

‘A PROTEST AGAINST PROTESTANTISM’:
HICKSITE FRIENDS AND THE BIBLE IN THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY*

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ABSTRACT

Differing views of the nature and authority of Scripture were at the heart of the Hicksite Separation of 1827–1828 among American Friends. After the separation, the Bible became a source of conflict among Hicksites. Some Hicksite leaders feared anything that tended to diminish the authority of the Bible; other Hicksites argued for a critical view. By 1870, the liberals had the upper hand, as virtually all Hicksite Quakers came to share views of the Bible, including a sympathy for critical scholarship, that mirrored the modernist movement among Protestants.

KEYWORDS

Society of Friends, Elias Hicks, Hicksites, Bible

In 1878 John J. White, a minister of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, visited Baltimore Yearly Meeting. White was near the end of his life, a life that had left him marked in the Hicksite Quaker world as a hidebound conservative. Before the Civil War, he had often been at odds with other Hicksite Friends over questions such as women’s rights, participation in the abolitionist movement, and nonresistance. More than once he had crossed spiritual swords with his contemporary, Lucretia Mott, doubtless the best-known minister in the yearly meeting. By the standards of almost any other denomination, however, White’s words to Baltimore Friends would have marked him as a daring religious liberal, if not radical. ‘Quakerism is a protest against Protestantism’, he said, ‘a refusal to assent to the dogma that the Scriptures are God’s last

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revelation to man, and the only guide to faith and practice'.¹

White's statement is striking in several respects. First, it is as cogent a summary of Hicksite understandings of the place of the Bible in Quakerism as any I have encountered. Embedded in that one sentence are at least three radical implications: that on the fundamental question of the place and authority of Scripture Friends part company with other Protestants; that revelation from God to humanity has continued beyond the writing of the last book included in the New Testament; and that we have sources of religious authority other than the Bible. Certainly these views placed Hicksites well outside the mainstream of American religious culture in the nineteenth century, and at odds with the larger body of American Friends in the Orthodox tradition, especially those whom we label Gurneyite. In this essay, I will show how Hicksite Friends arrived at these conclusions, and what their implications were from the time of the Great Separation in the 1820s to my somewhat arbitrary boundary line that divides history from contemporary theological debate, the twentieth century.

I will do this in four steps. I will begin with a brief overview of what modern scholars tell us about the place and the authority of the Bible in early Quakerism, emphasizing that this is an area in which consensus is far from having been achieved. I will then look at this issue in the Hicksite Separation, and how even those who supported Elias Hicks in the contest with the Orthodox were not united on it. I will then examine the question in the period of the second round of separations among Hicksites in the 1840s and 1850s, as more radical Congregational Friends left the larger Hicksite body, in part in contests over the proper understanding of biblical authority. Finally, I will argue that beginning around 1870, however, Hicksites who advocated views of the Bible in line with those of the Modernist movement emerging in American Protestantism became dominant, and how by 1900 their views were almost totally unchallenged in what had now become Friends General Conference.

The attitudes of George Fox and the others we collectively lump together as 'early Friends' toward the Bible were complex. The evidence we have is contradictory. Fox, Edward Burrough, George Whitehead, William Penn, James Naylor, Margaret Fell, and other early Quaker leaders were not systematic theologians. They often contradicted each other, and sometimes themselves. Moreover, since this question has been at the center of the divisive feuds of Friends for the past two centuries, it is not surprising to find hints that the

1. 'Baltimore Yearly Meeting', *Friends' Intelligencer* (9, 11th Month, 1878), p. 593.

needs of later debates have colored consideration of the past. That is the genius, and the vexation, of coming from a noncreedal tradition.

On one hand, Fox and the other leaders whom we usually lump together as 'early Friends' were careful students of the Scriptures, regularly employing them to justify everything that they did and asserted. Quaker peculiarities, ranging from refusal to take oaths to pacifism, were based at least in part on adherence to the letter of particular biblical texts, as were more bizarre behaviors, such as James Naylor's Christ-like entry into Bristol in 1656.² William Penn said of Fox that if somehow all of the Bibles in the world were to be destroyed, almost the whole of it could be reconstructed from Fox's memory.³ Much of the third thesis of Robert Barclay's *Apology* is devoted to praise of the Scriptures, 'accounting them the most excellent Writings in the World, to which no other Writings are to be prefer'd'.⁴ And, of course, we have Fox's letter to the governor of Barbados in 1671, in which he used language that would have been acceptable to almost any Protestant: 'Wee doe believe that they were given forth by the holy spirit of God through the holy men of God, who speoke (as ye scriptures of truth saith) as they were moved by the holy Ghost in 2 of Peter 1.21; and that they are to be read and believed and fullfilled'.⁵

On the other hand, one of the most frequent charges that opponents of the early Friends leveled at them involved the Quaker understanding of the Bible. Some of the controversy focused on the Quaker refusal to refer to the Bible as 'the Word of God', as Friends believed that that title belonged to Christ.⁶ A more fruitful source of controversy was the Quaker emphasis on Direct Revelation. As Hugh Barbour succinctly puts it, 'The Bible was of necessity placed in a secondary role lest it supplant the initiative of God's Spirit and the absolute need of obeying the Light within'. Friends believed that they had had the same experience as the authors of the Bible, and that experience opened to them richer understandings of the meanings of various disputed texts. Samuel Fisher, whom Barbour calls the best biblical scholar among the early Friends (he was an Oxford graduate), anticipated modern biblical scholarship with his

2. Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: The Early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1656* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 51–59.

