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ABRAHAM SHACKLETON AND THE IRISH SEPARATION OF 1797-1803

Anyone who attempts to find a way through the tangle of the Irish Separation is faced at the outset by the scarcity of contemporary evidence. In almost all the records for the years between 1798 and 1805 there are gaps. Letters have been destroyed, journals mutilated and even a folder of press cuttings which should begin in 1799 has been tampered with. From a minute of the National Meeting of Ministers and Elders in Dublin in 1798 it appears that the policy of silence was deliberate and it was felt that public discussion would only exacerbate the difficulties involved; the whole problem was too delicate for anything but the most careful and tender handling. In a short essay it is not possible adequately to cover all the complicated issues involved, so I propose to concentrate on the key figure of Abraham Shackleton the younger and to explore the radical difference between him and nineteenth century English evangelical Friends in their attitude to the authority of the scriptures.

It is first, I think, necessary briefly to sketch in the historical background to the events of these years. The Irish Separation took place against the background of the great Rebellion of 1798 and the communities of Friends scattered throughout the counties affected were inevitably caught up in the general ruin and desolation, the sense of loosening of restraint which often accompanies such calamities. Many

had lost all they possessed; the losses of Friends in county Wexford alone were estimated at more than £7,000¹ and a large subscription was started for their relief.² The easing of this financial burden, while considerable, was a practical measure about which there could be no difference of opinion; a far deeper reason for disquiet lay in the low and dull state of the Society and in a growing disunity on fundamental matters of religious belief. Throughout the greater part of the eighteenth century the Society of Friends in Ireland had remained inward-looking and self-contained to an even greater degree than had been the case in England; the discipline imposed by the elders was very strict, only ruffled by the emergence of the New Light movement in the 1770s, when a group of the younger members of the Society sought to ease the stranglehold of the elders on Quaker life and thought. This re-emerged in 1798 in the protests of younger members against the strictness of the marriage regulations. But the Quakers were part of the national life of Ireland, they could not forever remain immune to the conflict of ideas within society as a whole, nor to the ideals of political and religious freedom which became increasingly the goal of many Irish men and women.

In the spring of 1798 Friends in Ireland were faced with differences which had arisen in the interpretation of the scriptures and the value to be placed upon them as a guide to faith and conduct. A committee was appointed to examine the state of the Society and was charged with the task of visiting every quarterly and monthly meeting in the country. To the members of this committee, as is clear from the unpublished letters of one of its members,³ the Inward Light of Christ in the heart was still the primary rule, the 'counsel of Truth' contained in the scriptures a secondary guide to faith and conduct, as it has been to early Friends, and this position foreshadowed the controversy which developed in England during the nineteenth century. But the conflict between the relative importance of the Inward Light and the scriptures did not assume among Irish Separatists the direction it later took among those supporters of the evangelical movement in English Quakerism. It contained two definite strands of thought; the first, derived directly from Proposition III of Robert Barclay's *Apology*, that whatever in the scriptures could not be supported by the witness of the Inward Light of Christ in the heart had no claim to be accounted 'the principal Ground of Truth',⁴ a position completely opposite to that which obtained amongst English evangelicals; and the second that those parts of the scripture which presented a view of the nature of God inconsistent with one of divine mercy and love could have no claim to be called sacred writing. For this part of the Separation, the emotional and intellectual

criticism of the Bible, it is necessary to turn to Abraham Shackleton the younger, as its principal exponent.

For many years before 1798 Abraham Shackleton had been a member of most of the committees set up to consider the state of the Society in Ireland and he was a regular representative for Leinster province at the National half-year's Meeting in Dublin. He was sensitive and intelligent, a man of high principle, with a mind wide open to the intellectual climate of the time. He was interested in philosophy and what he described as metaphysical speculation, as evinced by a delightful letter to his sister Debbie⁵ and in due course was prepared to embark on criticism of the scriptures far more radical than anything hitherto seen within the narrow confines of Quaker religious thought.

