

ATTENTION MEATEATERS: Canadian scientists, seeking a clean control group for a pesticide residue study, went far into the Arctic and chose a group of Inuit Indians. Result? The Inuit had the highest concentrations outside of industrial accident areas. The villain: seal meat and fat, from the top of the food chain. Enjoy your hamburgers....

A Friendly Letter

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Fourth Month, 1989

Dear Friend,

The article in this issue, on a new development in Quaker Bible study, relates well to an announcement I want to make here. It concerns the Friends Bible Conference, which will be held on Eleventh Month 10-12, 1989, at Philadelphia's Arch Street Meetinghouse.

The conference is aimed at unprogrammed Friends, and it will feature three plenary presentations, lots of workshops and a chance for a special kind of fellowship. Our plenaries will all be led by women: Elizabeth Watson of Massachusetts, Martha Grundy of Ohio, and Patricia McKernon of Minnesota. Workshops will deal with a wide range of topics, from liberation theology, to the problem of sexism in the Canon, to starting Bible study groups in local meetings and teaching children about the Bible, with time to form ad hoc groups on the spot.

The conference is being planned by an eight-person committee for which I am acting as coordinator. The committee first came together at the Friends General Conference Gathering last summer. The Conference has been endorsed, among others, by the Religious Education Committees of Friends General Conference, Philadelphia and Canadian Yearly Meetings, and several Monthly Meetings, from Langley Hill in Virginia to China Ridge in Alaska.

One source of the impulse for this Conference was reading accounts of a series of summer Bible schools held at Haverford College at the turn of this century. There Orthodox Friends came to grips, under the leadership of Rufus Jones and other first-rate scholars, with the new developments of that day in Bible study, and as a result left the blinders of literalism definitively behind them. This not only prepared them to withstand the assaults of fundamentalism; it also helped plant the seeds of rapprochement with Hicksites, whose views were evolving in much the same direction. Those were exciting, historic gatherings; we hope this conference can be too.

In this case, however, those of us on the planning committee do not see ourselves as missionaries bringing the true light to benighted masses. Instead, we began with the observation that there is a lot of study and wrestling with the Bible already going on among unprogrammed Friends today (see AFL #59), but this bubbling of activity has not achieved much visibility or self-consciousness among us. Thus the Conference is intended as a way of catching up with it, and offering a forum in which Friends who are already involved in Bible study, as well as those who are simply curious, can gather to learn from and get to know each other. We hope that thereby the religious life of the Society will be enriched.

By the bye, I am aware that many programmed Friends tend to think of themselves as being more serious about the Bible than liberal Friends; and while this is true in a sense, it is not as true in other ways as some might think. And any programmed Friends who wish to attend the Conference are, of course, welcome.

The final details for the Conference program are still being worked out; but we are striving to keep fees modest, and hope that Friends from places other than the East Coast will also be drawn to join us. Anyone who wants more information or registration forms can write to the Friends Bible Conference, * A Friendly Letter, P.O. Box 1361, Falls Church VA 22041, and we will see that they get to you as soon as they are available.

I hope to meet many of you there.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

Among the earliest Friends were to be found iconoclastic pioneers in many fields. One area in which they were most radical, however, is among the least appreciated today, namely, their approach to the Bible. It's a shame we don't pay more attention to this; whatever one thinks of it, the Bible still plays a crucial role in our civilization, as a fount of archetypes, legitimizer of cultural patterns and institutions, and as a source for moral vision. For anyone reasonably familiar with some of the key issues of biblical interpretation, a reading of, say, Barclay's Apology or any of several other first-generation Quaker writers should be a real eye-opener. They combined reverence for revelation with a blunt challenge to literalism that was way ahead of their time—so far ahead that many Christians, including some "Bible believing" Friends, haven't yet caught up with them!

BACK TO THE BIBLICAL FUTURE

Yet there are scholars and writers today who have not only absorbed the insights articulated so eloquently by early Friends but who are also doing new interpretive work on the Bible that is equally radical and pioneering, if not more so. They are the growing band of feminist exegetes, from many denominations, who are taking the Bible apart piece by piece. Yet they are not thereby destroying it; if anything, their "deconstruction" is what will make possible the salvaging, indeed the salvation of the Bible as a religious resource for those who are conscious of gender oppression and the imperative to struggle against it. And such a paradoxical undertaking, by the way, is eminently biblical.

Among this band of hermeneutical radicals, the informed reader will recognize such names as Mollenkott, Fiorenza, Tribble and Reuther. Here we will focus on a Quaker in their ranks who has now made a brilliant debut among us: Gracia Fay Ellwood of Pasadena, California. Pendle Hill has just published a new pamphlet, Batter My Heart, in which

she skillfully summarizes most of the key insights of this approach, and extends it by relating it to her own deep concern for battered women.

If this sounds like another trendy liberal Quaker jumping on the latest bandwagon, I hope to show that it is much more than that. But don't take my word for it: read Batter My Heart for yourself (it is available from our Friendly Bookshelf, at this address, for \$3.75 postpaid).