3. John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1986), p. 40.

4. Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (London: Luke Hinde, 1736), p. 68.

5. Norman Penney (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox, II* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), pp. 199–200.

6. Penney (ed.), *Journal of George Fox, II*, p. 200.

attacks on inerrancy and attention to the formation of the canon. Some Friends, in their enthusiasm for the authority of the Spirit, actually burned their Bibles, but they were exceptional.⁷ For Fox, the experience of the Spirit was so powerful that he did not give much effort to developing a theology of the relationship between it and Scripture.⁸ The question then became, of course, the authority of individual leadings of the Spirit versus the previous commands and injunctions of that Spirit as found in Scripture. Barclay, of course, tried to resolve the problem with his injunction that the Spirit was consistent, and would never lead a believer to actions inconsistent with the Bible. But that still left open opportunities for endless wrangles over the proper understanding of disputed passages.⁹

So the first generation of Friends left an uncertain legacy with a solution that met the needs of their day. But its application to future generations would be uncertain.

We now move forward over a century, to the end of the eighteenth century and the era of Quaker history that historians have labeled 'quietist'. It was marked by an emphasis on the authority of the Spirit that feared to undertake any action, even to pray or read the Bible, unless it was under a sense of leading.¹⁰ In the larger world, intellectual crosscurrents contended for hegemony. One, Deism, saw God as distant and removed, a sort of clockmaker who, having wound up the world, allowed it to run according to natural law without further intervention. Deists naturally questioned many of the accounts found in the Bible as fantastic and unreasonable.¹¹ On the other hand, both the British Isles and America found themselves in the grip of a powerful evangelical movement that in the former manifested itself in the rise of Methodism and the Evangelical party in the Church of England, in the latter in the wave of revivalism that we collectively label the Second Great Awakening. Such evangelicals founded their faith on the authority of Scripture, usually a literal understanding of it, and feared anything that seemed to undermine its place.¹²

7. Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 157-59.

8. H. Larry Ingle, *First among Friends: George Fox & the Creation of Quakerism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 111.

9. Barclay, *Apology*, p. 86.

10. Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (2 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1921), I, pp. 57-103.

11. Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 105-49.

12. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale

This context is important, because historians of Quakerism are still at odds over just how it influenced Friends. In the 1820s, Friends divided between the followers of the Long Island minister Elias Hicks, the Hicksites, who feared the impact of the evangelical movement, and Orthodox Friends, whose views, if not directly influenced by it, were in most respects compatible with it. For Hicksites and Orthodox, currents in the larger world explained what they saw happening among Friends. One heard identical arguments, essentially: We are true to the understandings and views of the early Friends, while our opposers have been led astray by dangerous ideas drawn from outside Our Society. In the case of understandings of Scripture, that meant that Hicksites charged the Orthodox with adopting the creeds of the Episcopalians and Presbyterians with whom they were all too often tied, while the Orthodox, when they were not accusing Hicksites of being under the direct dominion of the Evil One, blasted them for 'deistical opinions'. One can see elements of truth in both. 'The World' influenced Friends, no matter how much they tried to hedge themselves against it. While Hicksites furiously denied being students of Thomas Paine, the most famous heterodox of the day, they probably were picking up hints of such teachings indirectly. The same can be said of the Orthodox in their ties with non-Quaker evangelicals. These tensions first came to a head in the British Isles between 1795 and 1805, in the case of the so-called Irish New Lights, Friends who questioned certain parts of the Old Testament, such as the wars, as inconsistent with the commands of Christ. Hannah Barnard, a New York Friend, became caught up in the controversy while visiting England; all of these incipient liberals found themselves disowned.¹³

This brings us to the heart of the controversies of the 1820s, the views of Elias Hicks. Understandings of the authority of Scripture were probably second only to disputes over the nature of Christ in promoting separation. Unfortunately, as Hicks's most careful student, Larry Ingle, notes, Hicks, while a man of great ability and virtue, was not a systematic theologian: 'His language was undisciplined, and he seldom defined his terms very precisely'. Thus it is possible to quote statements from Hicks that would today sound satisfactory to the most evangelical Friend, and to produce others that convinced Orthodox Friends at the time that they were dealing with a dangerous infidel.¹⁴

University Press, 1972), pp. 366-68; Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 63-146.

13. H. Larry Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), pp. 9-10.

14. Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict*, p. 41.

Hicks himself was horrified by any such suggestion. 'As respects the Scriptures of truth, I have highly esteemed them from my youth up, have always given them the preference to any other book, and have read them abundantly more than any other book, and I would recommend all to the serious and diligent perusal of them', he wrote in 1829. 'And I apprehend I have received as much comfort and instruction from them as any other man. Indeed, they have instructed me home to the sure unchangeable foundation, the light within, or spirit of truth'.¹⁵ As anyone who has read any of Hicks's published sermons (and we have more sermons preserved for him than any other Friend before the twentieth century) will testify, his preaching abounded with Scriptural references and allusions. 'A large portion of them have been revealed to me in the light of the Gospel; they are mine; some other parts of them have not been so opened to me; they remain closed', he told Joseph Foulke, a sympathetic minister of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. 'But there is no part I dare to deny, for it requires as strong evidence to deny a proposition as to affirm it'.¹⁶

