

## The Languages of Slavery: Response - Quakers and Spiritual Bondage

I have been struck in my work on the early Quaker movement about the ideas of bondage and 'Christian slavery' discussed in Quaker writings, meeting minutes, and other letters and epistles. The Quakers, I think, provide a very interesting snapshot into the question of how far the constraint of religious liberty consciously evoked Atlantic world slavery. This is because, from their inception in the 1650s, the Quakers were a heavily persecuted religious community who faced decades of suffering for their religious testimonies, including captivity, physical punishments and beatings, financial distrains, and general exclusion from the wider social, cultural and economic customs.

The relationship between spiritual and physical bondage is particularly interesting in the Quaker movement of the late-17<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the writings of the early Quaker leaders who were incarcerated for their religious beliefs spoke of both their own bondage, as well as the necessity to free men from the bondage of wickedness and sin that they viewed as the cause of their present suffering. In a letter to William Dewsbury in August 1655, Margaret Fell offered him and his fellow-sufferers words of edification. She contrasted their imprisonment with spiritual freedom:

'My dear Brethren stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, Nott onely to beeleeve on him but alsoe to suffer for his sake, And doe not bend nor bow to the yoake of bondage of man's will: But a fast unto the Lord God keepe, which yee are now called unto; which is to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undoe the heavy burden and to let the oppressed goe free and to breake every yoake.'<sup>1</sup>

How far biblical ideals of slavery and bondage permeate the writings of religious dissenters is an interesting point to raise. Quaker writers like Margaret Fell often used Old Testament biblical figures like Daniel to come to terms with their current experiences of captivity and suffering.

Early Quaker writers also viewed the indwelling Christ – a central feature of their theology – as liberating them from sin and other worldly concerns. For example, when the Quaker leader and founder, George Fox, was recalling his experiences of religious awakening in his journal in 1647, he evoked the idea of the world being in 'bondage to the flesh' and sought a theology that would release the individual believer from the constraints and temptations of the material world.<sup>2</sup> It was on the basis of such arguments that Fox developed his anti-materialist theology, that emphasised plainness and simplicity. Throughout his journal moreover, Fox spoke of his opponents and detractors being 'chained' by God's divine intervention – preventing them from speaking in opposition to his testimony.<sup>3</sup> It was through divine intervention that Fox was able to deliver his message 'and people began to see the apostacy and slavery they had been in, under their hireling teachers ... and they came to now their teacher the Lord Jesus who had bought them and purchased them and made their peace betwixt them and God'.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Quaker language of bondage and captivity are not always compared to the conditions of slavery, there is nevertheless something interesting about the relationship between ideas of spiritual bondage and Quaker writings in opposition to slavery. The evangelical zeal of the first Quakers encouraged a culture of itinerancy and

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Fell to William Dewsbury, August 15 1655, in Elsa F. Glines ed., *Undaunted Zeal: The Letters of Margaret Fell* (Indiana, 2003), p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> *George Fox: The Journal*, ed. Nigel Smith (Harmondsworth, 1998), pp. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69.

missionary work across the transatlantic trade routes dependent on enslaved African labour, especially in Barbados, where Quakers developed a strong missionary presence. In these new encounters, Quaker leaders were forced to question the universality of the inward light that they preached, and whether belief in spiritual equality was open to enslaved Africans and indigenous populations. Although he never explicitly debated the issue of abolishing slavery, George Fox, encouraged masters and mistresses to bring their slaves to family meetings, which he argued would free them from the bondage of sin. He was also quick to condemn the reluctance of the Barbadian clergy to preach to enslaved populations and made clear that Christ died 'for the Tawnes and for the *Blacks*, as well as for you that are called *Whites*'. He used this as the basis for an inclusive religion that embraced the religious education of all men regardless of their background, ethnicity, or race.<sup>5</sup>

How far the material and spiritual ideas of bondage intersect in early Quaker writings is a particularly important question to ask. It is clear that there were early Quaker writers willing to formulate arguments about spiritual freedom to oppose the institution of slavery. Both of the primary source extracts I have provided talk of freedom of conscience and its relationship to outward liberty. William Edmundson's text is particularly illuminating because he sees slavery as an oppression of the mind and views freedom from bondage as releasing slaves from a more pressing spiritual captivity.<sup>6</sup> Such statements have led me to question how far wider discussions about religious toleration and freedom of conscience inform wider debates about the slave trade. I am also interested in probing how far we can see the prominent Quaker involvement in the anti-slavery campaigns of the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a response to the early Quaker experience of suffering and persecution. It also leads me to ask about the wider culture informing Fox's theology. How, for example, do the Quakers compare to other religious dissenters and writers talking of spiritual captivity and freedom of conscience at this time? How central is Quaker theology on spiritual freedom for opening up broader debates around the status of enslaved peoples?

#### **Some secondary texts to consider:**

- J. William Frost, 'George Fox's Ambiguous Anti-Slavery Legacy', in *New Light on George Fox, 1624-1691*, ed. Michael Mullett, 69-88 (Ebor Press, 1994). An open source reprint is available here:  
<http://web.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/fox.php#note1>
- Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) [ebook copy in library]

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<sup>5</sup> George Fox, *Gospel Family-Order* (London, 1676), pp. 13-4.

<sup>6</sup> William Edmundson, *A Journal of the Life, Travels, Sufferings, and Labour of Love in the Work of the Ministry, Of... William Edmundson* (London, 1715).