

JOSEPH SALMON FROM SEEKER TO RANTER – AND ALMOST TO QUAKER¹

During the turbulent years of the English Civil War, a period when politics and religion were uniquely fused, thousands of young, idealistic Puritans dropped out of all forms of Church life. They were usually dubbed 'Seekers', though they were more likely to describe themselves with names like 'mourners after Sion' or 'Sion's travellers.' These were not the 'happy seekers' that we often find among Friends and elsewhere today, who are often content to dabble among religious ideas and practices, in some cases determined never to 'find' in any definitive sense. The English Seekers of the 1640s were acutely melancholy and even desperate souls, seeking a true Church where they could settle and worship in peace with God, themselves and their neighbours. They were convinced that none of the churches was legitimate. A long, dark night of apostasy had settled over the entire edifice of Christendom, and the many different reforms of Protestantism had not achieved a true restoration of early Christian faith and practice.

There seem to have been two principle types of Seekers. These were described succinctly by John Saltmarsh in his last book, *Sparkles of Glory* (1647).² The classic Seekers were those who had left all churches and waited in spiritual wilderness for the true Church to be revealed. This would be a restoration of the primitive Church of New Testament times. Only new apostles, with an extraordinary gift of the Spirit, working signs and wonders like the apostles in the Book of Acts, could renew the true Church. They would institute the proper practice of the sacraments, ministry and Church government. Until then, it was best to mourn and wait for God's deliverance. These Seekers either remained isolated individuals or met in informal groups to read Scripture, pray and hold religious conversation together. Saltmarsh concluded, 'This is the highest of their Attainment'.³ In effect, these Seekers were Protestants who had taken the Reformation's quest for 'primitive Christianity revived' to its ultimate conclusions. They had been driven by intense idealism and millenarian hope to radical conclusions. Rather than settle for a half-way reformation, they would wait for divine intervention in some form reminiscent of the Church's original founding.

'But,' Saltmarsh added, 'some speak of a further discovery, and more spiritual than this of the Seekers.' According to that view, the New Testament Church was only a transitional form. Apostasy aside, it was intended to pass away in any case. All dispensations are but for a season, and they are never restored. Therefore, to await the restoration of New Testament Church order is Antichristian. There is nothing in Scripture to warrant it. The truth is that Christ, the eternal seed is already in all true Christians. All true reformation, growth and improvement of the Church can only take place by Christ himself working through his people. The world will see Christ come in the saints (a common expression of radical hope), but it will be 'in a day of conviction and spiritual judgment upon themselves'. Far from being a day of signs, wonders and glory, the day of the Lord will be perceived by most people as a day of consternation.

Saltmarsh had been among this second type, whom he did not even call Seekers. During the previous year, he had served as a chaplain in Cromwell's New Model Army. There he found and helped nurture intense worship groups among soldiers who practiced ardent religious devotion and held the most utopian political expectation for the outcome of the Civil War. These groups met to 'wait upon the Lord' and experienced a deep, cathartic work of the Spirit, which Saltmarsh called the 'Fiery Tryall'.⁴ Seekers of this second type were definitely starting to find something. They believed themselves to be crossing the threshold into a new realm, a new age of the Spirit. Previous ages, or dispensations, (Law and Gospel) had been preparatory for this day. God would not take Christians backward in history to an earlier dispensation, but would bring them into a new order of Church. This Church would not reinstitute sacraments of baptism and communion. These sacramental realities were now known in an inward, unmediated way by these new, 'spiritual Christians.' Spiritualist worship groups in the Army and elsewhere saw themselves as the vanguard of a new order that would soon sweep over all England and the world.

The second type of Seeker had gone beyond the pale of Puritanism, even Protestantism in general. While many of their ideas can be traced to the Spiritualist Reformers, ranging from Caspar Schwenckfeld and Sebastian Franck to Jakob Boehme, the extraordinary struggles and expectations of the Civil War had led them into realm of imminent expectation of God's kingdom on earth, of Christ's return in the purified bodies of the faithful, of a new dimension of human existence. Many of the religious ideas and practices that we associate with early Quakerism were already in

place: a strong emphasis upon the light of Christ within: an experience of the light's work as an apocalyptic day of judgment; a disuse of outward sacraments; a cessation of regular, professional ministry and probably an extensive use of silence; claims to moral perfection by the power of the Spirit; and the beginnings of a Christian pacifist position. These Spiritualist Seekers were in some respects proto-liberal in their belief in progressive revelation (or dispensations), their disenchantment with the entire edifice of Christendom and their affinities with the republican politics of the Levellers. Figures like Saltmarsh also expressed confidence in the emerging world-view and discoveries of the new sciences.⁵

But between the heady days of 1647, when it seemed as if anything were possible, and the beginnings of a visible Quaker movement, these Seekers would have to pass through a dark night of political defeat and spiritual despair. Some of the most advanced Spiritualist Seekers were among those most deeply crushed when the end of the Civil War did not produce a new, utopian society. The new powers in Parliament and the Army did not enact even an official religious freedom or an abolition of tithes. The defeat of the Leveller initiative for a republican English Commonwealth in 1649 led to a collapse of radical hope, both political and religious.⁶ The explosion of Ranter rage and nihilism in 1649–50 is directly related to those deep disappointments. A number of Spiritualist Seekers who were most exalted in their expectation in 1647 were most prone to Ranter outrage by 1650.