Still, Hicks qualified his esteem for the Bible in certain critical ways. The Bible could only be understood as the Inner Light or the Holy Spirit revealed it; otherwise human understandings would bend the text to suit human will. Knowledge of the Scriptures was not necessary for salvation; if it were, God would have given them to all nations: 'to suppose a written rule to be necessary, or much useful, is to impeach the Divine character, and charge the infinite Jehovah with partiality and injustice, as the greater part of his rational creation have never been furnished with those means'.¹⁷ Hicks scorned literalism: 'nothing more sullies and degrades the scriptures of truth, than the fears that many of their advocates manifest in regard to the investigation of them, and insisting upon their being taken and believed *literally* just as they are, whether consonant with reason, yea or nay'.¹⁸ Hicks did not believe that all of the Bible was inspired, or even especially useful. In an unpublished essay,

15. Jeremiah J. Foster, *An Authentic Report of the Testimony in a Cause at Issue in the Court of Chancery of the State of New Jersey, Between Thomas L. Shotwell, Complainant, and Joseph Hendrickson and Stacy Decow, Defendants*, II (2 vols.; Philadelphia: J. Harding, 1831), p. 432.

16. Joseph Foulke Letter, *Friends' Intelligencer* (15, 11th Month, 1856), p. 549.

17. Elias Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks. Including Also a Few Short Essays, Written on Several Occasions, Mostly Illustrative of His Doctrinal Views* (New York: Isaac T. Hopper, 1834), p. 46.

18. Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks*, p. 51. See also *A Letter from Elias Hicks to William Poole of Wilmington, Del* (n.p., 1823), 2-3; and *Discourses, Delivered in the Several Meetings of the Society of Friends, in Philadelphia, Germantown, Abington, Byberry, Newtown, Falls, and Trenton, by Elias Hicks, a Minister in said Society* (Philadelphia: Joseph and Edward Parker, 1825), p. 119.

Hicks even showed a touch of humor on this subject: 'We might read some account of the wars of the Jews from youth to old age and never be profited a whit by these as also of the account of Solomon's seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines and many other parts as all we can get by it even if we believe it is to raise our admiration and wonder what use he could possibly put them to as wives'.¹⁹

For Hicks, the problem was that most Christians elevated the Bible above its source, the Spirit that inspired it, and to him that was unchristian. 'Is it possible that men can be guilty of greater idolatry, than to esteem and hold the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice, by which they place them in the very seat of God worship them as God?' he asked in 1820.²⁰ God never intended that the revelations that past generations had recorded should be a binding rule for future ones—'for had that been the case, he would have made them as plain and clear as he did the law to Israel, so that every one should understand them alike'.²¹ Instead, disputes over their interpretation 'have been made a principal cause of the division, the controversy, the war, and the persecution and cruelty, that have convulsed and drenched Christendom in blood ever since it has been called Christendom', Hicks wrote to Wilmington Friend William Poole.²² He opined privately that 'it [the Bible] appears, from a comparative view, to have been the cause of four-fold more harm than good to Christendom, since the Apostles' days'.²³ Hicks even expressed doubts that 'if Friends, generally of the foremost ranks, should honestly and plainly speak their sentiments on the Scriptures in general, so great would be the diversity of prospects, that little help or edification, in a society capacity, could be derived from them'.²⁴

Hicks certainly found allies in the 1820s, Friends who argued strenuously that evangelicals, inside and outside the society, were exalting the written word to the denigration of the indwelling light and the Holy Spirit. 'I have a *Bible*, and... I read it, but I dare not worship it, nor consider it the *more sure word of prophecy*, nor the *one thing essential to salvation*', one wrote in 1828.²⁵ 'Our dignified predecessors refused to submit even to the scriptures themselves,

19. Elias Hicks, 'Observations on the Scriptures, Etc.' n.d., box 30, Elias Hicks Papers, Friends Historical Library (Unpublished; Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA).

20. Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks*, p. 64.

21. Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks*, p. 2.

22. Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks*, p. 2.

23. Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks*, p. 44.

24. Hicks, *Letters of Elias Hicks*, p. 48.

25. 'Letter to an Orthodox Friend', *Advocate of Truth*, 1 (8th Month, 1828), p. 218.

unless opened to the understanding by the spirit of holiness', another claimed.²⁶ The Bible, wrote Wilmington Friend Benjamin Ferris, a Hicksite leader, was 'not the 'word of God' nor the words of God, but a record of things known, or believed, or predicted, or done—written by faithful men under divine influence or inspiration'.²⁷ Thomas Wetherald, an ally of Hicks from Baltimore Yearly Meeting, preached that the canon of the Bible was the work of humans, the councils that had included some books and excluded others. Thus it was potentially changeable and could not be the Word of God, which was everlasting and unchanging. To exalt the written word thus was 'the ground-work of darkness, and darkness was added to darkness, till mankind was brought into that dismal state of apostacy which, for many centuries, overspread Europe. The true church fled into the wilderness'. To Orthodox Friends and non-Quaker evangelicals, the line between such views and outright disregard of the authority of Scripture was indistinguishable.²⁸

