipation of what our hearers are interested in, can understand and will respond to. We use a shared stock of language that is always already someone else's, carrying associations that we cannot control. The meaning of any utterance does not exist in some mental space, stripped of language; on the contrary, it is as dialogue occurs that meaning arises. Language then gives rise to the possibility of thought, not the other way around.

Granted that this is a highly reductive account of a controversial and inexhaustible discussion, the point is that this dichotomy, 'monologic' rather than 'dialogic', to reduce things to a single term, has profound consequences for the way that those who adhere to either position understand themselves in the world. In the particular case we are interested in here, it has particular effects on how one understands the role of a text such as the Bible. Is the Bible monologic or dialogic? Is our reading of it informed by monologic or dialogic understandings of how texts and communities might interact? Which approach does, or should, characterise Quaker approaches to the Bible? This is the dilemma the title points to.

To address that, we can turn to the place of the Bible in our protagonists, Tolstoy and Kierkegaard/Dostoevsky. As you may well know, Tolstoy became increasingly interested in religion as he grew older. He embraced a life of simplicity and pacifism, which he saw as conforming to the will of God as expressed in Jesus' teachings. No wonder he came to the attention of Quakers and he was both amused and impressed by their earnest attempts to bring Fox's

Journal and Barclay's *Apology* to his attention, finding that many of his own biblical arguments for Christian pacifism had been made centuries earlier by Quakers.

Tolstoy's attitude to the Bible was complex, but it displays all the hallmarks of a monologic understanding. Even as a young officer in the Crimean War he wrote as follows:

A conversation about Divinity and Faith has suggested to me a great, a stupendous idea, to the realization of which I feel capable of devoting my life. That idea is the founding of a new religion corresponding to the present state of mankind: the religion of Christ but purged of dogmas and absolutism – a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth. ... Deliberately to promote the union of mankind by religion is the basic thought which I hope will dominate me.⁵

This led him in later life to rewrite the Bible, or more specifically the gospels, to accord with his own views. In 1892 he produced *A Translation Harmony and Analysis of the Four Gospels* and in 1902 extracted from it the most important aspects, which he published as *A Gospel in Brief*. In this work he discarded what he deemed to be the supernatural aspects of the gospels, including references to Jesus's divinity and miracles.

In essence, what Tolstoy seeks is the will of God. In this endeavour, the Bible and even the person of Jesus ultimately become obstacles to be cleared out of the way. It is an intriguing fact that the early Church did not choose to canonise one coherent account of the life and teaching of Jesus, but, out of the large number of accounts available to them, chose four. Ever since, there have been those who sought to produce a harmonised account that encompassed all four, most famously the so-called *Diatessaron* of Tatian, written in the second century. One story must lie behind all the apparently contradictory gospel accounts and so what does not fit with this can be discarded. In order to do this, judgements have to be made as to what is reasonable and believable.

Tolstoy carries this idea to its logical conclusion. For him, the important thing was to deduce what God intended and express it in such a way that it became a practical blueprint by which human life and society could be ordered. It is simply unfortunate, on this view, that God's intentions have to be deduced from a set of apparently contradictory texts that have overlaid the teaching of Jesus with superstition and factional arguments. Even Jesus, of course, supposing we could get back to his actual words, was constrained by the possibilities of the language he spoke and, in his case, that has come down to us only in Greek translation. In any case, he may not have understood or expressed that teaching perfectly.

Furthermore, that teaching, in Tolstoy's view, was not exclusively Jesus's. He was a witness to a unitary and universally applicable truth that has been conveyed,

5 Tolstoy, Diary Entry from March 1855 in R. F. Christian (ed.), *Tolstoy's Diaries*, vol. 1; New York: Scribners, 1985, p. 101.

more or less faithfully, by many prophets and philosophers across time and space. Jesus is one culturally bound – and so, limited – exemplar of this. Indeed, he went as far as to write in his *What I Believe*:

It is terrible to say, but it sometimes appears to me that if Christ's teaching, with the Church teaching that has grown out of it, had not existed at all, those who now call themselves Christians would have been nearer to the truth of Christ – that is to say, to a reasonable understanding of what is good in life – than they are now.⁶

'A reasonable understanding' is a key phrase. In another place, Tolstoy explains that the voice of Christ is to be identified with 'the whole rational consciousness of humanity' and that the essence of Christ's ministry is to teach human beings 'not to commit stupidities'. So, for Tolstoy, this monologic understanding of what it means to interpret the Bible is effectively to erase it. All that one could learn from it is available in the 'rational consciousness' of humanity anyway. The fact that he spends any time on the Bible is a product of its place in Russian society of the day and the power and influence of the Orthodox church, which claimed the right to provide the authoritative interpretation of biblical teachings.

Undeniably, Tolstoy's approach to the Bible found sympathy among Quakers, not least because it seemed to be aligned with one strand at least of Quaker reflection on scripture. Christopher Hill, in his fascinating book *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*,⁷ depicts seventeenth-century England as a society that was passionately engaged in redefining and redescribing itself in terms set by the Bible. In this context, Quaker apologists entered an ongoing argument centred on the question of authority and the great intellectual quest of the age, the search for the ground of certainty. Thinkers such as Descartes and Spinoza, in their different ways, expounded an understanding of 'truth' as universally demonstrable and valid in all circumstances, with the supreme example being the axiomatic systems of Euclidean geometry. So we find the remarkable Quaker biblical scholar Samuel Fisher stating as his first principle that "The foundation of the faith must be something that is infallible, firm, fixt, certain, stable, sure and inalterable."⁸

For much of Protestantism, the ground of that certainty was the Bible, but this begged important questions. 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. If anything could be questioned, everything could be.

6 Cited in Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 263; Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession; The Gospel In Brief: What I believe*, trans. Aylmer Maude; London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 462.

7 Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, London: Penguin Books, 1994.

8 Samuel Fisher, *The Testimony of Truth Exalted*, [London], 1679, p. 445.

Fisher's erudite but obsessive refutation of this claim seeks to argue that the Bible cannot be fixed and inalterable through its very nature as text, subject to misreading and miscopying across the millennia. The foundation of certainty and therefore of truth must therefore lie elsewhere, ultimately in the direct mediation of the Spirit that does away with the fallible exigencies of language and human communication.

Fisher makes the following interesting observation: '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.'⁹ He ascribes to the prevalent notion that truth must be unitary as well as immutable. Where there is contradiction, we do not have clarity and therefore lack truth. As text, the Scriptures are inherently various and ambiguous and so cannot be the source of truth. We see here the kind of monologic thinking that led Tolstoy to the production of his harmonised gospel.

The same logic underlies the biblical criticism of such figures as Hobbes and Spinoza. Arguing that the Bible could not be the touchstone of truth because of its heterogeneity allowed them to put forward another source of authority that fitted the criteria of universality and unity. In this way such writers become the forerunners of modern critical readings of the Bible that set aside any presumption of authority and apply the same tests to ascertain the authorship, history and interpretation of the text as they would to any other work.

So strong is the grip of this 'monologic' view of truth that the heterogeneity and therefore 'dialogic' potential of the Bible becomes an argument to undermine its authority. Of course, this argument can be reversed and, in the face of rising biblical criticism, one response is to stress the homogeneity of the Bible as the Word of God given by the Spirit. In crude terms, this is the response that develops particularly in the nineteenth century under the broad rubric of evangelicalism, which had its own effect on the Quaker interpreters. This is a debate between different versions of monologism, where despite appearances the actual text of the Bible is incidental; the real question is whether or how its manifest diversity can be construed as unitary.

All this has severe limitations if it is to be regarded as a way to interpret the Bible as a body of texts. It is rather like seeking to discover someone's inmost thoughts by dissecting his brain. However diligent the search, it cannot succeed as thought is not located in one unambiguous location. It is a product of the brain working as a complex association within a human body, which in turn is embedded in an environment of human culture and the natural world. It fails to acknowledge that truth cannot be abstracted from the means of its expression and from the conditions of its communication. It sees the textuality of the Bible as a distraction from its meaning instead of addressing the task of taking it seriously as the condition of its being meaningful at all.