The school he maintained at his home in Ballitore numbered the statesman Edmund Burke, who became a lifelong friend of the Shackleton family, among its former scholars and in the conduct of this school, which had been founded by his grandfather Abraham Shackleton the elder, he grew in his father's words 'in a concern for the religious prosperity of the rising generation among us, & is more & more regulating & modifying his school for this purpose'.⁶ So deep was his concern for the spiritual welfare of the boys in his charge that he ceased to teach them the classics, for fear that too great an admiration for the blaze of heroic prowess should obscure the meekness and gentleness of the 'mild author of Christianity'.⁷ John Keats' first acquaintance with Chapman's Homer opened the windows of his mind to a new vision of spiritual truth; for Shackleton Homer and Virgil were 'rocks of destruction to thousands of young minds, which are more pernicious as they promise so much safety, serenity and calm, covered over by the deceitful wave of specious appearance & a display of the milder virtues of the heathen world, dressed in the highest imagery and delusive language'.⁸ He set out his reasons in a letter to the parents of his pupils, but many of them were not Quakers and a knowledge of the classics was essential to a university education. For this and other reasons the number of his pupils steadily declined, until he was forced to close the school.

Rufus Jones, in *Later Periods of Quakerism*⁹, in his discussion of Abraham Shackleton's part in the Separation, has suggested that the American Quietist minister Job Scott, who arrived in Ireland in 1793, would have possessed the 'inward depth and spiritual insight' which would have preserved Shackleton from the extremes to which his subsequent thinking led him. There is no doubt that Shackleton was exposed to the influence of the charismatic American preacher. Job

Scott was intimate with Shackleton's circle of friends – he speaks in his Journal of 'returning to the house of my friend John Hancock'¹⁰, who with Shackleton became a leader of the later Separation, and while in Ballitore he stayed at the house of Abraham Shackleton's widowed mother. As well as being a well-known Quaker minister Job Scott was also clearly a scholar and in his Journal there is to be found not only evidence of his universalism and his reliance on the Inward Light of Christ in the hearts of all men as the true guide, but also the germ of the historical criticism of the Bible which Abraham Shackleton carried to much greater lengths. But while Job Scott comments merely on the fact that the Bible has been subjected to scholarly criticism,¹¹ Shackleton, ranging far wider, uses this criticism in order to refute its authority. Job Scott died in Ireland in 1793, but even if he had lived it is doubtful whether his influence on Shackleton would have been more than minimal, although his contact with Shackleton may have reinforced the latter's reservations as to the irreconcilability of a view of God as the God of mercy and love for all his creation with the warrior God portrayed in the pages of the Old Testament, reservations which came to a head in 1798.

It should also not be overlooked that the Quaker Samuel Fisher, a contemporary of Robert Barclay, who died in 1665, also pointed out that the text of the scriptures had been 'corrupted, vitiated, altered and adulterated in all translations'¹² and Shackleton would no doubt have been aware of this, but an equally potent contemporary influence may have been the writings of the sometime Quaker Thomas Paine, with which Shackleton would have been familiar through his own and his father's friendship with Edmund Burke¹³ and his consequent knowledge of the English revolutionary circle. Paine was a deist and wrote *The Age of Reason* on the threshold of imprisonment in France as an anti-Jacobin. He believed:-

...in a God, whose beauty he saw in nature; he taught the doctrine of conditional immortality, and his quarrel with revealed religion was chiefly that it set up for worship a God of cruelty and injustice. From the stories of the Jewish massacres ordained by divine command, down to the orthodox doctrine of the scheme of redemption, he saw nothing but a history derogatory to the wisdom and goodness of the Almighty. To believe the Old Testament we must unbelieve our faith in the moral justice of God ... From this starting point he proceeds in the later second and third parts to a detailed criticism designed to show that the books of the Bible were not written by their reputed authors, that the miracles are incredible, that the passages claimed as prophecy have been wrested from their context, and that many inconsistencies are to be found in the narrative portions of the Gospels.¹⁴