Still, it is important to keep in mind that Hicksites were a diverse group. Not all shared Hicks's views on all subjects. A significant proportion probably had opinions of the Bible that were closer to those of the Orthodox, but sided with the Hicksites because of family ties, or distaste for the arrogance of some of the Orthodox leaders, or simply because the Hicksites were the majority of their meetings. They repeatedly denied Orthodox accusations of a low regard for the Bible. Typical was Samuel Mott, a New York City Friend who held up as proof of Orthodox detraction and false witness that 'we set lightly by the Scriptures, and even disbelieve a considerable portion of them'.²⁹ New York Yearly Meeting in 1829 told its subordinate meetings that 'we know of none amongst us who deny the Scriptures', but 'should any such be found, we recommend them to the particular care of the Society, that by suitable labour, they may be convinced of their error'.³⁰ The implication was clear—to 'deny' the Scriptures could bring disownment. Significantly, the Hicksite Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, revising its Discipline after the Separation, retained

26. C. Letter, *Advocate of Truth* (1, 5th Month, 1828), p. 125.

27. Benjamin Ferris, *A Letter from a Friend in America, to Luke Howard, of Tottenham, Near London, in which the Character of Our Late Friend Job Scott Is Vindicated and Defended, and His Doctrines Shown to Be Consistent with Scripture and Sound Reason. In Reply to a Letter Addressed by Luke Howard to the Author* (n.p., 1826), pp. 18–19.

28. Thomas Wetherald, *Sermons by Thomas Wetherald, and Elias Hicks, Delivered during the Yearly Meeting of Friends, in the City of New York, June 1826* (Philadelphia: Marcus T.C. Gould, 1826), pp. 249–51.

29. Samuel Mott to Hicks (30, 8th Month, 1829), box 26, Hicks Papers.

30. 'Epistle', *Advocate of Truth*, 2 (6th Month, 1829), pp. 203–04.

the provision for such disownments that had first been adopted in 1806.³¹

Probably nothing showed the limits of Hicksite tolerance of skepticism as clearly as a controversy that took place in Wilmington, Delaware, soon after the separation. Wilmington was a Hicksite stronghold, and one of the most outspoken critics of Orthodox 'oppression' had been Benjamin Webb, a prosperous resident of the city. In 1829, Webb began publishing the *Delaware Free Press*, with the motto: 'Let everyone be convinced in his own mind, and act according to his convictions'. Webb's convictions led him to reprint selections from the writings of two of the best-known free thinkers of the age, Robert Dale Owen and Fanny Wright. He found support among some of the young Friends, who, as one of their opponents put it, denied 'as usual with young skeptics, *certain parts of the Scripture*'. To make things worse, they publicly avowed such sentiments in a debate with a Presbyterian minister. William Gibbons, Webb's foremost opponent in Wilmington, summed up their views: 'The Scriptures are men's *dreams and incoherent notions*—no better than the pagan oracles'. Gibbons responded with a ferocious denunciation, *An Exposition of Modern Skepticism*, in which he scored Owen, Wright, and their supporters as deadly enemies of all religion and morality.³²

How could those who lately had been accused of infidelity themselves become such ardent pursuers of the heterodox? Benjamin Ferris, another Wilmington Friend who had drawn Orthodox charges of unsoundness because of his writings in the 1820s, provided a hint: 'Some of us have contributed largely to excite the younger and inexperienced part of society to free inquiry—we have treated subjects deemed sacred with great freedom'.³³ Now things were out of hand. While Ferris called for 'great patience' and 'labour in the spirit of meekness', others were not as charitable.³⁴ Gibbons wrote angrily that Wilmington Monthly Meeting 'must be a dead stinking carcass indeed, not worthy to remain on earth', if it did not act against Webb.³⁵ Outside pressures may have played a part. Hicksites now contended with

31. *Rules of Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of Friends, Held in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: John Richards, 1831), p. 23.

32. H. Larry Ingle (ed.), '“A Ball That Has Rolled Beyond Our Reach”: The Consequences of Hicksite Reform, 1830, as Seen in an Exchange of Letters', *Delaware History*, 21 (Fall–Winter 1984), pp. 127–37; William Gibbons, *An Exposition of Modern Skepticism, in a Letter Addressed to the Editors of the Free Enquirer* (Wilmington: R. Porter & Son, 1830).

33. Verna Marie Cavey, 'Fighting among Friends: The Quaker Separation of 1827 as a Study in Conflict Resolution' (PhD dissertation; Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1992), pp. 142–43.

34. Cavey, 'Fighting among Friends'.

35. Ingle (ed.), 'A Ball That Has Rolled Beyond Our Reach', pp. 130–32.

Orthodox Friends in court fights over possession of property and endowments, and Orthodox Friends were quick to point to Webb and the *Free Press* as evidence of Hicksite infidelity.³⁶ One Hicksite saw Webb's sympathizers as 'a combination,... I fear for the purpose of injuring the *Christian name* and bringing reproach on the Christian profession'.³⁷ So Ferris, Gibbons, and other Wilmington elders moved systematically against Webb and his party. Using some of the same language that the Philadelphia Orthodox had used against Hicksites just a few years earlier, they dismissed Webb's supporters as 'quite young men, with their lapelle coats on, and such as are copying after the vain and fashionable customs of the world'. In other words, they lacked weight.³⁸ Despite claims by Webb of support of a majority of the monthly meeting, and victimization by 'secret meetings' of a 'party', Wilmington Friends disowned Webb and his supporters.³⁹

