Public Justice and Personal Liberty: variety and linguistic skill in the letters of Mary Fisher

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Abstract
This essay concerns the use of language in letters by Mary Fisher, the seventeenth-century Quaker missionary. It shows how she adapts her exegetical discourse to suit her readers, and uses it for more than self-justification. Her first letter, written from York prison is shown to be influenced by the work of Elizabeth Hooton. It is also used as an example of a letter containing a complex and subtle biblical subtext. This technique gave these early Quaker women the confidence to write. Both Fisher and Hooton started writing to draw attention to injustice. Hooton continued to do this throughout her life; Fisher went on to use the same technique to express affectionate parental care for her converts. She continues to use biblically imitative language in order to write in a way acceptable to many readers in various situations. This is particularly useful when writing to Barbadian households where slaves and poor servants are kept. Fisher's letters show how an early modern serving woman adapted a particular linguistic technique to a variety of situations and readers. Her biblically imitative text justifies her public expression of faith and provides her with a rich and varied subtext. Hooton's example enables Fisher to express her concern for public justice. Fisher develops her skill to write about a spiritual liberty that transcends material confinement.

Keywords
Quaker, women, letters, Fisher, Hooton, Bible.

During the Civil War and the period of Parliamentary government in seventeenth-century England, Quakers were among many dissenting sects preaching and proselytising both at home and abroad. They continued these activities after the Restoration. Letters and printed tracts played a large part in this missionary activity. There is considerable contemporary scholarly interest in Quakers, their social structures and use of language. One reason for this is that women were permitted to minister, preach, travel and write as well as men. During the last decade literary critics and historians have examined the work of these early Quaker women. Christine Trevett has analysed women's historic contribution to the social and theological development of the sect, which is now known as The Religious Society of Friends (Trevett 1991). Meanwhile feminist literary critics, as I shall show later, have been examining their use of language. Most of the literary analysis of seventeenth-century Quaker women's writing has been wide ranging and comparative. Detailed work on particular documents is still lacking. This essay is specific; it examines the way Mary Fisher, one of the first Quaker missionaries, adapted her writing skills to suit different readers and circumstances. Fisher wrote her first letter in York prison, where she was influenced by Elizabeth Hooton, an older woman with more experience of preaching. Hooton's letters written throughout her Quaker ministry, are predominantly concerned with the justice that she hopes to see established on earth. She was a mistress of the biblically imitative comminatory letter. Fisher, using the complex exegetical skills acquired to write a similar request for justice, later developed the technique to express affection for her converts and to describe a concept of liberty within servitude. Her work also demonstrates that the Bible is not only for self-justification, it provides a rich undercurrent of imagery and story. Such exegetical texts, when read by those who know their Bibles well, produce an experience like that of hearing a well remembered song as a theme in a new symphony. In Fisher's letters this technique is used to prompt the consciences of the powerful and to include the powerless.

It took considerable courage for women to publish in the seventeenth century. As I shall show later, several literary critics have noted the way that dissenting women of the period used biblically imitative text to justify their writing. However, private letters were traditionally an acceptable form of female writing. Fisher and Hooton use exegetical text to justify, not the letters themselves, but the kind of letters. All the works discussed in this essay are public letters, written to powerful people, to groups of converts or with a view to conversion of the readers who are not personally known to the writer. Therefore they involve the women in the innovation of representing themselves in the public sphere. Neither Fisher nor Hooton had printed publications made of their letters, combined with autobiographical accounts of their missionary activities, as did some other early modern Quaker women, such as Barbara Blaugdone, Alice Curwen, Sarah Chevers with Katharine Evans, and Joan Vokins (Wing. A410; M857; T9357&B487; V686). All these Quaker travellers rely on the Bible, and its contemporaneous universal acceptability, as a holy book to justify their activities and their writing. Most give far more personal details than does Fisher, whose letter are notable for a lack of this kind of information. Her first letter is imitative of Hooton and in this way she acquires the exegetical skills which are used in subsequent letters.

Hooton's extant letters, of which there are at least 80 in manuscript form in The Library of the Society of Friends in Britain (L.S.F.), kept at Friends' House in London, stress predominantly her belief that she had a responsibility to speak to the powerful condemning injustice.(1) She describes her own and other Quaker's sufferings and addresses letters to magistrates, Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Chancellor and King Charles II, among others. Fisher's literary remains are also letters and there are very few compared to Hooton's output. Among her extant works is Fisher's contribution to the internal argument about whether or not men Quakers should remove their hats in meeting and this, like her 'Letter to ye world...', remains in manuscript form.(2) When describing her own activities her letters are usually brief in the extreme. Fisher, unlike other Quaker women writers, does not justify her ministry with a conversion narrative, details of personal inner conflict or accounts of her own

sufferings. She reports on her arrival in America by asking George Fox to pray for her and to send more missionaries.(3) Her letter about her visit to the Ottoman Empire is a succinct report on her accomplished mission.(4) However, as I shall show, when she is writing to encourage her converts or to describe her discovery of a satisfactory inner life she writes at greater length. Her testimony to the life of her first husband, William Bailey, is her only printed work listed in Donald Wing's *Short Title Catalogue of Books 1641-1700*. It is included in *A Collection of several wrightings of William Bayly*, which was printed in London in 1676 (Wing. B1517). Thus the letters analysed in this essay relate to the very earliest period of Quaker activity and have not been subsequently adapted for printed publication. They have all been taken from the manuscript collection in The Library of the Religious Society of Friends. During the seventeenth century spelling and punctuation were not standardised and I have reproduced the letters as they are written, except for the long 's' which is not reproducible in modern print.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the translation and distribution of printed Bibles made it possible for certain groups of English speaking people, such as women, to read it in their own language for the first time. As Christopher Hill says in *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-century Revolution*, this was not an entirely theological exercise:

> In the seventeenth century the Bible was central to emotional as well as intellectual life. The majestic prose of Tyndale, the Geneva and the Authorised Versions, transformed English ways of thinking as well as the English language - not only ways of thinking about theology (Hill 1993: 438).

Many women were given courage, by reading and learning the Bible, to express themselves in public for the first time. Elizabeth Hooton was a tenant farmer's wife when she became a Quaker; Mary Fisher was a servant when she was converted. Seventeenth-century women in these ranks lacked contemporaneous education in rhetoric. Only very wealthy women, who

were tutored at home, could acquire any aspect of this skill. Rhetorical skills were, of course, available to those gentlemen who could study at the universities, and they were considered to be the basis for good writing. In spite of this Fisher, like her Quaker peers, worked within self-imposed literary rules, using the Bible as her classical literature. Sometimes it is evident from a woman's text that she is using the translation of the Bible authorised by James I and first published in 1611. Some early texts suggest access to, or a memory of, the sixteenth-century translation known as the Geneva with its detailed interpretative marginalia. Elizabeth Hooton would have used this version during the first part of her life. I have used the Authorised Version except when the text indicates that the author may have the language or marginalia of the Geneva in mind. The Bibles I have used were printed in 1616, after the last revisions of both (Geneva 1599; Authorised 1614) and when both were in print and being distributed at the same time. Seventeenth-century Quakers had a particular attitude to biblical language. In *Let Your Words Be Few*, Richard Bauman demonstrates the significance of this. Of priests of the established religions, he says:

> Proper religious speaking demanded a body of acquired knowledge, including linguistic knowledge, and the human ability to interpret the Scriptures for the uninitiated. Of course, for the priests of the established religions authority also rested in the control over and management of a range of essential rituals, not necessarily wholly verbal, although all with a verbal component (Bauman 1983: 42).

For Quakers, however:

> Religious practise was systematically reduced to the Word, and the sole function of the religious specialist was to open that Word to the world (Bauman 1983: 42).

As for some of the other dissenting sects of the period, for Quakers 'opening the Word' did not depend on having a particular kind of

education. It depended on a response to an inner experience. This is described by Nigel Smith in his book, *Perfection Proclaimed.* Smith defines Quakers as within a group of sects with a particular approach to biblical narrative. Speaking of the 1640s he says:

> There were further challenges to scriptural authority, such as the denial that God created the world *ex nihilo*, which was sometimes coupled with rejection of the literal truth of the Bible and the habit of reading it as an allegory of the internal state of each individual, a practice which had characterized the Family of Love and which was to mark out the perfectionist groups of the late 1640s and 1650s, the Seekers, Ranters and early Quakers (Smith 1989: 7).

Perfection Proclaimed does not examine sectarian women's writing as a separate genre, but work by other critics has shown that this 'allegory of the internal state' was particularly relevant to women's need for self-expression at the time.

Early modern Quaker women's writing has been analysed with reference to the work of other women of the period. Among these are prophetesses and the representatives of the various dissenting sects of the seventeenth-century. These sects perceived political involvement as a part of religious responsibility. Women sectarians of the period, living in a society which afforded them no official religious or political power, needed a special kind of confidence to speak and write about their beliefs. Recent work by literary critics has drawn attention to this. In *Virtue of Necessity*, Elaine Hobby describes the source of this courage and the significant part played by women in the consolidation of the group of itinerant preachers who came to be known as Quakers:

> In many respects, the ideas and activities of early Quakerism reveal women's part in its establishment. Quaker emphasis on Inner Light as a source of understanding and guide for action grew out of, and made possible women prophets' challenge to

> their restriction to the private sphere (Hobby 1988: 36).

Hobby's work is a pioneering study of seventeenth-century women's writing. Since she wrote *Virtue of Necessity* there has been increasing interest in the writings of dissenting women. Quaker women's writing has been represented in several books of essays. Additionally, monographs, such as *Visionary Women* by Phyllis Mack and *God's Englishwoman* by Hilary Hinds, have drawn attention to the significance of early-modern Quaker women's writing and its specificity, with reference to other sectarian women. All these scholars discuss the wide variety of work produced by Quaker women. They wrote charismatic tracts, defended their beliefs, justified preaching, reported on their own trials, wrote about journeys, faith and their own conversion experiences.

