

'Not the word of God': varieties of antiscrpturism during the English Revolution

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An Antiscrpturist, that is one who denies the truth and authority of Scripture, was a polemically constructed term used and popularised by the Presbyterian heresiographer Thomas Edwards in his notorious *Gangraena* (1646). Hitherto very little scholarly work has focussed exclusively on the category of antiscrpturism so in this article I explore the basis of antiscrpturian ideas, their evolution and the diverse ways in which they were articulated during the English Revolution by members of various religious communities and political movements. I suggest that, on the whole, initial objections to what was envisaged as an unquestioning adherence to the outward letter of Scripture together with doubts about its salvific potential were reinforced by several interlinked doctrinal positions: the supremacy of the interior spirit over exterior flesh; the supersession of ordinances; seeking and awaiting a return to the primitive Christianity of the Apostles; and belief in the imminent second coming of Christ.

The term Antiscrpturism, which was used increasingly from 1646, derived from the nouns Antiscrpturian and Antiscrpturist, meaning one who denies the truth and authority of Scripture.¹ Although the adjective antiscrpturian appears to have been a neologism coined by the anti-Calvinist scholar and future dean of Peterborough Thomas Jackson in his enormous published commentaries on the Apostles' Creed (1613),² the noun, like its variants Anti-Scriptarian and Antiscrpturist, was not in common usage until 1646. The date is significant. For in that year the controversialist Thomas Edwards's *Gangraena*, a notorious

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¹ It was variously spelled with or without a hyphen, and with or without a final 'e', see; Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (3 vols., 1646), vol. 2, p. 305; Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist* (1647), p. 263; John Goodwin, *The Divine Authority of the Scriptures Asserted* (1648), title-page; *A Testimony to the Truth of Jesus Christ* (1648), p. 33; *The Hearty Concurrence of divers Citizens and Inhabitants of the City of London* (1648), brs.; Edward Hill, *Vindiciae veritatis* (1648), p. 9; cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'antiscrpturian', 'antiscrpturist', 'antiscrpturism'.

² Thomas Jackson, *The Eternall Truth of Scriptures, and Christian beleefe* (1613), p. 444; Thomas Jackson, *A collection of the works of that holy man and profound divine* (1653), book II, chapter xxx, p. 285; A.J. Hegarty, 'Jackson, Thomas (bap. 1578, d. 1640)', *ODNB*.

three part catalogue of doctrinal errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious sectarian practices was published. As Ann Hughes has shown, the book can be placed in a long line of anti-heretical writing that stretched from Paul, Epiphanius and Augustine to Luther and Calvin.³ While Edwards's antagonistic work was part of a broader Presbyterian polemical campaign which provoked several outraged printed responses, it can also be compared with less famous writings within the same genre such as Ephraim Pagitt's *Heresiography* (1645), enlargements of *Heresiography* published under Pagitt's name, and various pamphlets and broadsides purporting to accurately classify an ever increasing multitude of perceived sects. Intemperate, alarmist and occasionally inaccurate, their purpose was generally to represent doctrinal and behavioural errors as inversions of truths so as to facilitate their extirpation. Furthermore, those involved in constructing these, more often than not, damaging portrayals were constantly alert to precedents. They attached labels – sometimes borrowed from their predecessors – to aid categorisation, thereby providing loosely connected individuals with a sectarian identity and genealogy that may have deliberately obscured or ignored subtle doctrinal distinctions.

Taking Edwards as an example, he named several individuals whose publicly expressed beliefs included notions consonant with antiscrpturism: the apothecary's apprentice turned army surgeon John Boggis (*fl.*1646),⁴ the preacher, polemicist and sectary Lawrence Clarkson (*c.*1615–1667?), the parliamentarian army chaplain William Erbery (*c.*1605–1654), Thomas Webbe (*c.*1625–*fl.*1651), who would become infamous for scandalous activities while a minister in Wiltshire, the clothier Clement Wrighter (*fl.*1627–*d.*1659x62), and assorted members of Thomas Lambe's congregation meeting in London. Significantly, all these people with the exception of Erbery had voluntarily undergone believers' baptism. Drawing on their manuscript and printed writings as well as reported conversations and other information provided by correspondents, Edwards conflated their distinct views by enumerating a range of antiscrpturian errors, notably:

1. That the Scriptures cannot be said to be the word of God; there is no Word but Christ, the Scriptures are a dead letter, and no more to be credited then the writings of men, not divine, but humane invention.