Still, Webb's case had repercussions. Lucretia Mott wrote that in Philadelphia, 'many feel weakened by the course pursued... by Friends at Wilmington'.⁴⁰ And other Friends began to voice some of the same ideas that Webb had supported. Prominent among them was James Bellangee, a minister in Ohio Yearly Meeting. Bellangee preached that the Bible was not the source of religion; 'the Spirit of God, which is Christ within', was. This, of course, was doctrine that any Hicksite would embrace. But Bellangee went on to argue some of the same ideas that had brought trouble on the Irish New Lights and Hannah Barnard. Bellangee saw things in the Old Testament incompatible with the teachings of Christ, so he concluded that they could not have really been the will of God. In 1836, he preached that the fault lay with those who took the Bible literally, invoking Old Testament wars to justify mass slaughter and the story of Jacob and Esau to justify slavery. Like Webb, Bellangee found himself the target of rebukes from elders and other ministers. Typical was George Hatton, a minister of Indiana Yearly Meeting who tried to convince Bellangee of his errors. When Bellangee argued that 'God was not the author of war, neither did [he] believe that he ever commanded man to slay his fellow man in any age of the world', Hatton responded: 'Thee need not say anything

36. Foster, *Authentic Report*, II, pp. 92, 202-05.

37. Edward Garrigues to Benjamin Ferris (3, 1st Month, 1831), box 2, Ferris Family Papers (Friends Historical Library).

38. Foster, *Authentic Report*, II, p. 202.

39. 'Notes on B.W. case', n.d., box 13, Ferris Family Papers; Ingle (ed.), 'A Ball That Has Rolled Beyond our Reach', pp. 127-37.

40. Lucretia Mott to Phebe Post Willis (16, 3rd Month, 1831), box 1, Lucretia Mott Papers (Friends Historical Library).

to me about it, for I am fixed, and it will not do for thee to deny the Scriptures'.⁴¹

By 1840, then, if one may venture to call it that, a kind of orthodoxy had emerged among more conservative Hicksites in regard to the Bible. Hicksites saw themselves as fundamentally different from other Protestants in that they looked to the Inner Light, or the Holy Spirit, as the fundamental source of all religion and faith. They believed that the same Spirit that gave forth the Bible continued to speak and inspire them. They would not agree to call the Bible 'the Word of God', believing that title alone was Christ's. Some of the most conservative would not even read the Bible unless they felt a clear leading to do so.⁴² Yet high regard was also evident. Accounts of sermons in meeting, as well as the writings of Friends, are replete with Scriptural language and allusions. Yearly meetings exhorted members to frequent Bible reading. Typical was Baltimore Yearly Meeting in 1835, which commended 'these sacred writings' as 'above all others, most valuable—and best calculated to impress upon the mind the true doctrines of Christianity'. No other book could be compared with the Bible.⁴³ And clearly they feared anything that seemed to question the inspiration or authority of Scripture as an assault on good order and Discipline, an entering wedge of infidelity. Typical of this outlook was the minister Samuel Comfort's description of Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1845: 'The testimony of truth went forth against the spirit of skepticism, and against poor finite man presuming to question the propriety of the dealings of Infinite Wisdom with mankind in former ages, as set forth in the Scriptures'.⁴⁴

There was much to unsettle such Hicksites after 1840. For over a decade, every Hicksite yearly meeting found itself torn by conflicts over the participa-

41. James Bellangee, *Journal and Essays on Religious Subjects* (Bordentown, N.J.: Aaron Bellangee, 1854), pp. 71, 86-88, 106-07.

42. 'Misrepresentations of the Views of Friends, with Regard to the Scriptures', *Friends' Intelligencer* (1, 6th Month, 1844), p. 73. For fears about Bible reading, see *Autobiography of John J. Cornell, Containing an Account of His Religious Experience and Travels in the Ministry* (Baltimore: Lord Baltimore Press, 1906), pp. 26-27.

43. *Baltimore Yearly Meeting Minutes, 1835*, p. 9. For the authority of the Bible, see *Testimony and Views of Friends Concerning the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: John Richards, 1848), pp. 15-20. For Scriptural language and allusion, see Charles Black to Charles and Catharine Foulke (2, 5th Month, 1855), box 1, Foulke Family Papers (Friends Historical Library); Catharine P. Foulke to Aaron Bellangee (3, 6th Month, 1855), Foulke Family Papers; and Ann A. Townsend, compiler, *Memoir of Elizabeth Newport* (Philadelphia: Friends' Book Association, 1878), p. 59.

44. 'Extracts from the Autobiography of Samuel Comfort', *Friends' Intelligencer* (20, 8th Month, 1870), p. 388. For a good example of such fears, see the description of a sermon by Benjamin Mather in the 'Mary White Longshore Diary' (11, 4th Month, 1847) (Friends Historical Library).

tion of Friends in radical reform movements, especially abolition, women's rights, and spiritualism. These disputes eventually led to the separation of many of the radical reformers into meetings that called themselves Congregational or Progressive Friends. The Bible was not at the center of these disputes; they focused more on questions of Discipline, particularly the maintenance of select meetings of ministers and elders and the degree to which Friends were to avoid ties with non-Quakers.⁴⁵ But the conservative Hicksites who disowned radical reformers in New York, Indiana, and Ohio, saw pernicious sentiments regarding Scripture among the Congregational Friends and their unseparated sympathizers, most notably Lucretia Mott. Sunderland P. Gardner, one of the most influential ministers in Genesee Yearly Meeting, summarized this outlook in 1846. 'I believe that skeptical ranterism abounds in different degrees of maturity in our Society. Not a few even of our ministers have entered into what is called the philosophy of the present day, and their preaching is made up to a considerable extent of lectures against the Scriptures'.⁴⁶