Seventeenth-century Quaker women were even more anxious than their male peers to be read as spokeswomen for God, rather than as individuals seeking notoriety. Their desire to remain virtuous, modest and within the contemporaneous terms of female goodness, caused them to encode their political utterances and their preaching within biblically imitative text. This was contemporaneously perceived as having divine authority. Hilary Hinds describes this technique, with particular reference to Quakers, in *God's Englishwomen*:

> ...the deployment of biblical narratives and identifications serves to universalise the quite overt political arguments being offered by these writers. By framing these arguments outside the temporal and contested terms of their own day, and expressing them instead as elements within the timeless and incontestable truths of biblical prophecy, ...the texts move towards the incontrovertible, their language 'invisible' in its incontestability, and the authority thereby attained divine and infallible rather than questionably human (Hinds 1996: 140).

Other dissenting women and charismatic preachers, both male and female, used this exegetical technique and it is not specific to seventeenth-century England, although the birth of Quakerism is. Fisher's letters are examples of the way an early-modern serving woman uses the technique as a method of self-expression and adapts it to describe desired justice, communal relationships and the inner life. She learned to write as a Quaker in order to address the powerful in England. Her later letters show her using the same skill, with variations, to include the powerless and the strangers among her readers.

The lives of Fisher and Hooton included many similar experiences. Both travelled and both were persecuted. In her chapter entitled 'Mary Fisher' in *Quaker Women,* M.R. Brailsford says that Fisher was a native of Pontefract, who was born around 1623 (Brailsford 1915: 96/97). She was a servant of Richard Tomlinson when he and his wife became convinced Quakers. Fisher was also converted and subsequently she was imprisoned in York Castle, as a result of speaking out against the priest at Selby. Later she served a second sentence in York for the same offence in Pontefract. In 1653 she and a companion, Elizabeth Williams, were whipped at the market cross at Cambridge, the first Quakers to suffer this punishment administered under the Elizabethan vagrancy law. In 1655 Fisher went to Barbados with Ann Austin and they both went from there to Massachusetts in the following year. They were the first Quakers to attempt to proselytise the area. In Boston they were imprisoned, kept without food, searched for witch marks and had their Bibles confiscated, before being transported back to Barbados where Fisher made the converts to whom one of her letters is addressed. Her experiences are recounted by Joseph Besse, in *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers*, who puts the most emphasis on her subsequent journey to Adrianople (Besse 1753: Vol. II, 394). She set out with six other Quakers, in 1657, with a view to converting the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. When the party failed to reach the Sultan after several attempts, John Perrot, the leader of the expedition, and two others gave up and visited Rome, another went to Constantinople. Perrot, in a letter to Edward Burrow reports leaving Mary Fisher and B.B. (probably Beatrice Beckley) on the island of Zant, preparing to continue their mission.(5) In her letter to 'Thomas Killam

Thomas Aldam & John Killam wth yor dear wives' Fisher reports briefly on her interview with 'ye king unto whom I was sent'.(6) There is no evidence that Beckley was with her but both returned to London. Fisher continued her Quaker ministry and she married a fellow Quaker, William Bailey, in 1662. After his death she became Mary Cross by her second marriage and she died in 1698 in America. I have used her patronymic throughout this essay.

Elizabeth Hooton, on the other hand, always writes under her married name. In her biography of Hooton, Emily Manners reports being unable to discover her patronymic with any certainty (Manners 1914: 2). Hooton was middle aged and married, to a Nottinghamshire farmer, when she met George Fox in 1647. In an anonymous note, filed with Fox's testimony to her life, the following information is given:

> Elizabeth Hutton from Skegby in Nottinghamshire, who was faithful laborour in the Gospel from about 1648 to 1671 and often imprisoned, & whipt in New England as the history of her life and death at large doth show it. And at last she finished her testimony in Jamaica 1671. (7)

Before meeting Fox, Hooton had been a Baptist preacher and after her convincement she proselytised for the sect that was, subsequently, to become known as Quakers. She was one of the first Friends and the first woman to do this. York was not her first imprisonment and like Fisher she later visited America. In contrast to Fisher's letters, Hooton's reiterate her own sufferings as part of her self-justification. Her letters recount her proselytising activities throughout America, but particularly in Massachusetts. Here the authorities would tolerate no deviation from their own Calvinist dogma, and after Fisher's visit they became increasingly persecutory. They are historically notable for being the only officials to hang a Quaker woman; Mary Dyer died on Boston Common, as did some of her male fellow Quakers, in 1660. In her essay 'Read Within: Gender, Cultural Difference and Quaker Women's Travel Narratives' Susan

Wiseman demonstrates Hooton's preoccupation with establishing her distinctive beliefs, in the face of such persecution:

> The Quaker approach to this situation, as manifested in Hooton's two visits to New England, was to visit repeatedly the places from which she was banished, re-enacting and repeating a cycle of witness, imprisonment, whipping, banishment, return, which locked Puritans and Quakers into varying attempts both to distinguish themselves and to dominate each other by their superior moral courage (Wiseman 1996: 161.).