³ Ann Hughes, *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴ Hughes, *Gangraena*, p. 208; Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 245.

2. That the Scripture, whether a true manuscript or no, whether Hebrew, Greek or English, is but humane, and so not able to discover a divine God ...
3. That the Scriptures are insufficient and uncertain, there is no certainty to build any Doctrine upon them, they are not an infallible foundation of faith ...
5. That the holy writings and sayings of *Moses* and the Prophets, of Christ and his Apostles, and the proper Names, Persons and things contained therein are Allegories ...
6. That the Penmen of Scripture, every one of them, writ as themselves conceived, they were the actions of their own spirit ...
7. That the Scriptures of the old Testament, do not concerne nor binde Christians now under the new Testament ...
8. That right Reason is the rule of Faith, and that we are to believe the Scriptures ... so far as we see them agreeable to reason ...
9. That the new Testament, nor no place of Scripture in it, binde any further then the Spirit for present reveals to us that such a place is the Word of God.⁵

Abbreviated versions of Edwards's list were subsequently circulated in cheap abridgements of and extracts from *Gangraena*, and the stereotypical image of Antiscripturists was given added substance when Pagitt (or more likely his continuator) designated them a 'wicked' sect whose adherents openly vented their 'damnable opinions' at congregational gatherings.⁶ A woodcut caricature with accompanying verse swiftly followed in another directory of contemporary sects.⁷

Afterwards, the Scottish Presbyterian minister Samuel Rutherford fulminated against Antiscripturists for denying 'Scripture to be the Word of God, affirming it to be a dead letter, a *humane thing of Inke*'. Grouping them with Anabaptists, Antinomians, Arminians, Familists, Libertines, Seekers, Socinians and other sects, he railed against the menace of

⁵ Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (3 vols., 1646), vol. 1, pp. 15, 18–19, 54, 75, 78, 82, 83–84, 94, 127, 145; vol. 2, pp. 149, 163; vol. 3, pp. 90, 136.

⁶ Anon., *A relation of severall Heresies ... Discovering the Originall Ring-leaders* (1646), pp. 9–10; Anon., *These trades-men are preachers in and about the City of London. Or a discovery of the Most Dangerous and Damnable Tenets that have been spread within these few yeares* (1647), brs.; Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography, or, A description of the Hereticks and Sectaries of these latter times* (3rd edn., 1646), p. 149; Obadiah Sedgwick, *The nature and danger of heresies* (1647), pp. 31, 32; Staatsarchiv, Zürich, Dureana, E II 457 f, fol. 93a^v.

⁷ *A Catalogue of the Severall Sects and Opinions in England and other Nations* (1647), brs.

religious toleration and its corollary moral dissolution.⁸ In the same vein, a Kentish minister likened universal toleration to a Trojan horse, lamenting the ‘cursed’ doctrines of Arians, Socinians and Antiscrpturists that were instrumental in breaking down ‘*some main Pillars of our Christian Faith*’.⁹ These associations indicate that along with other imagined sectarians and genuine religious separatists who no longer worshipped in their parish churches, Antiscrpturists were considered part of a devilish confederacy threatening to undermine the foundations of Reformed Christianity, national security, good government, a hierarchical social system, the maintenance of law and order, property ownership and patriarchal authority. So much so that denying the canon of the Old and New Testaments to be the word of God became a felonious offence punishable by death according to the provisions of a Parliamentary ordinance of May 1648 aimed at suppressing blasphemies and heresies.¹⁰ It is also instructive that just as the antitheses of these polemically constructed sectarian ‘Others’ reveal perfect models of doctrine and behaviour writ large (divine truths, orthodoxy, constant devotion, sexual probity, virtuous conduct, faithfulness), so the inverse of an Antiscrpturist discloses in miniature an ideal of the Bible as an incontestable authority (a perfectly preserved, divinely inspired, harmonious text) together with approved ways of reading and interpreting Scripture.¹¹