Shackleton's position led not, of course, to the elevation of the Bible as the primary guide to faith and conduct, as happened amongst nineteenth century evangelical Quakers in England, but to the total rejection of large parts of the scriptures as divinely inspired writings. His defence of his position, taken from *A Narrative of events in Ireland* published anonymously by the Liverpool Jacobin William Rathbone and echoing some of the statements made by Thomas Paine, is worth quoting at some length:-

These alleged commands of the Almighty [the Canaanite wars] for proceedings in some cases perfidious, and in others cruel and unjust, were either *wilful and impious pretences on the part of the perpetrators or original historians of such transactions; or subsequent interpolations in the history*; and that a right apprehension of ... the divine attributes would forbid our assent to such passages, as they could have no genuine claim to the appellation of SACRED SCRIPTURES ... it was highly derogatory to the character of the unchangeable God, 'with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning', to conceive that the Divine Being would himself act in opposition to those moral laws which he has ordained to be of perpetual and universal obligation; or that he would ever suspend the obligation of those laws upon his *rational* offspring ... Consequently that neither wars, nor any acts of cruelty, treachery, or fraud, nor the exercise of any of the angry, revengeful or hurtful passions, were ever either approved of, or authorised by the God of purity, holiness, peace and love; and that it was altogether unnecessary and unwarrantable that such points should be deemed essential articles of Christian's faith¹⁵ (my italics).

A passage which echoes Thomas Paine's view of the moral values enjoined by God upon mankind and which in its terminology reflects words and phrases used by Paine.

John Hancock, writing an appreciation of Abraham Shackleton after his death, states that 'His opinions were his own and not borrowed'¹⁶, but as a scholar Shackleton would probably have been aware of the work of the seventeenth-century scholar Hugo Grotius, a pioneer of modern biblical criticism. Grotius quietly upheld the right to study and analyse the books of scripture exactly as one does any other books. Shackleton's thinking was in tune in its origin with the threefold analysis of the purpose of the scriptures set out at the beginning of Proposition III of the *Apology*, but that he also upheld Grotius's view is clearly demonstrated in the following quotations:-

[Of the scriptures] one [part] is matter of faith, whose truths are of everlasting obligation; these truths are revealed in the heart of every man for his guidance, the scriptures bearing witness thereto, and serving as collateral evidence, showing the uniformity, universality and perpetuity of the divine communications; this is the DOCTRINAL PART. The other [part] is HISTORICAL, teaching also by a sort of figure, but of the *literal and historical acceptance, we have as*

*good a right to question, as of the truth of any other history, standing upon its probability or the degree of clearness of the evidence*¹⁷ (my italics).

and again as follows:-

I believe there are some errors in the translation, more errors in the transcribing, but most of all in the original writing [of the scriptures] which, coming through men strongly tintured with rabbinical mysteries, they were induced to muddy the fountain, to accommodate their darkened ideas. Now seeing that men have written, men have transcribed, and men have translated these writings, it is consistent with the excellence and dignity of truth, that they be perpetually subjected to the standard of incorruptible light, and the manifestation made thereby in the enlightened understanding of men, whereby these errors are detected ... Anything therefore on record which, subjected to this test, cannot stand the scrutiny, or has not an evidence in the correct illumined mind, is not an indispensable object of faith.¹⁸

Nothing could more clearly illustrate the distance between the Irish Separatists and nineteenth century English evangelical Friends, with their insistence on the infallibility of the scriptures as the revealed word of God. Shackleton may or may not have been aware of the biblical criticism of the eighteenth-century Frenchman Jean Astruc, who commented on the inconsistencies to be found in the biblical record and whose influence is principally to be found among later German biblical scholars, but although it should not be overlooked that Shackleton's condemnation of the Bible rested perhaps as much on a moral and emotional response to what he felt to be the true nature of God as on a careful scholarly analysis, his use of the historical method is well grounded in the technique of biblical criticism as used by Spinoza, Richard Simon, Johann Semler and others. His use of the term 'rational' is interesting and illuminating; a concept of the nature of God must satisfy the claim of human reason, in line with the natural theology of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, but it was to be 100 years before we find traces of such a view of the place of reason in relation to religious truth widely held among English Friends.