9 Fisher, *Truth Exalted*, p. 197.

But what of the other side of our dichotomy? What would the dialogic response to this be? Rather than using rational thought to extract the supposed essence of Jesus's teaching, disregarding the claims of the tradition as to who he is, for Dostoevsky, so Steiner claims, 'The image of Christ is the centre of gravity.'

He goes on,

Whereas Tolstoy cited with approval Coleridge's warning against those who love 'Christianity better than truth,' Dostoevsky asserted in his own name and through the mouths of his character that, in the event of contradiction, Christ was infinitely more precious to him than either truth or reason. His imagination dwelt on the figure of the Son of God with such passionate scrutiny that it is possible to read a major portion of Dostoevskyan fiction as a gloss on the New Testament.¹⁰

While this may at first sight seem a recipe for blind fanaticism, we need to consider more carefully just what is at stake here. Truth, for Dostoevsky, and even more for Kierkegaard, who shared his sense of the centrality of Christ, is an illusion, if by 'truth' we mean the kind of mathematical certainty reached by reason in any other realm than arithmetic. We never have sufficient information to reach that kind of truth in human interaction and, even if we did, reason has its limits. That is what faith consists in; it is to make the choice to believe not just in the face of insufficient evidence but in the understanding that no evidence will ever be sufficient. Famously, Kierkegaard talks of the leap of faith and, while Dostoevsky never uses that phrase, his characters are often brought to the point of having to make a decision on matters that are, in logical and reasonable terms, undecidable.

For Kierkegaard, especially, the element of paradox is paramount. It is not that he is an irrationalist, with no place for reason. On the contrary, it is only through the rigorous use of reasoning that one can reach the conclusion that a puzzle that presents itself to you is a paradox rather than a mistake or a confusion of categories. For both of them, the ultimate paradox is the claim that Jesus is both God and human. It is this entirely unreasonable claim that provokes either dissent – what Kierkegaard calls 'scandal', using the New Testament term – or assent, which is in this context faith. Looked at in this way, the choice between Christ and truth is not one between irrefutable and demonstrable certainties on which all rational people would agree and the fantasy of a dogmatic and blinkered tradition, but between the illusion of certainty and the incomprehensible but irresistible challenge of the absolute paradox.

What this means for biblical interpretation is that it now becomes interested not in eliding or smoothing over the contradictions and tensions of the textual tradition but in seeking them out, even playing with them, as the source of surprising, counterintuitive inspiration. Instead of reducing the multiple voices of the texts and their characters to one monologic voice, it revels in the dialogue between the voices. Rather than abstracting a set of propositions from the text, it

10 Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 291.

seeks to enter into the conversation between voices, finding its own voice through listening and responding to others, borrowing their words to discover what its own meaning may be. This may seem a recipe for irresponsibility and for what is called disparagingly eisegesis – putting into the text the meaning you wish to find there. But that is the danger of freedom, Dostoevsky would counter. As Steiner puts it:

In what are among his final notes, Dostoevsky observed

The Saviour did not descend from the cross because he did not wish to convert men through the compulsion of outward miracle, but through freedom of belief.

In that refusal, in that supreme liberality, Tolstoy saw the origin of the chaos and blindness affecting the human mind. Christ had infinitely complicated the task of those who would establish His kingdom by placing the enigma of His silence across the straight path of reason. Had Christ shown Himself in messianic splendour, men's beliefs might, in a sense, have been constrained, but they would have been cured of doubt and removed from daemonic temptation. Christ's policy appeared to Tolstoy like that of a monarch who would go about in rags and obscurity, allowing his realm to fall into disorder, so as to sanctify those few among his subject acute enough to recognize him even in disguise.¹¹

But, particularly in his remarkable book *Training in Christianity* – although it pervades his other writings – Kierkegaard takes this image of the disguised king entirely seriously. In his view, direct communication between God and human beings cannot take place; they are absolutely dissimilar and the human being could neither comprehend what God was saying nor survive the encounter. God has to disguise himself out of love for his human interlocutors to avoid overwhelming them. God knows, so to speak, that what is communicated depends quite as much on the nature and relationship of those who are in dialogue as it does on the actual words spoken. It is not even that God adopts a disguise; human comprehension is so limited that what it can know of God is such a partial view of what God may be that it amounts to a disguise.