Although these hostile sources clearly warn of the dangers of antiscrpturism, often regarding it as a vile stage on the descent into utter atheism, the category is too inflexible to adequately convey the diversity of opinions encompassed by the term. Moreover, despite the prominence Edwards accorded antiscrpturian errors, placing them at the head of an original list of 176 heresies, not all were novel doctrines held by extreme figures. Thus the notion that Scripture was a dead letter, which partly derived from the belief that Jewish judicial and ceremonial laws had been annulled by the coming of Christ (Romans 7:6, Galatians 2:19), as well as from the text ‘the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life’ (2 Corinthians 3:6), was enunciated by certain Elizabethan Protestant preachers. Indeed, in the published version of a fast sermon preached in March 1648 before the emasculated House of Lords by a leading

⁸ Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist* (1647), sigs. A2v, A2^r-2, a, pp. 191, 263, 336; Samuel Rutherford, *A free disputation against pretended liberty of conscience* (1649), pp. 202, 251, 252, 253, 262, 346.

⁹ John Elmeston, *An essay for the discovery and discouraging of the new sprung schism* (1652), sig. A2r-v.

¹⁰ Charles Firth and R.S. Rait (eds.), *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660* (3 vols., 1911), vol. 1, pp. 1133–34.

¹¹ Samuel Torshell, *A designe about disposing the Bible into an harmony* (1647), sig. A2r-v.

London Independent minister Peter Sterry (1613–1672), he declared that the dead outward letter of Scripture was but a shadow whereas the inward word of God was alive through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹² Likewise, although Protestant biblical commentators largely favoured literal readings of the text where applicable, allegorical readings of Scripture – especially when underpinned by Scholastic, Aristotelian training – were nonetheless part of a well-established four-fold method of interpretation that incorporated literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical senses of the text.¹³ Devoid of accepted restraints, however, unfettered allegorical readings of Scripture challenged traditional orthodoxies (notably those allegedly favoured by sectarians such as the Family of Love), and Christopher Hill was surely right to observe that ‘it was one thing for the clergy to allegorize a Latin text ... quite another for mechanic laymen to put their own allegorical constructions on a vernacular text available for all to read’.¹⁴

To date, there has been very little scholarly work focussed exclusively on the category of antiscriturism.¹⁵ Previous studies of antiscriturian ideas have tended to locate them within grand narratives charting the growth of scepticism or irreligion from the Reformation to the early English Enlightenment. In addition, a few exponents have occasionally been championed as representatives of an autodidactic plebeian underclass who presented a radical challenge to secular and clerical authority by subjecting the Bible to textual criticism and, through selective interpretation, appropriating its myths for their own ends.¹⁶ Recent

¹² Peter Sterry, *The Teachings of Christ in the Soule* (1648), pp. 30–33; cf. John Everard, *The Gospel-Treasury Opened* (2nd edn., 1659), part ii, p. 103.

¹³ William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng* (1607), pp. 30–31; G.L. Scheper, ‘Reformation Attitudes toward Allegory and the Song of Songs’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 89 (1974), pp. 551–62.

¹⁴ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Tanner 67, fol. 188r, John Everard accused of maintaining that ‘all the Scripture is false if literally understood’; [John Etherington], *A Brief Discovery of the Blasphemous Doctrine of Familisme* (1645), pp. 4–5; Anon., *Relation of severall Heresies*, p. 14; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (1972; Harmondsworth, 1984 edn.), p. 143.

¹⁵ An exception is N. McDowell, ‘Self-Defeating Scholarship? Antiscriturism and Anglican Apologetics from Hooker to the Latitudinarians’, in Kevin Killen, Helen Smith and Rachel Willie (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in early modern England, c.1530–1700* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 237–54.