Establishing difference was one way in which Hooton could describe the kind of society she wanted to inaugurate. She and her fellow Quakers are represented, by her, as already living in the way which would bring about the longed for utopia on earth that early Quakers had hoped to establish. Hooton preached and suffered during more than two decades in England and America and she reported this in her letters with increasing frequency, as she got older. Like Fisher, she proselytised in the West Indies, especially Barbados. Compared to Massachusetts, Barbados provided seventeenth-century Quakers with a comparatively safe place to work. In 1671, the year of her death, Hooton wrote to 'Some Ruler in Barbados' warning him against the 'false reports of ye Priests suggestions agt ye innocent'.(8) Throughout this letter 'the innocent' are the Quakers. Hooton is hoping to achieve complete freedom of worship for them in Barbados. In common with the vast majority of her letters this one, written at the end of her life, is aimed at achieving a desired change in material circumstances for the members of her sect. After her first greeting she says: 'If thou wilt be noble in thy place lend not an eare to the wicked nor to persecuters...'(9) Fisher, on the other hand wrote her longest letters to include others within the Quaker family, although her first Quaker letter is like Hooton's work.

Elizabeth Hooton was an older woman and a more experienced preacher than Mary Fisher when they met in York prison, at the beginning of their ministries. It is her influence on Fisher that is predominantly evident in Fisher's letter written in the jail and addressed to a magistrate. It is the

earliest piece of Fisher's writing in Friends' House Library, and is thought to be in her own hand. It is undated but in *Quaker Women*, M.R. Brailsford gives the date for the York incarceration as 1651-52 (Brailsford 1915: 97). The letter demonstrates the writer's passionate belief in the justice of her cause and the possibility of expediting an immediate change in official judicial policy. It is written in a state of righteous indignation at the passing of the death sentence on three fellow prisoners. They are horse thieves, not fellow Quakers, and thus it demonstrates the writer's compassionate concern for others, even those not within her chosen sect.
Here it is in full:

> From Mary ffisher presiner at Yarke:-
> woe, woe, to the un just judge wch respects mens persons in judgement the plagues of god is to thee & thee blood of al those wch thou hast condemned shall be required at thy hands, they cry for vengeance of the woe & miserie is thy portion without thou speedilye repent, Examine thy heart & see what thou hast done in speareing for murder and calls it man slaughter, & hath condemned theirfor yt creature to death, Contrarie to ye law of god, woe unto yt thou must give Account to god for thy unjust judgement thou arte not able to stand before [him] when he Appreth wch respecteth no man's person, but thou doth contrye to [ye] pfect law of God and contrarye to that in the conscience wch tels the [thou] should not put any to death for ye creature, but blood requireth blood; and thier blood shall be required of ye wch thou hast condemned for ye creature to die [obscured] ye it to hart & let ye oppresed go free the lord [obscured] it of thee writen by one who desires ye good of all people, Mary ffisher: prisner of ye lords for ye truth sake who Cryeth for justice & true judgement wth out ptiallitie/
> I desir I may come before thee/

At the end of this draft or copy is a note in the same hand giving background information to the letter and the outcome of the case.

> After ye corrupt judge had given judgement this was given to him hee had condemned 3 to dye for horses & ye creature stealinge; but they was not putt to death, 2 of them but led to ye gallowes and brought backe again 2 of them but one suffered by ye judgement of corrupt hearts;(10)

Fisher, in common with other Quaker writers, assumes that her reader's knowledge and interpretation of the Bible coincides with her own. She also, in this letter, assumes that her reader believes in the God of the Christian faith, and this is a reasonable assumption about an educated man in seventeenth-century England. Fisher's letter, nevertheless, shows a desire for a change of heart and mind which she believes will produce a new and better religious understanding and the judicial reaction she requires. She encodes this in biblical language, which gives her the authority to threaten the reader both overtly and covertly at the same time.

An example of the way this biblical subtext works will show how complex and portentous this letter is to the initiated reader. The 'unjust judge' is the title given to an imaginary character in a parable of Jesus's recounted in Luke 18 1-8. The judge 'who feared not God neither reverenced man', punishes the adversary of a widow who importunes him, because he is weary of her demands. Christ's followers are urged to 'pray always', for if the unjust can be moved:

> Now shall not God avenge his elect, which cry day & night unto him, yea though *he suffer long for them
> *Glossed at* *Though hee seeme slowe in revenging the injuries done to his (Geneva, Luke 18.7.).

There is a double threat in the use of this parable by a female writer because, like the widow, the author may make an increasing nuisance of herself. The reader of the Geneva Bible will also know that God's vengeance may seem slow, but is only postponed, not cancelled. The theme of injustice is then related to the corruption mentioned in the attached note by use of another biblically encoded warning about standing before the God who 'appeareth' suddenly, and 'wch respecteth no man's person'. In Job

41.10. God asks Job '... who then is able to stand before me?' Standing before God when he 'appeareth' is from Malachi and forms a link with the opening part of the letter because it also hints at the oppression of the poor:

> But who may abide the day of his coming? and
> who shall stand when hee appeareth? (Malachi 3.2.)

In chapter 3 verse 5 the fate of the unjust is elaborated upon:

> And I will come neere to you in judgement; and I will be a swift witnesse against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppresse the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, and that turne aside the stranger from his right, and feare not me, saith the Lord of hostes (Malachi 3.5).