Kierkegaard once said that, while other people had striven to make the New Testament easy to understand, his job was to make it more difficult. Again, this is not simple perversity, though he was on occasion capable of that. What he means is that too often interpretation of the Bible has meant accommodating it to what suits our view of what is acceptable and comprehensible. He wants to provoke the reader to the point of making a choice as to whether to persevere or not. Rather than smoothing the path for his readers, he sees it as important that they are confronted with the problems; only then can they learn the strategies to deal with them or the humility to realise that they cannot.

This means that, paradoxically (that word again!), truly reading the Bible entails realising the extent to which it is unreadable. Put another way, making

11 Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, p. 262.

sense of the text is possible only if we are honest about the extent to which we are *making* sense, constructing a meaning, rather than somehow extracting a lucid meaning from the overgrowth of language that surrounds it.

Kierkegaard's approach to writing has been summed up as follows:

Kierkegaard conceived it his function as a writer to strip men of their disguises, to compel them to see evasions for what they are, to label blind alleys, to cut off men's retreats, to tear down the niggardly roofs they continue build over their precious sun-dials, to isolate men from themselves, to enforce self-examination and to bring them solitary and alone before the Eternal. Here he left them. For here that in man which makes him a responsible individual must itself act or it must take flight. No other can make this decision.¹²

Interestingly, this passage is written by an eminent Quaker, Douglas V. Steere, who spent a period in Denmark to learn Danish and to work on his translation of his work *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, which is among the first of the translations that brought his work to the English-speaking world. This radical stripping away of illusion, leaving the individual alone before God, is also a strand that has deep roots in the Quaker tradition and beyond; one aspect of it could fossilise into what has been stigmatised as Quietism, a conviction that no human action could be pleasing to God demanding a complete surrender of the will.

This stance is left with a paradox as well. How are we to decide not to decide, so to speak? Can we willingly renounce the use of our will? Taken to its extreme, the Kierkegaardian approach can lead in its own way to the disregard for the textuality of Scripture; it becomes the occasion for a confrontation with the divine in the moment, which does away with the need for speech or discourse. The actual content of that moment ceases to matter.

This too seems not to take seriously a remarkable characteristic of the Bible in contrast to other sacred scripture. I have often said to students, particularly from a more conservative tradition, that they are trying to read the Bible as if it was the Quran. If you want a book that unequivocally gives you divine instructions as to how to conduct your life and understand your place in human society and before God, the Quran is a much better fit than the Bible. It consists almost entirely of first person speech by Allah addressed to one prophet in a limited period of time and in a limited place.

Contrast that with the Bible. It begins, in the book of Genesis, with the amazing words 'In the beginning, God ...'. First of all, it is a remarkable thing, which, however, has become entirely a commonplace, that the Bible begins with – the beginning. We take that for granted, but it is actually an unusual move and

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere; New York: Harper & Row, 1956, p. 16. It is noteworthy that Aylmer and Louise Maude, the most significant contemporary translators and biographers of Tolstoy in English, were also Quakers.

far from random. We know from the start that we are embarking on a journey through time. Moreover, the next word, 'God', tells us that we are not being addressed directly by the deity but that some narrative voice is telling us about God. God is a character in the story, whatever else he is, and what we will learn of him will be what we learn of characters in stories.