¹⁶ Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 261–68; C. Hill, ‘Irreligion in the “Puritan” Revolution’, in J.F. McGregor and B. Reay (eds.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 199, 209; C. Hill,

scholarship, however, has noted that this assortment of ‘radical philosophers, libertines, English revolutionaries, Quakers, and Jews’ – including some well-known figures such as Thomas Hobbes, Gerrard Winstanley, Samuel Fisher and Baruch Spinoza – are part of a larger story. Indeed, they must be located within the wider context of developing biblical scholarship which, in Jonathan Sheehan’s words, ‘had the potential both to erode and to buttress the authority of Scripture’.¹⁷ Accordingly the perceived rigid dichotomy between radical critics of the Bible and its conservative defenders has now been questioned and emphasis placed instead on the continuous interaction between humanist and vernacular, ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ traditions. Heterodox treatments of scripture should therefore be positioned within far broader debates incorporating figures from across the theological spectrum engaging in what was usually a shared if passionately argued discourse.¹⁸

In the remainder of this article I want to focus on an aspect of these disputes by exploring the basis of antiscripturist ideas, their evolution, and the diverse ways in which they were articulated during the English Revolution by members of various religious communities and political movements; namely, Baptists, ‘Seekers’, Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Quakers and Muggletonians. These of course were unrepresentative men and, very occasionally, women. On the whole, I will suggest that initial objections to what was envisaged as an unquestioning adherence to the outward letter of Scripture – akin almost to worship – together with doubts about its salvific potential were reinforced by several interlinked doctrinal positions: the supremacy of the interior spirit over exterior flesh; the supersession of ordinances such as Baptism (and later the Eucharist, prayer and marriage); seeking and awaiting a return to the primitive Christianity of the Apostles; and belief in the imminent second coming of Christ, an apocalyptic event preceded by prophetic visions of the New Jerusalem. Consequently, there were misgivings about the sufficiency of human learning and concomitant antipathy towards University-trained clergymen and their closely-guarded monopoly on Biblical interpretation. Ironically, this anticlericalism was partly buttressed by engagements with, and borrowings from, increasingly sophisticated Western European scholarly understanding of inherent flaws

‘The Bible and Radical Politics’, in Hill, *English Bible*, pp. 196–250; Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism. From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 230–38.

¹⁷ Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible. Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2005), p. 23.

¹⁸ Ariel Hessayon and Nicholas Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2006).

within the received canon of texts accepted in different configurations by the Roman Catholic Church and its Protestant counterparts as the Bible.¹⁹

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To begin with the Baptists, they agreed that there was no scriptural justification for infant baptism but were nonetheless divided on a number of other important theological issues. Arguably by autumn 1644 this led to a hardening of denominational alignments, so that gradually there developed on the one hand followers of Calvinist doctrine (Particular Baptists), and on the other essentially supporters of core Arminian tenets (General Baptists). Among the radical ideas espoused by certain General Baptists were the abolition of the Sabbath, tithes and ministers. Framed within this context, allegations that many members of Thomas Lambe's General Baptist congregation slighted the Scriptures seem, if allowances are made for polemical distortion, to accord with their broader doctrinal outlook.²⁰ The same may be said of one of the charges made in December 1647 by Rutland ministers against Lambe's evangelising associate the weaver Samuel Oates (1614–1683): namely, that Oates asserted that 'y^e old Testam[en]t is nul'd, and they y^t preach it or alleadg it, are Moses disciples, not Ch[ris]ts'.²¹ Nor were these notions maintained exclusively by General Baptists. Thus another itinerant Baptist evangelist who held a different view on universal redemption, the carter or husbandman Thomas Collier (*d.* 1691), propounded three things concerning Scripture. Firstly, it was insufficient by itself to instruct anyone in the knowledge of God; this could only be achieved through God's powerful influence working on men's spirits. Secondly, some people idolised the outward letter of Scripture rather than harkening to the light of truth within their souls. Thirdly, it was abused by 'making too much of it'. Collier, moreover, suggested that the Hebrew and Greek text was doubtless corrupt since Papists had preserved and transmitted copies of the original. Given that the Papacy had probably perverted the earliest version and that several Greek copies contradicted each other in particular places, Collier therefore advised his fellow self-regarding saints to place their

¹⁹ A. Hessayon, 'The Apocrypha in Early Modern England', in Killen, Smith and Willie (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Bible*, pp. 131–48.