By proximity, Fisher links Malachi's 'messenger' to the God who does not 'respect persons'. This phrase also runs throughout the Bible and is connected to injustice and corruption. It is a reference to Paul's letter to the Romans 2.11: 'For there is no respect of persons with God', and is also used by Paul in Ephesians 6.9, and Colossians 3.25. Peter says, in his letter: 'And if ye call on the Father who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's worke,...' (1 Peter 1.17). Additionally it is reported as a saying of Peter's in Acts 10.34: 'Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons'. James, in his epistle, enlarges upon the idea, saying that followers of Jesus should not show 'respect of persons' by giving more honour to the rich than the poor. (James 2.1-5) He reiterates his point in 1.9. saying: 'But if ye have respect to persons ye commit sin...'.

As is often the case this idea about God is used in the New Testament by writers who remember it from the Old. Most significantly for Fisher's argument the instruction to be like God in this respect is found in Leviticus. It is most obvious in the Geneva because the Authorised uses 'righteousness' for 'justly':

> Yee shall not doe unjustly in judgement. Thou shalt not favour the person of the poore, nor honour the person of the mightie, but thou shalt judge thy neighbour justly (Geneva, Leviticus 19. 15).

It is also in Deuteronomy, and here it is the same in both translations:

> Yee shall not respect persons in judgement, but ye shall heare the small as well as the great: you shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgement is Gods; ...(Deuteronomy 1.17).

Again in Deuteronomy 10.17 & 18, God's lack of respect for persons is related to his fairness and judicial incorruptibility:

> For the LORD your God is God of gods, and LORD of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons nor taketh reward.
> He doeth execute the judgement of the fatherlesse and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.

In 2 Samuel 14.14 the phrase is used to describe death and the way it levels all hierarchical rank. In 2 Chronicles 19.7 it is again directly related to the idea that God is a judge who does not take bribes. Psalm 138.6 uses the phrase with reference to God's lack of respect for wealth and concern for the poor. Thus the phrase runs through the Bible stressing that the judgement of God is fair, not corrupt and available to poor and rich alike.

Fisher is using a text which admonishes in the name of God, rather than putting forward her own judgement or ideas. In this way she is able to invoke the words of a powerful God in defence of those whom she considers have suffered from injustice, or even corruption. The implication is that the horse thieves would not hang for murder if they had rich friends to buy their freedom with a bribe. With the help of her divine subtext Fisher can say this with a certain amount of drama and fictive colour. Additionally, like Peter, Paul and James, she is using a phrase

which is recognisable to those who know the scriptures of their own culture. By doing this she is establishing her writing in a 'third' testament of divine inspiration, in her own time, and there are co-religionists writing in the same way. In a printed tract, entitled 'False Prophets and False Teachers', written by several Quakers in the prison in York, including Fisher, Hooton and Thomas Aldam, the writers say that this return of the spirit of Jesus has taken place:

> ...but the Lord is risen in the hearts of the people, and hath opened their eyes that were blinde, and causes them to see clearly, and bids them let their light shine forth to others that sit in darkness (Wing, A894B: 5).

From the output of Quakers in York at this time it was evidently a place for honing writing skills in company with other Quakers.

In an undated letter ' To you yt are Judges or Magistrates' Elizabeth Hooton is more explicit than Fisher, but works from within the same biblical phraseology:

> ffriends this is for you to Consider & take notice. Judges and Magistrates will ye Lord sett up such as will not respect mens persons, nor judge for gifts and rewards...(11)

When writing to Oliver Cromwell from York prison, she is, like Fisher, concerned with judicial corruption:

> ...your judges judge for reward. And at this Yorke many wch Committed murder escaped throughe friends, and money, and pore people for Lesser facts were put to death:..(12)

She threatens the arrival of God and his power to produce plagues: 'you know not how soone hee will come uppon you : & thunder his plagues upon you.'(13) This is another phrase also used by Fisher and relating to the time when Christ's judgement will be established on earth. To refer to

'the plagues of God' is to invoke the beginnings of the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God, and the last book of the Bible which prophesies the return of Jesus to earth. As early as Genesis 12.17. when Pharaoh takes Abraham's wife into his household: 'And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues...' In Exodus 9.14 Moses is told to threaten a later Pharaoh with plagues. These are inflicted on the Egyptian people until the descendants of Israel are released from slavery. In the last book of the Bible the plagues are again significant as a future judgement on the faithless. They are described in Revelation, chapter 8 and their heavenly origin is evident in Revelation 15.1:

> And I saw another signe in heaven, great and marveillous, seven Angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God.

Thus the women use admonitory phrases which yet can be read as universal warnings to prepare for God's judgement. They are obviously general and religious, not personal and vindictive. The biblically literate reader is referred to a communally accepted text full of imagery and rich in associations. Every phrase in the letter carries similar allusions to that heavenly Judge who will call the unjust earthly judge to account because every phrase can be related to a similar cluster of biblical quotations. The reader is expected to decipher the message, in all its complexity.