Joseph Salmon offers us an excellent example of that trajectory from Seekerism into Ranterism – and nearly into Quakerism. His background is largely unknown to us.⁷ There are no university records of him at Oxford or Cambridge, though his use of English language is almost as richly playful and perverse as that of Abiezer Coppe, his Oxford-educated Ranter cohort. There does seem to be a mutual influence of ideas, attitudes and vocabulary between Coppe and Salmon, but we do not know if they were associated before their ranting period.

Salmon served in Ireton's regiment as both a soldier and a chaplain around 1647–48. He was evidently a leading figure among the Spiritualist worship groups, for his first published tract, *Antichrist in Man* (1648) breathes the same ideas and excitement we find in Saltmarsh's *Sparkles of Glory* and tracts published by Army members around the same time. Like the other Army Spiritualists, Salmon evinced a strong sense that he was part of a new revelation breaking forth. His preface to *Antichrist in Man* exhibits a typical tension

between humility and superiority. On the one hand, he claims to know God beyond the formal religion that his readers practice; on the other, he asks them to read what follows with charity, for 'I am a child in the things of God.' He assures readers that if they come to this new revelation, they will find 'your present light will be darkness and your form to be flesh'. Salmon makes it clear that his new revelation is nothing less than Christ's second coming within.

The main text begins by looking back over the conflicted history of the English Reformation. There has been a continual sense of Antichrist's taint in the English Church. Some have identified Antichrist with Papacy, others with Episcopacy and more recently others with Presbytery. Thus, all have found Antichrist on the outside and not the inside, in history and not in mystery. These are deluded perceptions.⁸

Salmon uses the apocalyptic terms Antichrist and Whore of Babylon interchangeably. These masculine and feminine images of the demonic both represent the 'mystery of iniquity,' the power that continues to defeat personal transformation and social justice. In both cases, Salmon defines this power as 'fleshy wisdom,' 'carnal policy.' The problem of the flesh is not an innate evil of material existence but an outward (that is, both sensory and subjectively rational) way of knowing. The apocalypse of Christ's second coming is known only within, though the saints who receive the inward Christ will also enact the new age without. Like a 'mystical Herod,' the demonic power aspires to kill every new appearance of God in us.⁹ This work goes on by a variety of subtle operations in the human heart. Religion often serves Antichrist's purposes best of all. The whore 'wears a religious dress' to seduce believers from true knowledge of Christ, captivating the mind in formal observances.¹⁰

Salmon stresses that everything reported of Christ in Scripture, in history, must be known within, in mystery. He summarizes pungently: the history of Christ is 'Christ for us' while the mystery is 'Christ in us'.¹¹ Scripture and sacraments take us only so far. Then we are crucified with Christ to them and suddenly the elements become bare water, bare bread and wine. The soul must be patient in this dead condition and wait for the Comforter to come within. Therefore, to 'wait upon the Lord' is the order of this day of uncertainty. But in that very process of waiting, the 'still and small voice' will call the soul forth, beyond self and creature, allowing one to see the self as never before. In this movement, one is carried away in spirit beyond all former strength, strategy, and emotion – into a wilderness, a 'lost condition.' There, God will 'ravish the soul' with beams of light,

making one's vanity and deformity all the more clear. This is a time of great 'amazement of spirit'.¹² Here, the great battle of the Lamb begins against the mystery of iniquity, to defeat and cast it out. This is the day of judgment. Salmon epitomizes this Spiritualist sense of apocalypse: it is nothing to read about the last day prophesied historically in Scripture; it must be known mystically within.¹³

This cosmic battle of divine and demonic forces breaks out both within and without. There are wars and rumours of war. Salmon follows here the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation 12. As Christ is born within, the serpent is cast down from heaven (i.e., the demonic power loses its place within), causing it to rage and chase the true Church, heavenly Jerusalem, into the wilderness. God will sustain her there until the day of salvation arrives. For Salmon, the wilderness Church is comprised of groups, like those in the Army, who gather to 'wait upon the Lord.' They are experiencing both intense spiritual warfare within and conservative Puritan attacks from without.¹⁴