²⁰ Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 1, p. 94.

²¹ A. Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland', *Baptist Quarterly*, 25 (1974), p. 208; *LJ*, ix, 571.

faith in God, through whom Scripture's glorious inner truth would be revealed to their spirit.²²

Collier had been imprisoned at Portsmouth for sowing the seeds of Anabaptism and anti-Sabbatarianism in Guernsey, and was denounced in *Gangraena* as a 'great Sectary' and 'mechanicall fellow'.²³ Also censured in *Gangraena* was Thomas Webbe, who when still only a young man had appeared before the House of Lords in November 1644 charged with venting blasphemies – especially that of denying the immortality of the soul. Although he recanted, Webbe was shortly accused of preaching antinomian doctrines and evangelising against Baptism by water. In addition, Webbe reportedly said that the Scriptures were the 'golden-Calf and brazen-Serpent' that had set the King and Parliament at variance. Only when these idolatrous objects had been dashed to pieces would the divisions that had rent the kingdom asunder be healed. Furthermore, Webbe allegedly claimed that the Scriptures were nothing but a man-made tradition, whose authority was purposefully sustained by a parasitic clergy that derived their livelihood from the monopoly they exercised over its interpretation. In his defence, Webbe strongly denied 'questioning the truth of Scripture' but did not elaborate as to whether this scriptural truth was embodied in the outward letter or inner sense.²⁴

Equally heinous were the teachings disseminated in print by Lawrence Clarkson. Following his baptism in the moat around the Tower of London in November 1644, Clarkson had begun evangelizing and baptising in Suffolk and Norfolk. This resulted in allegations of sexual misconduct during his trial at Bury St. Edmunds and imprisonment. On his release he issued his first pamphlet entitled *The Pilgrimage of Saints, by Church cast out, in Christ found, seeking Truth* (1646). Though no longer extant, its blasphemous contents can be partially reconstructed – particularly several inflammatory passages 'highly derogatory to the Scriptures'. These included Clarkson's apparent assertion that the Bible was not the word of God but a human invention. Accordingly, regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the original manuscript or indeed the English translation's accuracy, the Scriptures had no

²² Thomas Collier, *A General Epistle to The Universall Church of the First Born* (1648), pp. 30–39; cf. Thomas Hall, *The font guarded with XX arguments* (1652), p. 125.

²³ Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 2, p. 148; vol. 3, p. 41.

²⁴ *LJ*, vii, 71, 80–81; Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 1, pp. 54, 74–75; vol. 2, p. 138; Thomas Webbe, *Mr. Edwards Pen No Slander* (1646), p. 9.

authority as a guide to Christian conduct. Afterwards Clarkson delivered a sermon at Colchester in which he allegedly ‘vilified the Scriptures and would not have the people live upon white and black’.²⁵ Some years later he still despaired of the Bible’s internal contradictions, admitting that his reservations had given way to a form of pre-Adamism.²⁶

Clarkson had originally discovered his gift for preaching while serving as a soldier at Great Yarmouth under the command of Captain Paul Hobson, a Particular Baptist. Hobson’s surgeon at Yarmouth was John Boggis, whom Edwards hyperbolically accused of committing the worst blasphemy ‘*since the Creation of the world*’. His doctrinal errors: Boggis was charged with mocking the mealtime prayer (‘*Where is your God, in Heaven, or in Earth, aloft or below, or doth he sit in the clouds, or where doth he sit with his —*’),²⁷ and with reportedly saying that he wished ‘*he had not known so much of the Bible*’ which was only paper.²⁸ Unlike Hobson, Clarkson did not long remain a Baptist. During his confinement he had a protracted conference with the preachers William Sedgwick and William Erbery, following which he concluded that the ordinance of Baptism had ceased with the Apostles’ death.²⁹ Erbery for his part was accused of broaching antinomian doctrines, preaching in favour of universal redemption and doubting the ‘certainty & sufficiency of the Scriptures’, insisting that they could not be considered a solid basis of faith given that there were so many variant copies. On another occasion, following in the footsteps of Erasmus and anticipating arguments that would be advanced in print by the antitrinitarians Paul Best and John Biddle, Erbery dismissed the so-called Johannine comma (1 John 5:7) as proof of Christ’s divinity, objecting that the original Greek text had been amended by opponents of Arianism.³⁰ Erbery returned to this contentious subject in a published letter of 1653, observing that many