Certainly the radical abolitionist Hicksites had ties to Garrisonian abolitionists, the most radical wing of the American antislavery movement, who by the 1840s were actively questioning certain parts of the Bible, particularly those that seemed to justify war and slavery.⁴⁷ As early as 1838, Lucretia Mott had written that 'it is quite time that we read & examined the Bible more rationally in order that truth may shine in its native brightness'. She and other radical abolitionists like Thomas McClintock commended the writings of liberals such as William Ellery Channing, Joseph Priestley, and Theodore Parker.⁴⁸ Particularly outspoken was John Jackson, a minister of Darby Monthly Meeting near Philadelphia. Jackson praised the Bible 'because *divine inspiration* now teaches the same thing to us. We know of no book that contains so large an

45. Thomas D. Hamm, *God's Government Begun: The Society for Universal Inquiry and Reform, 1842-1846* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 201-02, 216-17; Albert John Wahl, 'The Congregational or Progressive Friends in the Pre-Civil-War Reform Movement' (PhD dissertation, Philadelphia: Temple University, 1951).

46. Sunderland P. Gardner, *Memoirs of the Life and Religious Labors of Sunderland P. Gardner. (Late of Farmington, Ontario County, New York)* (Philadelphia: Friends Book Association, 1895), pp. 248-49.

47. John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 65-66.

48. Mott to James M. McKim (15, 3rd Month, 1838), box 1, Mott Papers; Mott to George W. Julian (14, 11th Month, 1848), box 1, Mott Papers; Mott to Joseph and Ruth Dugdale (28, 3rd Month, 1849), box 1, Mott Papers; Mott to Joseph and Mary Post (12, 2nd Month, 1858), Post Family Papers (Friends Historical Library).

amount of valuable and instructive reading'. But Jackson cautioned that the Scriptures also contained 'contradictions and inaccuracies which destroy a claim to their divine authenticity. In some places, fact and fiction have been so intimately blended, that it is impossible to decide where one ends and the other begins'. Some parts, he argued, 'which have a miraculous or mythological coloring must be received with great caution, and in some instances wholly rejected'.⁴⁹ Conservatives responded with attempts to silence such sentiments. More liberal Friends like Mott and her close friend, minister George Truman of Philadelphia, worried that history was repeating itself. 'Orthodox times over again', was the judgment of a Friend on Long Island.⁵⁰

After 1860, however, there was a radical shift. Such conservatism lost its hold on Hicksite Friends, and what had been dangerous radicalism in the 1830s and 1840s became the dominant view. We still do not understand exactly how this happened. My own guess is that it reflects personalities. The first generation of Hicksite leaders who survived the Separation and were most outspoken and fearful of anything that seemed to question the authority of Scripture, such as John Comly, Edward Hicks, Joseph Foulke and William Gibbons in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting; George F. White in New York; and George Hatton and John T. Plummer in Indiana, were all dead by 1865. The last leader of their generation, Benjamin Ferris, died in 1867. In contrast, most of the liberals, with the notable exception of John Jackson, outlived their opponents. Lucretia Mott, for example, emerged as the most respected and influential minister among Hicksites only in the 1860s. Such leaders found themselves joined by ministers who had been voices for moderation, such as Samuel M. Janney and Benjamin Hallowell of Baltimore Yearly Meeting; and those whose views apparently softened, like Sunderland P. Gardner. And of course they were joined by a new generation of Hicksite leaders, such as John J. Cornell in Genesee Yearly Meeting; Louisa J. Roberts in Philadelphia; and Jonathan W. Plummer in the newly formed Illinois Yearly Meeting.⁵¹

By 1890, a clear consensus on the Bible had emerged among Hicksites,

49. John Jackson, *A Dissertation, Historical and Critical, on the Christian Ministry* (Philadelphia: T. Ellwood Chapman, 1855), pp. 93, 100.

50. George Truman to Samuel M. Janney (2, 5th Month, 1848), box 2, Samuel M. Janney Papers (Friends Historical Library); *Memoirs of the Life and Religious Labors of Edward Hicks, Late of Newtown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Written by Himself* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1851), pp. 144-45; Mary R. Post to Isaac and Amy Post (23, 11th Month, 1841), box 2, Isaac and Amy Post Papers (Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.).

51. Thomas D. Hamm, 'The Hicksite Quaker World, 1875-1900', *Quaker History*, 89 (Fall 2000), pp. 17-41.

albeit with dissent from a few elderly Friends. The Inner Light, the Light of Christ within, was at the center of their faith, and they feared anything that threatened its place. These Friends still read and valued the Bible, considering it unique among all books. Yet they also were frank about what they saw as the limitations and deficiencies of the Scriptures. Thus they did not fear the development of critical Bible study and the spread of Darwin's theory of evolution, which caused such controversy in other denominations, including Orthodox Friends.