A MARRIAGE NOT MADE IN HEAVEN

Ellwood's focus is the frequent biblical metaphor of the Sacred Marriage describing the relationship between God and "His" people, first Israel and later the Christian church. Marshaling the research of specialists in the ugly business of spouse abuse, which in our culture is overwhelmingly the abuse of wives and children by men, she shows convincingly how the "extended image of the Old Testament God Yahweh as husband of Israel fits disquietingly well into the syndrome of the battering husband": very jealous and possessive, alternately and unpredictably tender and threatening, dominating by verbal intimidation and violence, and extremely dangerous when provoked.

Often enough, this "husband" speaks of punishing the purportedly adulterous "wife" by instigating her gang rape and ghastly dismemberment: "I will give you into the hands of your lovers," shouts Yahweh through Ezekiel, "...they shall strip you of your clothes...They shall bring a host against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords." (Ezek. 16:37-40)

Most of the New Testament references are much less overtly violent, though the Epistles are peppered with commands to women to keep quiet and obey their husbands, which Paul takes to the point of absurdity by insisting (in 1 Corinthians 14:35) that a woman with a question about religion may only seek answers from her husband at home; evidently widows and maidens

with questions are out of luck. This overall milder climate, however, is spoiled by the climactic visions of Revelation. There, Ellwood notes, a woman again is the object of divine violence, in the form of the archetypal Harlot, representing Rome, in Rev. 17-19. She is not just destroyed, but killed "in a gruesome scene of gang-rape, torture and murder; she is cannibalistically eaten and her remains burned, all at the instigation of a God who 'has put it into their hearts to fulfill his will.'" Meanwhile, "her[male] companions in fornication are not punished, merely watching from a distance."

UP AGAINST THE DARK SIDE

Given the continuing role of the Bible in Western culture as a font of archetypal patterns for relationships, and a source of social legitimacy and moral norms, these patterns within it of horrifying violence against female figures are of more than just literary or theological significance. And as Ellwood shows, the habitual language and behavior of Yahweh in relation to female figures, particularly where his "wife" Israel is concerned, is too closely parallel to the typical behavior of battering husbands to be ignored or minimized.

All this, of course, is in addition to the consistently androcentric (male-centered) narrative and mindset of the biblical books; the standard identification of God as He; and its legitimation of an inferior social position for women in Hebrew and Christian culture. Indeed, if a feminist were looking for an excuse to throw out the Bible and have nothing further to do with it or any religion based to any degree on it, from this perspective there are reasons in abundance on almost every page of the book. Many religious feminists have done just that, and who can blame them? For that matter, Ellwood warns us that when someone who is accustomed to a conventional view of the Bible confronts this radical critique, "adherents of that religion will suffer anomie, or breakdown of total

worldview into meaninglessness." Hence common responses to it include denial, avoidance or personal attacks on the critics.

Nor are such problems evident only to those looking for sexism. Slavery and oppression of race and class also mark its pages; God several times commands the Israelites to commit what can only be called genocide, and punishes their first king, Saul, when he fails to fully carry out one such warrant. There are many aspects of what can be called the Dark Side of the Bible; and to confront this dark side, and its long and bloody impact on human history, is indeed an unnerving prospect.

LIGHT BEYOND THE DARKNESS

Yet despite the pain and risks of this confrontation, Ellwood argues that it is worthwhile, even imperative, for a number of reasons. For one thing, the Bible, horror and all, is our common heritage, and "it is highly unwise," she feels, "to cut ourselves off from our roots in this manner..." for if, "like Archimedes, if we would move the world, we must have a place to stand." (I would add that giving up on the Bible means leaving its still crucial social weight in the hands of fundamentalists, as a weapon to be used against us unchallenged.)

Perhaps more important for Ellwood is the fact that the Bible, for all its patriarchy, is not monochromatically oppressive. If it is the sourcebook of sexism, it also reveals the lineage of liberation, which runs directly back to the book of Exodus. (How important this image is can be seen from the fact that Jesus, when making the first public declaration of his ministry in Nazareth, quoted the prophet Isaiah's summation of it: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me...he has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives...to set free the oppressed" (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1)

Indeed, in many respects there is no more severe critic of the Bible than the Bible itself; and to discover in it this ongoing dialogue and struggle is to begin to understand why it can be of value in

spite of its failings.

Among these corrective features, for Ellwood none is more important than the egalitarian male-female relationship modelled in the Song of Songs. While the arrangement of this text is somewhat confused, "the erotic relationship it describes is different at root, unmarked by patriarchal gynophobia or even androcentrism." Initiative is spontaneous and shifting; the woman, does not lose her identity or give up her own labor and income; and the couple openly and playfully flouts accepted notions of man-woman decorum. There is nothing else like it in the Good Book.

CAN THIS MARRIAGE BE SAVED?