This is where the true revolution is unfolding. The Civil War has been a grand diversion from the real struggle for Christ's kingdom on earth. Therefore, Salmon exhorts, do not so much desire the downfall of the Pope, Presbyter, or any other state; desire the ruin of this mystical Babylon.¹⁵ He concludes that he has only sought to declare 'the manifestative minde of God unto me in all my mystical application of Scripture, I do not endeavor to ouverturn history [but] have only written about the history I have known verified in me, in the mystery.'¹⁶ Thus, Salmon by no means discards Scripture; it is the historical code that identifies the forces working within the faithful. But in a culture saturated with biblical knowledge and debate, the work of liberation shifts toward knowing the revelation of Scripture enacted on an interior landscape.

Salmon shares much in common with Saltmarsh and some other writers (including the future Digger Gerrard Winstanley¹⁷) at that tremulous moment. But there is a clarity in his apocalyptic vision and internalizing application of the Book of Revelation we do not find in other writers, until George Fox in the 1650s.¹⁸ Unlike Fox and the early Quaker apocalyptic message, we do not yet hear the same sense of empowerment and socially transforming witness. But Salmon has gone far to relate the inward, spiritual struggle of the Seekers with the outward, political events of the 1640s.

Salmon advanced his interpretation of inward and outward events further in his next bulletin from the Army, *A Rout, A Rout*, subtitled, *some part of the ARMIES QUARTERS BEATEN UP, By the DAY of the*

LORD Stealing upon Them. This piece appeared in February 1649, just after the beheading of Charles I, the abolition of the House of Lords and the Army's purge of the Presbyterian majority from the House of Commons. The Generals were taking control of the country, but the Levellers were denouncing them in *England's New Chains*.

Salmon addresses a first preface to the Generals, now at the height of their power:

All that I have to say [to you] is this; That you go on as fast as you can with the work you have begun, for the time draws nigh that is allotted you...in this day of the Lords Wrath you strike thorow King, Gentry, and Nobility, they all fall before you: You have a Commission from the LORD to scourge ENGLAND'S Oppressors; do it in the Name of God, do it (I say) fully, hotly, sharply; and the same measure you mete, shall be met to you again; for the Lord ere long cast his Rod into the fire of burning and destruction: It will be a sweet destruction, wait for it.¹⁹

This is an ironic encouragement! Salmon invokes God's blessing, even commission, for the strike the Generals are making against the competing powers of monarchy and Parliament. But he adds that their time is running out too, and the force of their violent actions will soon double back upon them.

The tract is really written for the 'Fellowship (of SAINTS scattered)' among the Army's rank and file, whom he addresses in a second preface. The Spiritualists and Levellers he counts as brethren still hope to do God's work as members of the Army. He responds that

I have fellowship with you in the Lord: but I am distant from your dark and fleshly enterprises. You are a scattered seed amongst tares, and it is your name that upholds the fame of the whole...if it were not for you, this power of the sword, would vanish and be annihilated. ... Thus saith the Lord of Hostes, The Day is coming, and now is, when I will gather up my jewels in the Army (from under this dark and carnal form of the Sword) into my self...when they shall no more contend with the world for outward Interest, but beholding all in Divine Fulness, shall in the enjoyment of it sit down and contented. And this I partly see fulfilled in my self and others.²⁰

The Army is degenerating as God's instrument on earth. The righteous remnant is the only element saving it from God's wrath.

But this will not be for long. A final weaning from political and personal interest will soon draw them out. It sounds as if Salmon himself is already on his way out.

He expects nothing but censure and malice for his message. But he is willing to bear it: 'I will own it all, being willing to become sin from you, though the Lord in me knows no sin; that you, together with me, may be presented in the Lord an eternal righteousness.'²¹ These words may indicate the onset of Salmon's Ranter phase. He is engaging in pure acts that others will regard as sinful, but the purity within him knows no sin. Whatever malice or retaliation he suffers for these acts will be a cross he must endure, a kind of *atonement* that he hopes will ultimately draw others with him into a higher form of righteousness. But at this point, as far as we can tell, the 'sinful' act in question is simply his prophetic message, not the outrageous behaviour that would soon make him a notorious Ranter. It is probably too soon to call Salmon a Ranter. He concludes by portraying himself and other soldiers waiting in the Army as being like Mary at the sepulchre. Christ is no longer here, but risen. He waits to see where the Lord's next appearance shall be. This is not a withdrawal into quietism, but a removal from the corrupted power of the Army, to await God's next move in the revolutionary drama.

In the main body of the tract, Salmon states his principle that God's power moves from one dispensation or party to another, accomplishing divine purpose in both religious and civil affairs. The power now rests in the Army. It is a low, dark form for God's glory.