In contrast Fisher wrote, later, to her Barbadian converts without indicating a need for any social change and concentrating on their individual spiritual needs. Barbados was a place where Quakers had made early converts, some in households served by slaves, and Fisher was one of the first missionaries to achieve this. Her letter to her converts has, in common with her letter from York prison, a concern with the welfare of others.(14) It was written from London in the 2nd month of 1657, which means that Fisher must have written before setting off to preach Quakerism in the Ottoman Empire. A manuscript transcript is in Friends' House Library with letters by Peter Head and George Fox to 'Friends in Barbados'; Fisher's letter is by far the longest of the three. In his letter, Fox speaks briefly about the dangers of judging one another and of

speaking 'evill of one another, for yt is yt wch serveth enmity among the brethren'. Head instructs the group to 'be dilligent in ye places and callings wherein ye Lord hath called you' and uses his letter to encourage steadfastness and patience. Fisher concentrates on achieving liberty of soul by personal righteousness and witness to the one true God. Thus she offers her converts an internalised experience rather than writing in the hope of expediting material change. In *Visionary Women,* Phyllis Mack refers to Fisher's letter as an example of a woman writing as a pastor to encourage her flock (Mack 1992: 171).

It opens with an address which indicates the empowering qualities of familial affection:

> Dear children
> with wm my life is bound up, in ye
> end less love of our God, Dear hearts goe on in ye
> power and might of our God...(15)

This letter also uses biblical quotation and allusion but in a different way. Here Fisher uses key words in the first passage of the letter, within a few lines she uses 'love' four times, 'peace' five times and 'life' or 'lives' four times. The following extract is a particularly good example of this.

> dear hearts there is nothing soe desirable as ye love of our God, his beauty exceedeth all things, & his peace passeth my understanding, there is no peace to be found for those yt thirst after him in anything below him, all things passeth away & is vanity, noe peace will endure but ye peace of him who is ye prince of peace, there is but one thing wch is needful above all things, ye endlesse love of our God,...(16)

Tracing the biblical origins of Fisher's vocabulary demonstrates that those of her readers who know the Bible will recognise her language as 'sacred'. All however, will read a letter that is personal to them and has linguistic qualities that they recognise from hearing Fisher and other Quakers

preach. The 'peace which passeth all understanding' is from Paul's Epistle to the Philippians 4.7. This time the words can be related to biblical language but the phrases are fractured and splintered to make the new text. Once again Fisher uses phrases from Old and New Testaments. 'No peace' except in the worship of God is taken from Jeremiah 6.14 & 16. In Ecclesiastes 1.2 she found 'all is vanity'; in 1 Corinthians 7. 31 and 1 John 2. 17 the 'world passeth away', and 'the Prince of peace' is from Isaiah 9.6. This is not a biblical subtext as in the letter to the Judge, rather it is a collection of words, which put together sound familiar and as if they have sacred connotations. While continuing to organise her language to sound biblical, Fisher is also using a technique similar to that used when teaching, preaching and story telling, repeating key words which relate to each other in memory. Here they are 'peace' and 'perfect', which can be found together describing a spiritual state of being in Isaiah 26.3:

> Thou wilt keepe him in perfect peace, *whose* mind is stayed *on thee;* because hee trusteth in thee:

The alliteration is more obvious in the Geneva:

> By an assured purpose wilt thou preserve perfect peace, because they trusted in thee (Geneva, Isaiah 26.3).

In the next passage of Fisher's letter, the word 'peace' is replaced by the complementary word 'perfect', which is also used repetitively.

> ...christ Jesus being once offered to God, perfects all who come unto him, out of him is none perfect, and unto him can noe unperfect thing come, he is ye guift of God, and he perfects all those yt are sanctifyed, yt come to ye father by him, where ther is no unclean thing can come. Therfore deare ones dwell in yt wch cleanseth yt yr garments may be made white with ye blood of ye lambe, yt you may follow him whether soever he leads you,...(17)

This gives the letter a connection to the New Testament Epistles and to Revelation, where a state of being perfect is the gift of God to Christians, and a notable theme. It is particularly significant in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle from James. Its use as a verb, relating to the sacrificial offering of Jesus's death and its effect on the spiritual lives of believers, can be found in Hebrews 10.14: 'For by one offering hee hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified'. This letter is, like Fisher's earlier one, part of the 'third' testament of religious experience. She is writing a new epistle to new converts encouraging them to seek for the antecedents to their own experience in this ancient literature, as well as for spiritual perfection in their own lives.

Her preaching and teaching skills are also manifest in her word play. She plays with the sounds of words, so that the aural effect of 'none perfect', 'unperfect' and 'unclean' ushers in the solution to this state of imperfection. The description of the ritual cleansing is taken straight from the Bible and it has precisely the same meaning as the original. Here Fisher uses an image from Revelation 7.14, where those who 'came out of great tribulation' are seen to have 'washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lambe'. As when writing to the Judge, she draws attention to Revelation and its description of the last days, but this time her readers are included in the reward for the faithful not excluded and punished.

While caring for her convert's spiritual development, Fisher is also particularly concerned in this letter with the idea that once allegiance to the one 'right' God is established the convert can participate in a particular kind of 'freedom'. This transcends any earthly liberty or lack of it:

> ...yt is ye liberty of ye son, & there is ye freedom indeed, & there his workes testify of him, & his testimony is true, he hath not left himselfe without a witness in you, let it witnesseth to all ye world yt yee are his children, my hope is to hear from you, & of ye adorning ye truth, hoping yt yee wil be

> glorious, & shine forth in glory through ye beauty of Christ, which he hath put upon you,...(18)

This liberty is a biblical concept given particular expression in the New Testament where it denotes the immediate reward offered to the new Christian converts. In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul writes:

> Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherwith Christ hath made us free, and bee not intangled againe with the yoke of bondage (Galatians 5.1).