This is not to say that biblical criticism was unknown amongst Friends in England at the turn of the nineteenth century. Richard Morris's *Animadversions on the Scriptures*, first published in 1742 and re-issued by Morris Birkbeck in 1798, was used by Hannah Barnard in her appeal to London Yearly Meeting in 1801; Morris Birkbeck's reason for re-issuing this tract was that it seemed to him to point out not only what the scriptures are, but also what they are not and Richard Morris, like Job Scott and Abraham Shackleton himself, held that learned men give different interpretations of the scriptures and they cannot all be right.

William Matthews and other notable Friends shared Hannah Barnard's view that acceptance of the historicity of the Bible and several points of faith, as for example the virgin birth were not essential to salvation; too much infallibility had been imputed to the records of the Old and New Testaments, not only by Friends but by others as well and Abraham Shackleton, who accompanied her from Ireland to England, supported her views.

But the climate of opinion in the Society as a whole was inimical to such views and it is not until the 1880s and 1890s that we find English Friends troubled by 'speculation and unbelief'.¹⁹ As the nineteenth century progressed English Quakerism was held in tension between the rising tide of evangelical thinking, with its insistence on the infallibility of the scriptures as the primary rule, and those who desired above all else a return to the simplicity and purity of what they considered to be the beliefs and practices of early Friends (see my essay on 'Tensions' in the Society at this time, *JFHS* vol. 56, no. 1 and also Roger C. Wilson, 'Manchester, Manchester and Manchester Again', F.H.S. Occasional Series No 1, (1990)) and it was not until this tension was resolved in the liberalising influence of the Manchester Conference of 1895 that the use of reason as applied to the scriptures could be freely admitted. Abraham Shackleton lacked the scholarly equipment of nineteenth-century biblical critics such as Julius Wellhausen and his school, but he was not a lone voice and stood firmly in the line of biblical criticism since its beginnings in the history of the early church. His reference to 'men strongly tinctured with rabbinical mysteries' reveals an awareness of the circumstances in which it was thought the books of the Bible had been put together.

So a picture emerges of, on the one hand, a small group of Quakers in Ireland led by Abraham Shackleton and John Hancock, holding views on the fallibility of the scriptures totally at variance with those held by the Society in Ireland, which while asserting the supremacy of the Inward Light in the heart continued to acknowledge the Bible as a secondary rule; and on the other hand English Friends divided between those who supported the orthodox Irish position and those evangelical Friends at the opposite extreme from the Irish Separatists who elevated the Bible to a primary guide for faith and conduct. The Irish Separatists were, in the Society of their period, voices in the wilderness, but they anticipated the great swell of nineteenth-century biblical criticism and if the Society had not been, in general, inimical to theological questioning, and if the scholars there undoubtedly were among its members had turned their minds to the kind of questions raised by Shackleton, it could have been in the vanguard of religious thought and scholarship.

The turn of the nineteenth century was one of the great watersheds not only of religious but of political and social history and it is arguable that the Society chose the wrong way forward, losing itself in the narrow toils of evangelicalism when a wider destiny beckoned to it. It was perhaps too small in numbers to accept such a challenge, its frame of reference inhibited by its religious environment.

Abraham Shackleton was disowned in 1801²⁰ and wrote to Carlow Monthly Meeting pleading for a wider unity than that offered by the Society, in words which clearly express his universalist convictions:

First, I do not disown the Society, nor any society of men, nor *any* man; I am a man, subject to like passions as other men and like frailties; I cannot therefore *disown* any, but would rather *seek the good of all men, continually whilst I live ...*

Secondly, I disown not man, I disown the principle of *congregated societies, of religion housed up*, which has a tendency to separate the affections of man from man ... very much tending to lay waste those *brotherly sympathies* by which *all* the sons of men are, or ought to be, *united in common interest*.