The Lord besmears himself with blood and vengeance, deforms his own beauty, hides his amiable presence under a hideous and wrathful form. ... Friends! Look about you, for the Lord is now coming forth to rip up your bowels, to search your hearts, and try your reins; yea; to let loose the imprisoned Light of himself in you.²²

The Army is now 'far below the pure Light and Life of God.' The men of God in the Army must disentangle their hopes from the Army's designs. Hope must rest in God, not this 'beggarly thing.' An army is animated by a 'base, earthly Spirit' that 'seeks after the ruine and blood of creatures, for the enjoyment of that which is at best bitter-sweet, a well-being subject to all manner of casualties.'²³

The Lord was content to work through such dark spirits up to this point, but now

he is coming out of darkness, his secret place, into a light and open view...[and] in an holy shame, you will reflect upon your present Employments ... the Lord hath shewed us...a more easie and sweet way of Victory; we can overcome by being conquered, we can lose all, and yet be savers in the conclusion. ... Oh, that sweet and meek Spirit of Christ! Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again...you must shortly part with all; your name, fame, success and victory must all be forgotten, yea, you yourselves shall rejoyce at your own Overtures. ... All things are not yet reconciled in you, earth and heaven are not yet agreed... If you could see all men, all interests, all power in the Lord, you would be offended at none, you would not fear any.²⁴

Salmon has clearly begun to articulate a pacifist Christian understanding. He has seen the cruelty and the vanity of war as an instrument of justice. While he is still willing to affirm God's hand in these military struggles till now, he finds God's power shifting toward nonviolent means.

Salmon speaks for some kind of pacifist group that may be outside the Army. It is not clear that this is the incipient Ranter party. There is no indication of the wild expressionism that will soon make Ranters so scandalous. But there is a rapturous sense of moving into some realm beyond all present categories:

We see and behold ourselves, (as in the Lord) without fear or jealousie, because we are really reconciled to all men, all designs, all interests; and all they that know us are carryed forth in a spirit of Love towards us. The reason why we are hated, despised, and trampled upon is, because the world knoweth us not, they know not the Father in us. In [their] state of ignorance we are the objects of scorn and contempt, and it is our Freedom and Liberty to be so. ... the dyings of the Lord are manifested in us dayly: Here, O here's a way to bring forth peace and unity: the Lord is coming, (he is coming) to discover it...²⁵

Salmon makes inspired use of ideas and phrases from Paul and from John's Gospel. Nevertheless, there is a sense of desperation here, from one who has moved to the edge and beyond. This becomes abundantly clear in the final sentences of Salmon's postscript:

I was once wise as well as you, but I am now a fool, I care not

who knows it: I once also enjoyed my self, but I am now carried out of my wits, a fool, a mad man, besides my self; if you think me any other, you are mistaken, and it is for your sakes that I am so. And now Friends, In him that was, is, and is to come, I take my farewel of you...The Lord was, when you were lowest; he is now, now you are highest; and he is to come, when you shall be nothing. Even so, Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly.²⁶

Adapting the 'fool's speech' from Paul in 2 Corinthians, Salmon enters the Ranter eclipse. The entire Reformation project to restore 'primitive Christianity', the Leveller hope for a free English republic, even the Seeker quest itself - these are all now swallowed up into a strange, nether region. Salmon has charted the painful spiritual dialectics of this awful historical moment better than any other Spiritualist. But it has left him 'a fool and a mad man, besides my self.'

Little is known of Salmon's activities over the next year. He definitely was an associate of Coppe in London and elsewhere during this period. According to reports, Salmon indulged in 'wicked Swearing, and uncleanness, which he justified and others of his way, That it was God which did swear in them, and that it was their Liberty to keep company with Women, for their Lust.'²⁷

In February or March of 1650, Salmon went to Coventry, where Coppe had been already been imprisoned the preceding month. He was arrested for preaching there in March. Salmon continued to defend his position for some months, preaching to crowds gathered outside his cell, and publishing his only true Ranter tract, *Divinity Anatomized*, which unfortunately is lost to us. An extant letter from Salmon to a Ranter associate, Thomas Webbe, gives us a taste of his outrageously playful and inverted state of mind:

Eternal plagues consume you all, rot, sink and damn your bodies and souls into devouring fire, where none but those that walk uprightly can enter. Sirs, I wish you damnable well, because I dearly love you; the Lord grant we may know the worth of hell, that we may forever scorn heaven: For my own part I am ascended far above all heavens, yet I fill all things, and laugh in my sleeve to think what's coming...²⁸

This excerpt illustrates the Ranter practice of swearing oaths; that is, taking God's name in vain, invoking heaven and hell. Ranter rhetoric expressed a sense of outrage at England's captivity to a Puritan

regime that had taken God's name in vain by invoking divine purposes in a revolution now subverted to the interests of a new ruling class. Ranter swearing was the intentional degradation of that misused language, an outrageous parody of the covenantal formulas that had been intoned by Puritan divines to bless war, religious repression and social inequality.