Ellwood is on to something here. Although it is but a tiny, half dozen-page oasis in the otherwise almost trackless sexual desert of the Canon, the Song of Songs has been a pivotal source of imagery throughout Christian history. Catholic doctrine even sees in it the model of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Many Jewish biblical scholars have regarded it as among the holiest books in the Hebrew scriptures.

Yet the Song of Songs is also problematic from an orthodox perspective: For one thing, it never mentions God; for another, the equality of the relationship it depicts fits the male dominant theological constructs built upon it not at all. This no doubt accounts for the chronic desire of establishment male exegetes through the centuries to spiritualize, allegorize, and otherwise obfuscate its dangerous literal import. For just this reason it reportedly had difficulty making it past the all-male rabbinical assemblies and into the Hebrew canon in the first place.

The practical implications Ellwood draws from these reflections point both to words and deeds. Most concretely, she calls Friends to be alert and responsive to signs of actual battering among us, because such violence knows no boundaries of class or denomination; Friends are not free of it.

At the level of worship and study, she notes that "historically, Friends have wisely focussed on gender-neutral images for the Divine, such as Light, Seed and Spirit." This is good, because in her view, God-as-male and God-as-Lord rhetoric need to be discarded from religious discourse, along with descriptions of ourselves as "servants" of such a deity. A balance of male and female terms for God could be potentially acceptable, she feels, as might gender-free descriptions of relationships such as teacher-student.

ADMIRING CRITICISMS

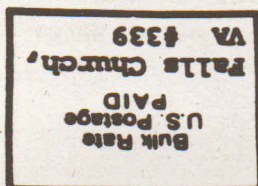
Ellwood admits that her interpretations "invite criticism." And despite my overall high enthusiasm for her work, there are some cavils to note briefly. First of all, while sharing her estimate of the Song of Solomon as a model for non-oppressive relationships, I feel there is another one that she neglects. In some later book there appears a feminine side of the biblical divinity, in the form of personified Wisdom. Ellwood gives Wisdom, as described in Proverbs and Sirach, short shrift as a mirror image of the oppressive Yahweh. That's not how Wisdom comes across to me at all.

Second, while I am willing to let go of the hierarchical male term "Lord" as a name for God, I draw back from doing away, as she seems to demand, with any language suggesting a transcendent gulf between humans and God. I believe we have a two-sided coin here: the Light Within is one, true enough, but there is also the One before whom fear and awe are, as Proverbs says, the beginning of Wisdom. It is, I believe, proper to speak of that; but Ellwood does not indicate how we can do so to her satisfaction.

These concerns do not diminish my admiration for Ellwood's overall perspective and her compact and clear statement of it. Instead, I would hope this dialogue might contribute to Friends' recovery of an appreciation of the Bible as a religious resource, and the continuing richness of our classical approach to it.

INSIDE: A QUAKER FEMINIST
TAKES ON THE BIBLE

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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In Fourth Month, 1956, the United States Senate passed a contempt of Congress citation against a person named Mary Knowles and sent it to the Justice Department for prosecution. Mary Knowles was soon indicted, and by early 1957, brought to trial in federal court. Her offense was that she had refused to answer questions from the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee about her political and religious beliefs, and allegations that she had been a Communist in Boston in the 1940s.

Mary Knowles was not a Friend; but her case was of great concern to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting because at the time she was employed by its Plymouth Monthly Meeting as Librarian of its Jeanes Memorial Library. While the Library had been begun with funds from a bequest to the Meeting, it was open to the public in the surrounding townships, and served as the equivalent of a public library. Two local townships and several public schools contributed to the library's budget, but its board was still an agency of Plymouth Meeting.

By the time the Senate acted, Mary Knowles was no stranger to controversy. Indeed, she had come to Plymouth Meeting after being fired from a library job in Massachusetts for taking the Fifth Amendment in an appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The Jeanes Library Board knew this, and accepted her assurance that whatever her past, she was not now a Communist or a "subversive." And by all reports she was an excellent librarian.

Even so, the public controversy evoked sharp and extended conflict within Plymouth Meeting. Some Friends repeatedly demanded that Knowles be dismissed; the Library Committee, citing her affirmations of loyalty and superior job performance, steadfastly refused. Most Friends agreed.

In the end, her conviction was overturned on appeal, and she continued working at the Library until her retirement. The Jeanes Memorial Library is still there, though in a new building and now publicly-owned.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

A sign of the times: A local Meeting newsletter recently published this notice: "The Despair Workshop set for this weekend has been canceled, because the leaders got so depressed about it they have given up on the idea."

Also, there has been some controversy about efforts to edit various passages in the Bible to minimize sexist and other oppressive terms in reference to God. One good example of this is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only

begotten son...." In a recent discussion of this passage, one Friend suggested replacing "he" and "his" with "God." This seemed workable, if a bit awkward, but an alternative to "Son" was harder to come up with.

Then an experienced woman Friend solved the problem with a formulation that makes up in wisdom whatever it might lack in exegetical exactitude: "How about," she proposed, "'For God so loved the world that God didn't send a committee.'"