²⁵ Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 1, pp. 18, 19, 29, 73, 127; vol. 2, p. 7, 165–66; Robert Baillie, *Anabaptism, the true Fountaine of Independency* (1647), pp. 118, 121; Edward Hill, *Vindiciae veritatis or an unanimous attestation to Gods blessed truth* (1648), p. 6; William Grigge, *The Quakers Jesus* (1658), p. 57; Lawrence Clarkson, *The Lost sheep Found* (1660), pp. 20, 21.

²⁶ Clarkson, *Lost sheep Found*, p. 32.

²⁷ Obscenity omitted in original.

²⁸ Clarkson, *Lost sheep Found*, p. 10; Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 2, ‘To Christian Reader’, pp. 161–63.

²⁹ Clarkson, *Lost sheep Found*, p. 19.

³⁰ Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 1, pp. 77–78; vol. 3, pp. 89–90; Paul Best, *Mysteries discovered* (1647), pp. 7, 11; John Biddle, *Twelve arguments drawn out of the Scripture* (1647), p. 15; Stephen D. Snobelen, ‘“To us there is but one God, the Father”: Antitrinitarian Textual Criticism in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England’, in Hessayon and Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship*, pp. 117–18, 121–23.

Patristic sources did not refer to 1 John 5:7 while the verse was omitted from the ‘very ancient’ Syriac translation of the Bible. Even so, he still accepted the ‘Letter of Scripture’ because he discerned the spiritual truth within.³¹

Erbery was regarded as a ‘Seeker’ as was Clement Wrighter, whom Edwards denounced as an arch heretic, fearful apostate, ‘old Wolf’, ‘Anti-Scripturist, a Questionist and Sceptick, and I fear an Atheist’. Wrighter had been an Independent, General Baptist and an associate of Thomas Lambe. According to Edwards, he also denied the immortality of the soul and asserted that there was no Gospel, no ministry nor faith unless anyone could demonstrate that they had been called to the ministry in the manner of the Apostles. Wrighter, moreover, was said to have affirmed in conversation that:

the Scriptures are not the Word of God, neither in the Translation, not yet in the Original tongues, so as to be an infallible foundation of Faith; that the Scriptures are writings only probably to be believed as the Story of *Henry* the Eighth.³²

Wrighter’s reputation as a prominent Antiscripturist and sceptic endured, and from the mid-1650s he became embroiled intermittently in controversy with the minister Richard Baxter, who erroneously suspected he was ‘a juggling Papist or an Infidel’. Baxter claimed that he had been provoked by this apostate to write *The Vnreasonableness of Infidelity* (1655), which contained sections dogmatically defending the authenticity, antiquity and pristine textual transmission of the Scriptures – except for a few insignificant passages – from the cavils of unbelievers and heretics.³³ Wrighter responded by observing that there were discrepancies between the various old manuscript copies; that scribes were fallible and prone to error; that

³¹ William Erbery, *The testimony of William Erbery* (1658), pp. 118–19, 262; H.J. McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (1951), pp. 229–31.

³² Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 1, pp. 81–83; vol. 3, p. 136; Thomas Wynell, *The Covenants Plea for Infants* (Oxford, 1642), sig. Bv; Henry Denne, *A Contention for Truth* (1658), ‘To the Reader’; Anon., *Some queries propounded to the Common-Councell* (1647), p. 9; Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints. The separate Churches of London 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 82; Wright, *Early English Baptists*, pp. 97, 98, 154; N. McDowell, ‘The Ghost in the Marble: Jeremy Taylor’s *Liberty of Prophesying* (1647) and Its Readers’, in Hessayon and Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship*, pp. 184–88.