George Fox, the future Quaker leader, was still a fairly obscure figure when he visited Salmon in the Coventry prison sometime in the spring or early summer of 1650. He recorded the encounter twenty-five years later in his *Journal*. This was his first encounter with Ranters and he felt great unease when he entered their company. They began to 'rant, vapor, and blaspheme,' claiming to be God. With his typical tenacity, Fox replied that if they were God, they could tell him if it would rain. He reproved them and left.²⁹ Fox continued northward and was himself imprisoned at Derby in October, under the Blasphemy Act (passed by Parliament in August to quiet the Ranter phenomenon).

It was not clear how long Salmon spent in prison. He was already free when his recantation was published in August 1651. *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights* may have been influenced by Coppe's recantation two months before. But there are significant differences. Salmon's repentance is less cringing, and he is able to articulate more fully the experience of Ranter mania.

The preface, 'An Apologeticall Hint,' explains that he has written 'in a homely Language' (in contrast to the exalted speech of his last couple of years) but adds teasingly that the tract 'steales like a Thiefe upon the benighted world: However, bee not shy of it; for it shal take nothing from thee but what thou shalt bee made willing to part withall.' Salmon has by no means lost his playful, ironic sense. He begins to explain his Ranterism, writing that after an initial, ecstatic experience of divine light (perhaps around the time of *A Rout*), he was suddenly covered with an 'enigmaticall cloud of darknesse,' that confused and disoriented him. Soon he was 'posting most furiously in a burning zeal toward an unattainable end.' That end is unfortunately not defined. He affirms that his behaviour was justly deemed uncivil by authorities, at least 'according to the present state of things.' After six months of defiance, his imprisonment became 'very irksome and tedious to my outward man.'³⁰

But prison was also a cloister, a sanctuary from the clamour of the world, affording time to ponder his condition. There, he summoned his heart before the throne of divine justice and saw that he acted destructively. Slowly, 'I was led to consider that certainly Providence

had some end in leading (or suffering me to be led) into these appearances'. He began to rise 'above the most insulting and daring Fury,' to see the Lord's purposes in his bizarre actions. Thus, 'the rage of man shall turn to the praise of God.' He writes appreciatively of two officers of the Army, Major Beak and Colonel Purefoy, who helped him define and condemn his offences, eventually gaining his release.³¹

The present publication honours his promise to make a public apology. He hopes to make this statement his last:

I now am made to speak, because I am almost weary of speaking, and to informe the world that silence have taken hold of my spirit. The thunderstrokes of the Almighty have to purpose uttered their voices in me, heaven and earth have trembled at their dreadfull sounds: the Alarm being over there's silence now in heaven; for how long I know not. I lie quietly and secure in the Lord while I see the whole world consuming in the fire of envie one against another. I heare much noyse about me, but it serves onely to deafen me into the still slumbers of Divine rest. ... Come then, O my Soule, enter thou into thy Chamber, shut thy doores about thee, hide thyself in silence for a season till the indignation bee blown over.³²

With amazement, Salmon looks out upon the continuing wrath and contention of English society. He has finally been delivered from its grips. After a season in hell, overcome by furious rage, he has found the stillness of eternity.

The main text reaffirms the Ranter sense of futility, taking Ecclesiastes as its starting point: 'Vanitie of Vanities, All is Vanitie saith the Preacher. The highest piece of wisdom, is to see wisdom it self but Vanity. The whole world is a Circle, including nothing but emptiness.' He reasserts the monistic principle of Unity. Life in the world is a 'State of variety,' in which forms exist as mere shadows. 'To descend from the oneness or Eternity, into the multiplicity, is to lose our selves in an endlesse Labyrinth. To ascend from variety into uniformity, is to contract our scattered spirits into their original centre and to find ourselves where we were, before we were.'³³ Such Neoplatonic speculation was popular among Ranter writers.

The Spiritualist Seekers had already placed great emphasis upon finding all truth within. Only their moral scrupulosity and political hope had maintained their moorings in the world around them. The overwhelming experience of political defeat combined with spiritual

exhaustion and resulted in a strongly *apophatic* (*via negativa*) mysticism³⁴ and a world-denying cosmology. Salmon's earlier apocalyptic dialectic between outward history and inward history was now swallowed up in an all-consuming Oneness that became both everything and nothing, an idealism intensified to the point of nihilism.