These distinctions, whatever good they may have produced in individuals, in the days of ignorance, and the gloominess of religious bigotry and blindness, I am persuaded *the day is come* for their *annihilation*; and that they ought not to be *found any more at all*; but that *all* men everywhere *love as brethren*, and own no man nearer or dearer for any outward circumstance (of this kind) than another, seeing that all men are created of one blood, and *all* are *children* of ONE HEAVENLY BENIGNANT FATHER, all the world over.

This letter, which is too long to quote in full, goes on to condemn the violence of some parts of biblical history as impossible to be of divine origin, those influenced thereby as having as bloodthirsty a record as any other type of religious belief; also that as well as no ‘congregated societies’ there should be no “BOOK, having particular DOGMAS of belief, by which that society is to be distinguished; the *absurdities contained in your bibles, being a sufficient indication to any unprejudiced mind for their annihilation.*”

The letter illustrates with great clarity the advanced position to which Abraham Shackleton’s concept of the nature of God and the historicity of the scriptures had led him and raises two issues of great interest. The first concerns the authority on which he rests his position. The basis of religious authority has been the subject of dispute since the time of the early church fathers. Tertullian, for example, in about AD 200 saw the church as the guardian of the scriptures and of truth,²¹ while for Augustine they were to be interpreted in ‘the primacy of the law of love’ (Matt.22:40)²² and the argument has continued through the succeeding centuries. Of immediate interest, as contemporary with Robert Barclay and the early Friends was Thomas Hobbes, who in his *Leviathan*

published in 1651 put forward the view that the Bible is not in itself a revelation of God, but only a record of such revelation,²³ and the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza, who in arguing for a rational approach to the Bible held that the scriptures are history, only authoritative for the irrational; he stated that 'everyone should be free to choose for himself the foundation of his creed, and ... faith should be judged only by its fruits'.²⁴ Biblical criticism was also part of the intellectual climate of the late eighteenth century, amongst such eminent men as the dissenter Joseph Priestley, the focus of the 'Church and King' riots in Birmingham in 1791. Abraham Shackleton clearly approached Spinoza's view; he discarded the central thesis of Proposition III of the *Apology*, thus denying the scriptural authority for faith and also as a dissenter abrogated the church's authority as the guardian of religious truth. He apparently removed the two traditional bases on which the authoritative apprehension of the nature of God rested and left himself with a concept of a God of love, the Father of all mankind, for which he had no authoritative foundation. Although he reached this position from the universalism explicit in George Fox's message, (Fox himself rested firmly on the Light of Christ in the heart and the secondary authority of the scriptures), Shackleton could not logically base his beliefs on those held by Fox, since he dismissed as only fit for annihilation the whole Bible, including the New Testament, the foundation of the Christian message of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the position held by the Society since its earliest days. There is no suggestion, in any of his writings examined in connection with this article, of personal mystical revelation or a sense of the numinous, and the essential weakness of his position, and of those who followed him, surely lies in this question of the authority on which he rested his concept of God. As his thought has been traced through this article he appears to have advanced from an original biblical concept of God as universal Father to ideas based neither on the teaching of the Old Testament nor of the New, which having no firm foundation collapsed into what William Savery described as the 'vortex of Deism'.²⁵

The second issue which this letter raises is the threat postulated by Shackleton's views not only to the existence of the Society of Friends and the Christian church, but to the whole social structure. He pleaded almost for a kind of universal religious commonwealth, ruled by God alone, in which all men and women would worship as equals, free from any kind of organization or ritual, even the minimum which George Fox found necessary to preserve Quakerism and which the disciples found to be essential for the spread and preservation of the early church. If the complete shift in the view of the Bible and the human situation before

God towards which Shackleton was groping had been taken up by Friends sympathetic towards his views and his criticism had been supported and modified by the scholarship of which some Friends of the period were undoubtedly capable, he might perhaps have been seen today not as the tragic figure which I think he was, but as one who had a unique contribution to make towards the religious thought, development and historical importance of the Society.