³³ Richard Baxter, *The Vnreasonableness of Infidelity* (1655), ‘A Determination of This Question, Whether the Miraculous works of Christ ...’, pp. 12–15, 51–67; Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London, 1696), part i, p. 116.

the English translation may be faulty. Furthermore, since the Bible was unnecessary for salvation when the Gospel had been preached by the Apostles who, he asked, had determined that the written Word should become the basis of true faith?³⁴ In another little treatise entitled *Fides Divina* (1657), a ‘pestilent discourse’ attributed to him by Baxter, Wrighter (if it was he) displayed his tendentious engagement with contemporary biblical criticism.³⁵ Mentioning in passing learned Catholic arguments demonstrating the ‘*corruption of our Scriptures*’ and repeating the Hebraist Hugh Broughton’s assertion that the translators of the Bishops’ Bible (1568) had perverted the text of the Old Testament in 848 places by favouring inferior marginal readings, Wrighter proceeded to reproduce extracts from Protestant scholars supporting his position.³⁶ While this is not the place to explore his social network, it is suggestive that Wrighter bequeathed money to both Humphrey Brooke and Brooke’s father-in-law, the former Leveller leader William Walwyn (1600–1681).³⁷

At a meeting held in London on 1 December 1645 attended by ‘Seekers, Antinomians, Anabaptists’ as well as some Presbyterians to discuss extending the bounds of liberty of conscience, Walwyn had defended Wrighter from the accusation that he denied ‘the Scriptures to be the Word of God’.³⁸ The same calumny together with the charge of atheism was evidently levelled against Walwyn himself, for in *A Still and Soft Voice From the Scriptures* ([March–April?] 1647) he felt obliged to acknowledge that ‘there is a God, and that the Scriptures are the Word of God’. Walwyn had been convinced of the latter proposition not by scholarly arguments but through an ‘irresistible’ persuasive power from within the Scriptures themselves that had ‘pierced’ his ‘judgment and affection’.³⁹ Despite the abundant joy and peace of mind that Walwyn had received, he did little to dispel his

³⁴ Clement Wrighter, *An Apologetical Narration* (2nd edn., [1658?]), pp. 50, 58–59, 62, 77–78; Hill, *English Bible*, p. 236.

³⁵ John Owen, *Of the Divine Originall, Authority, self-evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures* (1659), sig. A3v; Richard Baxter, *A Key for Catholics* (1659), pp. 333, 342–43.

³⁶ [Clement Wrighter?], *Fides Divina: The Ground of True Faith Asserted* (1657), p. 1; cf. Hugh Broughton, *An Advertisement of corruption in our handling of Religion* ([Middelburg], 1604), sigs. A3^v–A3^{r-2}; Hugh Broughton, *Principal Positions for groundes of the holy Bible* (1609), p. 4.

³⁷ TNA: PRO, Prob 11/307, fol. 233v.

³⁸ Edwards, *Gangraena*, vol. 1, pp. 83–84.

³⁹ Jack McMichael and Barbara Taft (eds.), *The Writings of William Walwyn* (Athens, GA, 1989), pp. 271–72, 388–89; John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in 17th-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 148–49.

enemies' suspicions that he privileged the interior sense of the Bible over the outward letter. Thus on one occasion he reportedly asserted the paradox that he believed the Bible was 'not the Word of God' and that simultaneously it was 'the Word of God'. On another, having read one of Lucian's dialogues together with Brooke, Walwyn allegedly informed his household that he considered there to be more wit in Lucian than in the Bible. Besides the aspersion that he valued 'Heathen Authors above the Scriptures', Walwyn's reputation was so traduced that it was even rumoured that he desired having 'all the Bibles in England burnt'.⁴⁰ Nor was the slur of antiscripturism reserved for Walwyn alone, for the Levellers were collectively defamed as Antiscripturists as well as atheists, Jesuits, libertines and royalist agents.⁴¹ These smears were rebutted by the leadership, who denied their intention to redistribute property, eliminate social distinctions and introduce anarchy. For good measure, John Lilburne disassociated himself from the Diggers on St. George's Hill, who had adopted the apostolic model of having all things common.⁴²