Still, Salmon maintains some tension between biblical theism and world-denying monism. He echoes his earlier theme of *waiting* in a state beyond desire or self-interest. 'How then shall a man attaine to a oneness, and communion with this inaccessible glory?... We must patiently expect its seasonable descension upon us; whose nature it is to consume us into itself, and melt us into the same nature and likeness.' This advice is not that different from his earlier exhortations in *Antichrist in Man* and *A Rout*, or Saltmarsh's *Sparkles of Glory* but the outlook is no longer Spiritualist and apocalyptic. With a weary shrug, Salmon testifies, 'I have lived to see an end of all perfections; that which I now long for, is to see perfection it selfe perfected. I have bin led out to seek the Lord in manifold appearances, I must now (by himself) be found in himselfe, who is the good it selfe, and nothing but this can satisfie.'³⁵ This is the final phase of one Seeker's quest.

So how did he come to this rarified state? Salmon narrates a classic Seeker trajectory from the Church of England, into Presbyterianism, Independency, Baptism and beyond. He felt uneasy about drifting from one thing to another, and tried to settle down in Baptism. But the Lord called him out, saying 'this is not your rest.' Thus, he continued following Christ until he expired with him and was buried in darkness with him. Out of this state of waiting in death, he was raised to new life, embracing love and peace, overwhelmed by unspeakable joy. This must be the time of *A Rout*, late 1648 to early 1649. 'I appeared to my selfe as one confounded into the abyss of eternitie, nonentitized into the being of being; my soule split, and emptied into the fountain and ocean of divine fulness: expired into the aspires of pure life.'³⁶ Seldom has mystical ecstasy been described as well.

However, Salmon explains that proud flesh soon tried to claim a share of this glory, causing

a suddain, certain, terrible, dreadful revolution, a strange vicissitude. God sent a Thorn immediately; hid himself from me by a sudden departure. ... Angry flesh being struck at heart with the piercing dart of vengeance, begins to swell, and contracting all the evil humors of the body of death into one

lump, to grapple with this throne of wrath, at last violently breaks out, and lets forth the very heart and coar of its pride and enmity. The rankor and venom of this subtil serpent, now discovers it self, and being sore sick with cup of pure wrath, disgorges its foul stomach upon the very face, and appearance of Truth. I...became a mad man, a fool amongst men. Thus tumbling in my own Vomit, I became a derision to all, and even loathed by those by whom I had beloved... O the deep drunken bewitching, besotting draughts of the wine of astonishment that hath been forced upon me.³⁷

Thus, Salmon's ego reasserted itself, seeking to wield, rather than yield to, this new spiritual power. This induced the inversion that Salmon interprets biblically as the Lord's cup of wrath, the wine of astonishment. The biblical allusion here is Habakkuk 2:15f. This strange potion induces 'shameful spewing' by those who are forced to drink it (vs. 16). The image is also found twice in Revelation (14:10; 16:19).³⁸ In addition, Salmon makes use of Paul's in 2 Cor 12:7-10, a 'thorn in the flesh' that bring's one's ecstatic flight back to earth. But unlike Paul, Salmon did not find the humility of spirit to accept the ongoing role of suffering. He instead fell into a state of uncontainable rage.

But the Ranter episode is not simply one man's tragedy. It is a sign, a warning to others. He chides those who think themselves superior:

You little think, and less know, how soon the cup of fury may be put into your hands: my self, with many others have been made stark drunk with that wine of wrath, the dregs whereof (for ought I know) may fall to your share suddenly. I speak not this either to extenuate my own evil, or to cast appropries in the face of those who have (to the utmost) censured me; but rather to mittigate the severity of peoples spirits, and to give a by-hint of that doom and judgement, that is at hand upon the world.³⁹

Salmon returns to the apocalyptic world-view, to suggest that the craven despair that claimed him may overtake others - indeed, the entire nation. When one considers the arrogant cynicism and moral debauchery that attended the Restoration period, beginning less than ten years later, this warning has a prophetic ring.

Salmon offers one more paradoxical commentary on his Ranter phase:

I was indeed full sick of wrath, a vial of wrath was given me to

drink; the heavenly pleasure would not excuse me a drop of it... Well - drink I must, but mark the riddle. 'Twas given me, that I might drink, I drank, that I might stumble, I stumbled, that I might fall: I fell, and through my fall was made happy. It is strange to think, how the hidden and secret presence of God in me, did silently rejoyce while flesh was thus manifested; I had a sweet rest and refuge in the Lord, even while my flesh was frying and scorching in the flames of ireful fury. I was ark'd up in the eternal bosome, while the flesh was tumbling in the foaming surges of its own vanity...and this I know is a riddle to many, which none but the true Nazarite can expound; and til he is pleased to unfold it, it pleases me it should lie dark.⁴⁰

Salmon has not completely abandoned the Ranter doctrine of salvation through saturation in sin. It is not unlike his earlier affirmation that the violence of the English Civil War had served God's purposes up to a point. Truly, the role of sin and evil along the path of redemption remains a troubling ride for all.