High regard for the Bible continues in statements from yearly meetings and in the writings of leading Hicksites. Baltimore Yearly Meeting in 1885 urged Friends to greater Bible reading, as there would be found 'the experience of spiritually minded persons in the past ages of the world, and especially the life and teachings of the blessed Jesus'.⁵² Samuel M. Janney, the Virginia minister, wrote that the society had 'always maintained its belief in the authenticity and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, referring to them for proof of its principles, and acknowledging them to be the only fit outward test of Christian doctrines'.⁵³ John J. Cornell, the Genesee Yearly Meeting minister who became increasingly influential after 1870, wrote that Friends revered the Bible, but feared putting them above the Spirit. 'The Scriptures possess a deep intrinsic value as a corroborative evidence of what is immediately revealed to the soul of man', he concluded.⁵⁴

One mark of the high regard of Hicksites for careful biblical study was the energy they put into the establishment of First Day Schools after 1860. The first under Hicksite auspices began in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1859, aimed at non-Friends.⁵⁵ The numbers slowly increased in the 1860s and 1870s in other yearly meetings. By 1891, one Friend estimated attendance at about eight thousand, of whom half were not Friends, perhaps the greatest outreach to non-Friends Hicksites had ever undertaken.⁵⁶ The Bible was not the only text, of course, but proponents argued that the schools had increased Scriptural knowledge greatly.⁵⁷ Significantly, at least one Friend felt compelled to caution

52. Baltimore Yearly Meeting Epistle in *Ohio Yearly Meeting Minutes, 1885*, p. 29.

53. Samuel M. Janney, *Summary of Christian Doctrines as Held by the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Friends' Publication Association, 1871), p. 5.

54. John J. Cornell, *Essays on the Views of Friends* (Philadelphia: Friends' Book Association, 1884), pp. 66-71.

55. John M. Truman, Jr., 'The Truth of History', *Journal* (6, 12th Month, 1882), p. 374.

56. 'A National Friends' Society for Christian Culture', *Friends' Intelligencer* (21, 2nd Month, 1891), pp. 121-22.

57. 'An Essay at Abington Union', *Friends' Intelligencer* (14, 11th Month, 1885), pp. 626-27.

that 'while the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament will be a prominent text book we should not make an idol of them'.⁵⁸ In their first days, they faced accusations of 'creaturely activity'; one elderly Friend in 1873 blasted them as 'an engine of priestcraft'.⁵⁹ But opposition had almost vanished by the 1890s.⁶⁰

Still, the ways in which Hicksites qualified the authority of the Bible after 1870 is striking. 'I do not regard the Scriptures as the law or Word of God, for I believe this would not have been left in a form so subject to alteration, perversion, or even annihilation *at man's will*, when it could be written indelibly on the heart, and thus be always with us', one Friend wrote in 1874.⁶¹ Thomas E. Hogue, a prominent minister in Illinois Yearly Meeting, agreed in 1893. If Jesus 'had intended to teach the world his religion from a book, he himself, would have written that book, and would have laid it down as the first fundamental principle of his religion'.⁶² Catharine P. Foulke, a Bucks County Friend who twenty years earlier had feared anything that tended to question Scriptural authority, now was willing to state flatly that she would follow only Christ as her teacher of religion: 'I do not accept it at second hand, either from books or men'.⁶³ For all of these Friends, the Spirit or Light within was paramount. Baltimore Yearly Meeting in 1874 tried to strike a balance, stating:

We give to the sacred records the place assigned them by the writers of the New Testament, neither exalting them as the only rule of faith and practice, nor calling in question their authenticity and divine authority.⁶⁴

As usual, Lucretia Mott was among the most radical on her views on the Bible:

I cannot accept its inspiration as a whole, and cannot see why it should read as a book of worship in the schools or in the churches. Ministers should dare to take their texts from other books, modern or ancient, as well as from the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures. Let us recognize revelation and truth wherever we find it.⁶⁵

58. Thomas F. Seal, 'Local Information', *Friends' Intelligencer* (17, 2nd Month, 1877), p. 822.

59. 'A Few Words on First Day Schools', *Friends' Intelligencer* (19, 11th Month, 1870), p. 597; 'First-Day Schools', *Journal* (17, 9th Month, 1873), p. 258; 'The Object of First-Day Schools', *Friends' Intelligencer* (26, 6th Month, 1878), p. 182.

60. 'A Question for Young Friends', *Friends' Intelligencer* (17, 1st Month, 1891), p. 44.

61. 'Scraps from Unpublished Letters', *Friends' Intelligencer* (18, 4th Month, 1874), pp. 119-20.

62. T.E. Hogue, *Paper: 'The Inner Light': Presented to and Read before the Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends Held at Clear Creek, Ill., Ninth Month, 1892* (n.p., n.d.), p. 10.

63. 'Proceedings of Caln Quarterly Meeting', *Journal* (2, 5th Month, 1877), p. 114.

64. *Baltimore Yearly Meeting Minutes, 1874*, p. 26.