Much use is made throughout the New Testament missionary letters and the Revelation of the freedom afforded the faithful and their glorious future, for example in Paul's letter to the Romans:

> Because the creature it selfe also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8.21).

In her first letter, as I have shown, Fisher uses the Bible to try to change and convert her reader. In this letter her insistence that liberty of soul transcends and is more significant than physical freedom is also biblically based, and designed to encourage her new converts. Whereas in the earlier letter she wrote to alter material events in this letter she uses the Bible to work on the imagination of her readers and to offer them an inner life protected from material events. Her letter can be read by master, mistress, servant and slave, because the 'liberty' is biblical. Thus she maintains her place as pastor and comforter to all. Her own sufferings are not mentioned. Fisher's readers would have known that she had been imprisoned and whipped for her faith like the Apostles, Peter and Paul (Acts 12.1-6 & 2 Corinthians 11 23-25). Her experiences of persecution are relevant to this letter. She could put beside the sufferings of others her experience of being whipped at the Market Cross in Cambridge, England. Her Bostonian imprisonment, with its attendant hunger and confiscation of her Bible, had taken place in the year before this letter was written. When Fisher wrote about a spiritual liberty which transcended material and legal

restrictions she was describing something that she had experienced herself under torment and within confinement.

Additionally Fisher had received no special education and had undergone no ordination ceremony. The rite of passage which enabled her to exhort her correspondents to enjoy 'liberty' of soul had taken place within her creative imagination. Through it she had gained access to that 'inner allegory' that meant so much to her. Her writing suggests that it is a universally available rite of passage, once the commitment to the 'Lord' of Quaker enlightenment is made. Notably, when writing to a group of readers who have not all grown up in a society governed by the doctrine of the Christianity, Fisher stresses the significance of there being one God who protects his faithful:

> ...fear not ye conquest, for all ye enimies is subdued, beleiving in ye light, faith in Jesus christ overcomes ye world where all ye enemies is, yt would not yt christ should reigne; there is ye many Gods, & ye Lords many, but all who are out of ye world, have but one God and one Lord, & all ye enimies who are in ye world, yt would not yt this one Lord should rule over them, they shalbe brought & slain before our Lord, wch is but one, wch is Lord of Lords, & King of Kings, to wch shall every dominion bend...(19)

As she did in her letter to the Judge, Fisher is using Deuteronomy 17.14. and the 'Lord of lords' can also be found in the New Testament. One Timothy 6.15 describes: '...the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords...'. Similarly in Revelation 17.14, the Lambe of God is entitled: 'For he is Lord of lords, and King of kings, and they that are with him are called and chosen and faithfull'. The passage also reflects 1 Corinthians 8.5 & 6:

> For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth (as there bee gods many, and lords many.)

> But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.

This encounter with the one God, turns ordinary, powerless men and women into spiritually significant people, like the early Christians. It has made all Fisher's converts into witnesses and she is anxious to hear that they continue to fulfil this role:

> ...he hath not left himselfe without a witnes in you, let it witnesseth to all ye world yt yea are his children, my hope is to hear from you, and of ye adorning ye truth,...(20)

In her, undated, general letter 'To ye world yt they owne ye scriptures according to their conditions as they were spoken forth', Fisher enlarges on the theme of liberty in service as a result of choosing the right God.(21) This letter has much description of the dire fate awaiting those who remain 'in the world' but it also has the metaphor of the neophyte as a servant choosing a new master. In Fisher's writing it is the servant who chooses the good master, just as the convert chooses the right God:

> ...owne ye scriptures, and read ye condition; and see whose servants yee are; & whom yee follow, & wch way yee are in,...(22)

There are multifarious biblical references to being a 'servant' of God or as Paul puts it, at the beginning of his letter to the Romans (1.1) 'Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called *to bee* an Apostle,...'. Peter, in his 'Second Epistle' and Jude, in his 'Epistle' also both use this appendage. The Old Testament Jews were frequently described as 'the servants of the Lord' and Isaiah designated the one whose sufferings had redemptive qualities as being God's 'righteous servant' (Isaiah 53.11). Jesus often told parables in which God was represented as a master and his followers as servants. He sometimes described himself as a servant and counteracted any arguments about rank among his disciples by saying:

> ....Yee know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great, exercise authoritie upon them.
> But it shall not be so among you: But whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ('servant' in the Geneva)
> And whosoever will be chief among you let him be your servant (Matthew 20.25-27).

This instruction about being a servant is repeated in Matthew 23.11, Mark 9.35, and 10.44, so Fisher is on firm ground; she remains a servant of God and she exhorts other servants to join her in the full knowledge that no higher status could be desired by anyone. In this case, the preacher knows what it is to be a servant in the material world as well as the spiritual.