But at last, Salmon has passed on to an unearthly repose:

All the waves and billows of the Almighty have gone over me. I am now at rest in the silent deeps of eternity, sunk into the abyse of silence, and (having shot this perilous gulf) am safely arrived into the bosome of love, the land of rest. I sometimes hear from the world, which I have now forsaken; I see its Diurnals are fraught with the tydings of the same clamor, strife, and contention, which abounded in it when I left it; I give it hearing, and that's all. ... My great desire...is to see and say nothing. I have run round the world of variety, and am now centred in eternity...I see partly what the end will be, but I must not declare, neither will the world hear it.⁴¹

The rest of the tract is given over to individual questions of blasphemy, which he renounces, citing biblical authority. Most interesting, perhaps, is his reaffirmation of the Trinity:

Unity is the Father, the Author and begetter of all things; or (if you will) the Grandmother in whose intrinsecal womb, variety lies occult, till time orderly brings it forth. ... In multiplicity they [Father, Son, and Spirit] are three, but in the unity or primary state all one, but one. I love the Unity, as it orderly discovers it self in the Trinity: I prize the Trinity, as it beares

correspondency with the Unity; Let the skillfull Oedipus unfold this.⁴²

Thus ends one of the most amazing and paradoxical pieces of English religious literature. Salmon may have regained his composure and civility, but he lost none of his impish genius.

After his release from Coventry, Salmon garnered a loyal following around Kent. He preached regularly on Sundays at Rochester Cathedral until he emigrated to Barbados around 1655. J.F. McGregor, historian of Ranterism, believes that Salmon's followers provided the nucleus for the subsequent Quaker community in Kent.⁴³

Our final sighting of Joseph Salmon comes in a letter from Barbados in November 1656. Henry Fell wrote to the Quaker leader Margaret Fell regarding the new Quaker mission there. Despite many promising developments, Henry Fell notes that

here is one Joseph Salmon who was a ringleader of the Ranters in England and has gotten a chance to speak, he seems to deny Ranting outwardly, but it is but to deceive the hearts of the simple. And truly many are deceived by him...and gotten into his image...he hath gotten the forme of truth in words the most that ever I heard any, and very bould and impudent...and yet his fruits plainly make him manifest that he is not on the foundation. Truly he is a great enemy to the truth... I know not any such a one in England as he is.⁴⁴

Fell concludes that he has tried to warn the congregation against Salmon, but 'many of them are sore bewitched with him...they will hear nothing against him.' Clearly, Fell was deeply disturbed by this notorious character whose preaching was so close to the Quaker gospel, yet whose 'impudent' manner affronted the moral gravity of Quaker sensibility. In any case, it seems that Salmon either was pushed out of the Quaker meetings in Barbados or grew weary of them. A second letter from Henry Fell the following April makes no mention of him.

Salmon's writings offer us a colourful glimpse of the exhilaration and despair that many Seekers and other radicals experienced in the period from the latter 1640s into the early 1650s. Not all Seekers lapsed into Ranterism, however. Others, especially of those of Saltmarsh's first type, were less exalted in the late 1640s, but also less deflated during the dark days of 1650. They stayed 'low' in spirit and