65. Dana Greene (ed.), *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York: Edward Mellen, 1980), pp. 359-60.

Hicksites were frank in acknowledging what they saw as the limitations of the Bible. 'Yes, Friends believe the Scriptures were written by Divine inspiration, but being written by man, they bear many marks of human infirmity', wrote a Friend in Richmond, Indiana.⁶⁶ Jesse Holmes, a Nebraska Friend, agreed. The writers of the Bible were fallible—'their holiness consisted in freedom from intentional wrong, and not from the liability to error, incident to humanity'.⁶⁷ Hicksites found various grounds for such questions. A First Day School conference in 1897 concluded that it was justified to question passages in the Bible when 'contrary to the laws of nature'.⁶⁸ Thomas Elwood Longshore, one of the most radical liberals in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, argued that some portions were 'obscured in their interpretation by the traditions of Paganism, of Greek mythology, and by the later creed-makers of the Christian Era'.⁶⁹ Another Friend urged discarding 'the questionable exploits of Goliath, Sampson, or Saul'.⁷⁰ Sometimes even the Inner Light led to questioning, as in the case of John J. Cornell, who in 1870 had a 'revelation':

If thee ever finds the original manuscripts of the Bible thee will not find the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke in them.⁷¹

Such an outlook made Hicksites generally open to the development of modern critical study of the Bible. 'Modern criticism of the text of the New Testament has shown that some portions at least of the narrative cannot be accepted as literally true', one Friend wrote in 1880, and Lucretia Mott argued in 1879 that some parts of the Bible had now been 'set aside by competent authorities as spurious'.⁷² Hicksites speculated that as scholarship undermined biblical literalism, other Protestants would be forced closer to Quaker views.⁷³ Similarly, most Hicksites expressed few qualms about Darwinian evolution. 'The Bible is not a scientific work, was not intended to teach science', one said in 1877. 'It was not written by scientific men, and it may be assumed without detracting in the least from its value or authority, that where it touches upon scientific subjects its agreement or disagreement with modern discoveries is a

66. Unknown, *Memoir of Sarah A.E. Hutton* (Richmond, IN., n.p., 1888), pp. 51-52.

67. Jesse Holmes, 'The Scriptures of Truth', *Journal* (3, 9th Month, 1873), p. 243.

68. 'Conferences, Associations, Etc.', *Friends' Intelligencer* (3, 4th Month, 1897), p. 241.

69. *Friends' Intelligencer*.

70. 'Report of the First-day School Teachers' Meeting Held at Burlington, 9th Month 6, 1870', *Friends' Intelligencer* (17, 9th Month, 1879), p. 278.

71. *Autobiography of John J. Cornell*, p. 409.

72. E.W.P., 'Historical Christianity', *Journal* (4, 2nd Month, 1880), p. 9; 'Race Street Monthly Meeting of Women Friends', *Journal* (5, 3rd Month, 1879), p. 53.

73. 'The Higher Criticism', *Friends' Intelligencer* (13, 2nd Month, 1897), pp. 107-108.

matter of no moment whatever'.⁷⁴ A few Hicksites worried about such questioning; one Illinois Friend in 1889 saw so 'many and various views concerning the Scriptures' that he concluded 'we do not belong to the same organization'.⁷⁵ But that was a minority point of view. By the 1880s, many Friends did not even use the adjective 'holy' as a prefix to the Bible.⁷⁶

As Hicksites entered the twentieth century, they had thus, for the most part, embraced a theology of the Bible that their contemporaries, with good reason, identified as 'liberal'. Significant is the language that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting used when it revised its Discipline in 1894. It urged Friends 'to the diligent and reverent readings of those excellent writings', yet concluded with a reminder that 'the inward manifestation and operation of the Holy Spirit on their own minds' was 'the fundamental principle of our Society'.⁷⁷ Over the course of the twentieth century, Friends affiliated with Friends General Conference would continue that understanding, but with increasing emphasis on the primacy of individual and direct revelation, as opposed to the authority of past revelations, such the Bible.

What lessons may we draw from this history? I'll suggest three. The first is difficulty of discerning complete unity or consensus in the Quaker past. Friends in the 1820s divided in part because reasonable, spiritual people could look at both Scripture and the writings of the early Friends and draw different conclusions from them. Hicksites did not achieve complete consistency or agreement, and with the exception of the bitter disputes of the years before the Civil War, lived together in relative harmony.

Second, granting some diversity, it is clear that the Bible was important for Hicksites. Official statements, presumably reflecting the unity of yearly meetings, emphasized the benefits of careful reading of the Scriptures.

Finally, Hicksites were careful in qualifying the role of the Bible in their faith. Through all of their battles, they agreed that the written manifestation of the Spirit should not be placed above the Spirit itself. That is a witness that needs to be maintained, whether we speak of the Bible or creeds or declarations of faith. It is now an orthodoxy for concerned Friends of all persuasions to bemoan the separations of the nineteenth century. Yet implicit in such

74. 'The Theory of Creation', *Journal* (21, 2nd Month, 1877), p. 36.

75. Lydia J. Mosher, 'The 'Higher Criticism' and the Bible', *Friends' Intelligencer* (27, 3rd Month, 1897), pp. 218-19; L.P. Yeatman, 'Where Do We Stand?', *Friends' Intelligencer* (19, 1st Month, 1896), p. 40; Charles A. Lukens to Abel Mills (6, 6th Month, 1889), box 1, Abel Mills Papers (Illinois Historical Survey, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL.).

76. 'Baltimore Yearly Meeting', *Journal* (23, 11th Month, 1881), p. 358.

77. *Rules of Discipline and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends Held in Philadelphia* (Fifteenth and Race Streets.) (Philadelphia, n.p., 1894), p. 53.

statements is usually the assumption that unity would have been maintained on *my* basis. Instead, the divisions may have preserved truths that would have been lost otherwise. Hicksites kept alive this particular truth for Friends, and should have their gratitude.

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