We will learn as we watch characters interact with each other and with God, reading between the lines as if we were eavesdroppers on the scenes playing out before us, having to make inferences about the motivations and desires of the characters from their actions and learning that speech may hide as well as reveal character. What Bakhtin, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard teach us is that every utterance is necessarily ambiguous and that the admirable attempt of early Quakers to live up to an ideal of transparency between thought, word and action is based on a flawed understanding of how language and communication work.

Where does that leave us? Here I want to introduce the last of the teachers whose wisdom I would like to share with you. He is Edouard Glissant, not a well-known name to most Anglophone readers. In the world of Francophone literature, and especially in the French-speaking Caribbean, by contrast, he was a revered figure as a novelist, playwright, essayist, poet and postcolonial theorist, winning major literary prizes. He was twice a finalist for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Born in Martinique in 1928, he spent many years teaching at the City University of New York before his death in February 2011.

I hope to show that his work sheds light on obscure aspects of the biblical texts. But let me retract that last statement, as I have immediately lapsed into the very intellectual and cultural assumptions that Glissant calls into question. The problem is with the metaphor I used: 'shedding light'. It reflects the assumption that our business with the biblical texts, or in any intellectual endeavour, is to bring light to what was in darkness and transparency to what is unclear in an effort to clarify and thus to understand it.

Glissant's argument is that this is a Western attitude that arises from what is tellingly called the 'Enlightenment'. There are a whole cluster of metaphors around the valorisation of the light; we value lucidity and clear-sightedness, transparency, clarity, vision. This is particularly pertinent in the context of French colonial culture. He characterises it as seeking to deal with the strange and the mysterious by trying to render it transparent and thus 'understandable'. This apparently benign desire to understand the other is, in fact, designed to expose otherness as only a mask for what is fundamentally the same, defending itself from the uncontrollable possibilities of the truly different.

In contrast, Glissant champions the virtues of what he calls *opacité*, that which intrinsically resists the imperialism of the light. 'I claim for everyone the right to opacity, which is not *renfermement* [closing oneself off].'¹³ He asserts that everyone has a primal right *not* to be understood, to resist the understanding of others,

13 Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde: Poétique IV*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 29.

which all too often has meant assimilation into a dominant culture. Western culture has very often claimed the right not only to understand the culture of others but to explain it to them. Glissant's call, instead, is for what he terms both a poetics of diversity and a poetics of relation. Community and mutuality are built not by seeking to eradicate difference by a claim that 'deep down we are all the same' but in a mutual respect for each other's opacity. This demands an acknowledgement of the worth of what we *cannot* understand in each other.

The Bible does not figure largely in Glissant's writings, but he does trace the Western concern with clarity and enlightenment back to the Bible, among other sources. While his arguments have force, my contention has been that the Bible has its own forms of opacity and that Glissant's insights (but there goes that metaphor of light again!) can help us to appreciate these anew. The Bible may have more to say to a poetics of relation and diversity than Glissant acknowledges, but his reversal of the imagery of dark and light may also help us to read the Bible better.

As an example, having Glissant in mind brings out aspects of the familiar story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9 that had eluded me. First of all, there is the way that the builders of Babel explain their own project to themselves. The people specifically state that their object in building the tower is to prevent themselves being scattered over the world. In most interpretations, God's response to this building effort is interpreted as punishment. The human hubris of attempting to build a tower is thwarted by a God who seems threatened by this evidence of human solidarity and cooperation. He confuses or 'mixes' their languages and the resultant confusion sabotages their project so that, despite themselves, the people are scattered. All this is explained as divine retribution and the result is the sorry disruption of an original Edenic unity.

What Glissant's insights suggest is that we could counter-read this as a positive story of a God who saves human beings from their own capacity for self-limitation. After all, the building of a tower to prevent people being scattered flies in the face of the divine command in Gen 2:8 whereby human beings are directed to 'fill the earth' as part of God's good creation. The desire for unity and safety is also a refusal of the invitation to explore, to travel and to risk change through exposure to new and diverse environments. Just as the expulsion from Eden is actually necessary for the invitation to humans to people the earth to be fulfilled, so too is the scattering from Babel.