continued to wait for God's deliverance. The genius of early Quakerism would be revealed in its ability to gather, reconcile and empower a wide variety of English radicals, vigorously shaking the true seed of divine promise out from the chaff of idolatrous expectation and vain excess. Many Seekers joined this powerful and more practical resurgence of radicalism during the 1650s. Some of them fell away in later decades, as utopian hope faded and the movement became a more organized entity. Others, like Salmon, were found for a time at the edges of the new movement, attracted by its vitality but not quite able to renew the energy, commitment and hope they had expended during the previous decade.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ The following article is an adaptation from a forthcoming, book-length study of *Seekers and Quakers*, with the working title, *Seekers Found: Saints-Errant in Seventeenth-Century England and Today*.
- ² John Saltmarsh, *Sparkles of Glory* (1647), pp. 114-121. John Jackson sketched a typology of Seekers along similar lines in his anonymously published *Sober Word to a Serious People* (1651). The Presbyterian Richard Baxter produced a six-fold typology of Seekers in *A Key for Catholics* (1659), pp. 332-34. It adds more gradations, but essentially confirms the earlier characterizations by Saltmarsh and Jackson. At that later moment, as the Commonwealth teetered on the brink of collapse, Baxter speculated that the wide-ranging phenomena of Seekers, Ranters, Quakers and others were in fact fronts for Jesuit and other Catholic subversion in England, aimed to destabilize the nation and make it vulnerable to reclamation by Catholic forces.
- ³ John Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, pp. 114f.
- ⁴ Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, pp. 189-93.
- ⁵ Saltmarsh's proto-liberal outlook can be seen in a number of earlier works, especially his *Dawnings of Light* (1645).
- ⁶ Saltmarsh's confrontation (only days before his death) with the Generals regarding the suppression of the Levellers in late 1647 is narrated in the posthumous *Wonderful Predictions* (1648).
- ⁷ For Salmon's biographical details, I rely primarily upon Nigel Smith's article on him in *The Dictionary of National Biography, Missing Persons* volume (Oxford: University Press, 1993), pp. 580f.
- ⁸ Joseph Salmon, *Antichrist in Man* (1648), p. 1. See also Christopher Hill's fine study, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: University Press, 1971), which follows the rhetoric of 'Antichrist' in English religion and politics up to Salmon's tract, showing the progressive interiorization and political neutralization of the problem of evil.
- ⁹ Salmon, *Antichrist*, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Salmon, *Antichrist*, pp. 13f.
- ¹¹ Salmon, *Antichrist*, p. 27.
- ¹² Salmon, *Antichrist*, p. 38.

- ¹³ Salmon, *Antichrist*, p. 47.
- ¹⁴ Salmon, *Antichrist*, p. 64.
- ¹⁵ Salmon, *Antichrist*, p.34.
- ¹⁶ Salmon, *Antichrist*, p. 72.
- ¹⁷ Winstanley published his first four tracts in 1648, the year before he began his Digger experiment in Surrey. They are strongly in the Spiritualist Seeker vein. See *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1648) for a good example of his interpretation of Revelation in terms of ecstatic experience.
- ¹⁸ See my previous work on George Fox's apocalyptic thought in *Apocalypse of the World: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1986); and *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1995).
- ¹⁹ Nigel Smith, ed., *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (London: Junction, 1983), p. 190.
- ²⁰ Smith, p. 191.
- ²¹ Smith, p. 191.
- ²² Smith, p. 194.
- ²³ Smith, p. 195.
- ²⁴ Smith, pp. 196-98.
- ²⁵ Smith, p. 198.
- ²⁶ Smith, p. 200.
- ²⁷ Smith, p. 13.
- ²⁸ Smith, pp. 201f.
- ²⁹ George Fox, *Journal*, John L. Nickalls, ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1952), pp. 46f.
- ³⁰ Smith, *Ranter Writings*, p. 204.
- ³¹ Smith, p. 205. Colonel Purefoy of Coventry was an avowed enemy to established religion and a sympathizer toward radicals of nearly every stripe. He was uncle to George Purefoy, the local squire of Drayton-in-the Clay, George Fox's home. For more on the Purefoys, see Joseph Pickvance, *George Fox and the Purefoys: A Study of the Puritan Background in the Fenny Drayton in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1970).
- ³² Smith, *Ranter Writings*, p. 206.
- ³³ Smith, p. 207.
- ³⁴ Apophatic spirituality, sometimes referred to as 'the dark night of the soul' after the writings of St. John of the Cross, often befalls those of intense spiritual devotion. Early experiences of spiritual illumination suddenly give way to desolating experiences of darkness and the absence of God. The challenge is to learn to recognize God's presence anew, amidst the experience of absence, light in the depths of apparent darkness. An excellent contemporary guide to apophatic spirituality is Sandra Cronk's *Dark Night Journey: Inward Re-Patterning toward a Life Centered in God* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1991).
- ³⁵ Smith, *Ranter Writings*, p. 209.
- ³⁶ Smith, p. 212.
- ³⁷ Smith, pp. 212f.
- ³⁸ The exact source of this biblical image of divine wrath is not clear. Habakkuk 2:15f may give some indication. It pronounces woe upon those who make their neighbours drink the wine of their wrath, causing them to stagger and vomit.

The cup of God's right hand will come around to them. Thus, some kind of debasing social act seems to lie behind the prophetic image of God's cup of wrath. Also see Jer. 25:15; Isa. 51:17; Psa. 60:3.

³⁹ Smith, *Ranter Writings*, p. 214.

⁴⁰ Smith, p. 215.

⁴¹ Smith, p. 215f.

⁴² Smith, pp. 222f.

⁴³ J.F. McGregor, 'Ranterism and the Development of Early Quakerism,' in *The Journal of Religious Studies*, 9 (1977): pp. 356f. Also see Smith, *Ranter Writings*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Henry Fell to Margaret Fell, Barbados, November, 1956, Swarthmoor MSS., 1.66, Library, Friends House, London.