However, Fisher's general letter, like her others, is portentous; this is no bland dogma with no moral boundaries. The rewards of the spiritual life are only for those who choose the correct way. For the others:

> ...receive your wages from him who set you on worke: death is your wages, & eternall distruction of these yt servd ye devill while they live, ye receive your wages, & goe to your place with ye devill & his angels,...(23)

For those who choose to serve the world rather than God, Paul defines the punishment, 'the wages of sinne is death' (Romans 6.23). Fisher embellishes this with a reference to the spiritual powers of evil as used by Jesus in the parable of 'the sheep and the goats'. Here, the wicked are condemned to 'everlasting fire prepared for the devill and his angels' (Matthew 25.41), and Fisher knows that the 'place' in her text will be recognised by her reference to the 'devill and his angels'. Jesus uses this threat against those who do not show compassion to their fellow human beings when they are in trouble. Fisher uses it to encourage the reading of scripture, which she believes will prevent indulgence in those sins which render damnation likely, and with which exhortation she had opened her letter. For it is reading and using scripture that has set Mary Fisher free to

preach, travel and to write. Her belief in the value of the inner life, that it has given her, has supported her in suffering and hardship. She can and does recommend this particular form of literacy to her converts so that they may join the community of those who speak and write for God.

Thus Fisher adapted her letters to suit her different readers, while continuing to use biblical phraseology. The skills she used were the ones she had learned with and from other Quakers; among these mentors, Elizabeth Hooton is significant. Fisher took advantage of the opportunity to use the 'sacred' language offered by her biblical knowledge to describe her desires, her fears for the unconverted and to share her joys.

Like their Quaker peers, Fisher and Hooton eschewed fiction and visual art and filled their creative imaginations with experiences based on what they read in the Bible. Unlike a great many of their contemporaries, early Quakers believed that the inspirational power to interpret the Bible was not gender specific. Hooton and Fisher are only two of several women who used this conviction to write various kinds of official letters and tracts for publication, either in print or by being read aloud in the meeting. In a very few letters, Fisher is able to emphasise quite different aspects of her religious convictions. Among these convictions is the desire to establish a just and fair society and the need to express divinely inspired love for Quaker converts everywhere. The letters of Mary Fisher and Elizabeth Hooton illustrate these responsibilities. They also demonstrate that the two women use the Bible for more than self-justification.

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Notes

1. Hooton, E. 'Letters' MSS. Portfolio 3, ff. 1-79. (This is the main part of the collection.)
2. Fisher, M. 'A paper given forth by M.ff. concerning putting of ye hat', undated, MSS. Portfolio 33, ff, 34/35, & 'To ye world yt they owne ye scriptures according to their conditions as they were spoken forth', undated, MSS. Portfolio 33, ff. 60. L.S.F.
3. Fisher, M. 'Letter to George Fox', 30 day of the month cauled January, Swarthmore MSS. Vol. IV, f. 193. L.S.F.
4. Fisher, M. 'Letter to Thomas Killam, Thomas Aldam & John Killam wth yor dear wives', undated, MSS. Vol. 320, (Caton MSS Vol. I) f.164. L.S.F.
5. Perrot, J. 'Letter to Edward Burrow', undated, MSS. Vol. 320 (Caton MSS. vol.1) f . 161. L.S.F.
6. Fisher, M. 'Letter to Thomas Killam, Thomas Aldam & John Killam wth yor dear wives', undated, MSS. Vol.320 (Caton MSS. Vol. I) f.164. L.S.F.
7. Anon. Note filed with Fox, G. 'Testimony to Elizabeth Hutton',1690, MSS. Portfolio 16, ff. 75. L.S.F.
8. Hooton, E. 'To Some Ruler in Barbados', 7th of the 10th month,1671, MSS. Portfolio 3, f.32. L.S.F.
9. Hooton, E. 'To Some Ruler in Barbados'.
10. Fisher, M. 'From Mary ffisher presiner at Yarke', undated, MSS. Vol. 324, (A.R.Barclay MSS.) f. 173, L.S.F.
11. Hooton, E. 'Letter to you yt are Judges or Magistrates', undated, MSS. Portfolio 3, f. 10. L.S.F.
12. Hooton, E. 'Letter to Oliver Cromwell', 1653, MSS. Portfolio 3, f.3. L.S.F.
13. Ibid.
14. Fisher, M. 'A letter from M.ff. to friends in Barbados: and a noat from G.ff. to keep in patience', 9th day of ye 2nd month 1657, with a letter from Peter Head, MSS. Portfolio 33, ff. 112/113, L.S.F.
15. Fisher, M. 'Letter to friends in Barbados', Portfolio 33, f.112.
16. Ibid.
17. Fisher, M. 'Letter to friends in Barbados', Portfolio 33, f. 112, L.S.F.
18. Fisher, M. 'Letter to friends in Barbados', MSS. Portfolio 33, f. 113.
19. Fisher, M. 'Letter to friends in Barbados', MSS. Portfolio 33, f.113, L.S.F.
20. Fisher, M. 'Letter to friends in Barbados'. MSS. Portfolio 33, f.113.

21. Fisher, M. 'To ye world yt they owne ye scriptures according to their conditions as they were spoken forth.', undated, MSS. Portfolio 33, ff. 60/61. L.S.F.
22. Fisher, M. 'To ye world'. MSS. Portfolio 33, f .60.
23. Fisher, M. 'To ye world' MSS. Portfolio 33, f .60.

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