Furthermore, there are some key ambiguities around the translation of the Hebrew. In verse 7, where the New Revised Standard Version, for example, says that God 'confuses' the language of the people, the word translated 'confuse' is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the mixing of ingredients for baking. Here mixing is the necessary process to turn raw ingredients into a tasty treat.

This takes on a new significance when we recollect that Glissant was a champion of Creole, the distinctive language of Martinique, which was subject to suppression by the French authorities as a corruption of French. What they

characterised as a mixed, obscure, savage language was derided as the enemy of clarity of expression and thought. It was proof of the lack of education – or even the ineducability – of the black population. Glissant takes a very different view. Deprived of their own languages and having no common tongue between them except the French of their masters, the enslaved Africans developed a mixed language that allowed them to communicate among themselves but crucially was opaque to the dominant group, the speakers of ‘pure’ French. For Glissant, Creole embodies the slaves’ inventiveness and their success in creating an form of opacity that was not open to the masters’ gaze and allowed them to maintain their identity.

In the light of this, could we read Genesis 11 as a positive story of God ‘mixing’ or ‘stirring up’ their language in order to shatter a dull uniformity and to provide each group with its own capacity to retain a core of opacity? In this way, human beings become able to develop and sustain the diversity of identities which is the prerequisite for true relation. The confusion of tongues opens up possibilities rather than closing them down. It is only when people scatter and develop their distinctive cultures that they can then enter into creative dialogues and hope to learn from one another. God, rather than punishing them, can then be understood as saving the human race from lapsing into a sterile sameness, where everyone is shut up in its tower, all speaking the same language and ultimately devolving into what science fiction writers might describe as a ‘hive mind’.

Of course, that opens up the corresponding risk of misunderstanding and conflict, the whole sorry history of battles and betrayals, of xenophobia and genocide, that unfolds in the pages of the Bible and in which we are still caught up. Tolstoy’s aim of reconciling humanity and stressing its unity is an admirable one, but Dostoevsky proved prophetic when he argued that any human scheme designed to bring the Kingdom on earth would degenerate into tyranny.

In the preface that he provided for the 1980 reprint of *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, 20 years after the first edition, George Steiner tells us that, if he were to rewrite the study, he would point to the rare and unstable moments when there can be a congruence between them. Though they are antithetical, they are also part of the same literary world, aware of each other and with many similarities as well as differences. It is not a matter of glibly swapping the ‘or’ for an ‘and’, but the tensions and misunderstandings do not preclude some sort of communication; they are the spur to it.

So, to conclude, this discussion has not solved the dilemmas of biblical interpretation but that is what makes the enterprise endlessly frustrating and endlessly rewarding. Nor have I answered the question of what a distinctively Quaker biblical interpretation might be, except to suggest that any approach to the Bible that seeks validation for its own assumptions will, if it is sincere, find not answers but questions.

Let me end not with some neat conclusion but with an image of what my experience with Quakers has brought to my approach to the Bible. I have always

liked to see the Bible sitting on the table in the midst of the meeting as Friends and attenders gather. As they come in, they bear with them their own stories, stories built out of their encounters with others over their lives, stories maybe only partly known to themselves, let alone to the rest of the meeting. They settle down with their own memories and traumas, their prejudices and blind spots, their imagination and insight.

They join the text on the table which is the product of a long and continuing conversation of voices, some rejoicing, some mourning, some vindictive, some forgiving, some judgemental, others resigned, some seductive, others intimidating or repellent. Like it or not, these voices are present in the meeting whether the book is there or not, as they have shaped the culture and language through which each individual there has sought to make meaning of their life. Some of these voices are very dark, but the Quaker Advices and Queries enjoin us to trust the leadings of God 'whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life'. The corollary of that, surely, is that it is as we become aware of our darkness that we also may become aware of the light.

But there the book lies, in silence, waiting along with the gathering meeting: not for silence as an end in itself, nor as a prelude for some prepared and dogmatic teaching, but to have words listened out of them. I am grateful for the words that the Bible, and Friends, have listened out of me.

Author Details

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