In the extreme lengths to which his thinking led him he raised the perhaps unanswerable question as to whether such a completely individualistic view of religion is in fact attainable by ordinary men and women in a complex society. Can the ideal of the man or woman alone before his or her Maker be held together through the generations without some form of structure, or 'congregated society' to enfold and preserve it? The whole history of religious thought and practice, from their earliest beginnings, bears witness to the need man have felt to organize their experience into more, or less, hierarchical structures, resting on a received and experienced body of religious belief. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, within which Christianity has its roots, reveals a structure as highly organized as any in the history of religion, and for Shackleton's insights to have had the effect on the Society's development to which I have referred earlier, it would have been necessary for them to have been tempered by a more acute awareness of the basis of social structure and the needs of the human condition.

In the complete universalism of his belief, which however owes nothing, as far as it is possible to judge, to knowledge of any of the other great religious traditions of the world, Abraham Shackleton stands apart, not only from contemporary Irish Quakerism with its rigid acceptance of the structures and discipline created by George Fox, and from the acceptance of the Bible as the primary guide to faith and conduct by evangelical Friends in England, but in his total rejection of biblical authority in his plea for the experience of the divine to be based only on the personal relationship between men and women and God, without any structure of formalised worship or 'congregated societies'. The conclusion to which he came, of the divisiveness of 'congregated societies' is inherent in the doctrine of the brotherhood of man and a logical conclusion from it. It is also borne out in the long history of conflict resulting from different and strongly held religious beliefs, both within and outside Christianity, but it fails to take account of human frailty, of the need men and women have to find support and comfort in identification with those like-minded with themselves. The impression he leaves is not only that of a man who thought deeply on the nature of God, but of an intellect which had the courage to think out its concepts

to their ultimate conclusion, to stand by them in the face of the considerable opposition he aroused and to subject his faith not only to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but also to enlightened human reason.

Mollie Grubb

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Unpublished Grubb family papers: LSF: TEMP MSS 160/11/2-14; 13/1-10, 16/11-14 (File The Separation, 1797-1803).
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- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Robert Barclay *Apology* (1765 ed.) Prop.III, p.52.
- ⁵ Dublin Historical Library, Selina Fennell collection MSS Box 29.
- ⁶ Dublin Historical Library, Isabel Grubb's typescript: S4E1, Ses 53.
- ⁷ Isabel Grubb, *op.cit.*, Ses 52.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Rufus Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, 295.
- ¹⁰ LSF, portfolio 39/125.
- ¹¹ Job Scott, *Journal*, (1843 ed.), 28-29.
- ¹² Samuel Fisher, *Truth Exalted*, (1679 ed.), 33.
- ¹³ Mary Leadbeater, *Leadbeater papers*, vol. II, 133; in Dublin Historical Library.
- ¹⁴ H.N. Brailsford, *Shelley, Godwin and their Circle*, 75-76.
- ¹⁵ William Rathbone, *A Narrative of events in Ireland*, 50-51.
- ¹⁶ John Hancock, *A Sketch of the Character of Abraham Shackleton of Ballitore*, in Dublin Historical Collection, PB 20:2.
- ¹⁷ Rathbone, *op.cit.*, Appendix II, pp 22-23.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 20-21.
- ¹⁹ London Yearly Meeting epistles, 1880-1898.
- ²⁰ Carlow MM minutes: Dublin Historical Library MSS C12, 10 July 1801.
- ²¹ Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 74-75.
- ²² Grant and Tracy, *op.cit.*, 99.
- ²³ Grant and Tracy, *op.cit.*, 104.
- ²⁴ Benedict Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch 1, cited in Grant and Tracy, 107.
- ²⁵ Rufus Jones, *op.cit.*, 295.