St. George's Hill was situated in the parish of Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. About mid-February 1649 (just a few weeks before digging began on the hillside), there was a dramatic incident when six soldiers reportedly entered the church after evening service, one holding a lantern with a candle burning in it and four unlit candles. Prevented from going up into the pulpit and then speaking in the church, the lantern bearer went into the churchyard where he revealed to his auditors that he had received a vision and divine command to deliver God's message. This consisted of five lights, corresponding to the five candles: that the Sabbath was abolished as an unnecessary Jewish ceremonial law; that tithes were abolished for the same reason; that ministers were abolished as 'Antichristian' and now replaced by Christ's Saints whom he enlightened with '*Revelations, and Inspirations*'; that magistrates were abolished, being redundant now that Christ had '*erected the Kingdom of Saints upon earth*'; and that the Old and New Testament were abolished because Christ had now arrived in glory,

⁴⁰ John Price, *Walwins Wiles* (1649), p. 11; Humphrey Brooke, *The charity of church-men* (1649), pp. 3, 4; McMichael and Taft (eds.), *Writings of Walwyn*, pp. 356–57, 366, 398, 411.

⁴¹ Anon., *Sea-Green & Blue which Speaks True* (1649), p. 17; John Lilburne, *A manifestation from Lieutenant Col. John Lilburne* (1649), p. 4; John Wood, *The Levellers (falsly so called) vindicated* (1649), p. 1.

⁴² John Lilburne, *The legal fundamental liberties of the people of England* (1649), p. 75, reprinted in William Haller and Godfrey Davies (eds.), *The Leveller Tracts 1647–1653* (New York, 1944), p. 449.

imparting ‘a fuller measure of his Spirit to his Saints’ than the Scriptures, which were but ‘beggarly rudiments, milke for Babes’. At which point he set fire to his little Bible.⁴³

Although the identity of the lantern bearer is unknown, his religious opinions sound like William Everard (1602?–fl.1651) who at this time had likewise rejected gospel ordinances, believing he had received the gift of revelation. Apparently a Parliamentarian spy during the Civil War, Everard was subsequently implicated in a plot to assassinate Charles I. He was detained at Windsor in the Marshal-General’s custody and sometime after December 1647 cashiered from the army. Before March 1649 Everard had rejected both infant baptism and believers’ baptism as well, maintaining that he had been sent by God and given a new spiritual name. A Presbyterian minister of Reading later vilified him as ‘first a *separatist*, then a *scoffer* at ordinances, then a *curser*, then a *blasphemer*’.⁴⁴ Calling himself a prophet Everard was also, together with Gerrard Winstanley, a leading Digger. Their earliest recorded association can be traced to October 1648 when Winstanley dated the preface to his tract *Truth Lifting up its head above scandals* (1649). This work was written partly as a vindication of Everard, who had been accused of blasphemously denying God, Christ, Scriptures and prayer, ‘slanderously’ branded a ‘*deceiver*’ with other ‘*filthy names*’, and imprisoned by the bailiffs of Kingston-upon-Thames after lodging a night in the town – seemingly at the instigation of some ministers and local people.⁴⁵

Winstanley’s own heterodox religious views were the product of a spiritual journey with distinct puritan and General Baptist phases.⁴⁶ Though it would be crude to label him a Seeker during the spring, summer and autumn of 1648, envisioning his spiritual odyssey as progressing in parallel with those who had abandoned outward ceremonies to await a return to the primitive Christianity of the Apostles is instructive. Indeed, at the conclusion of *Truth Lifting up its head* Winstanley condemned ten outward ordinances whose observation he

⁴³ Clement Walker, *Anarchia Anglicana: or, the History of Independency. The Second part* (1649), pp. 152–53; Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 110, 189–90.

⁴⁴ Samuel Fisher, *Baby-Baptism meer Babism* (1653), pp. 303–04; Christopher Fowler, *Daemonium Meridianum: Satan at Noon* (1655), p. 59; Ariel Hessayon, ‘Everard, William (*bap.* 1602?, *d.* in or after 1651)’, *ODNB*.

⁴⁵ Thomas Corns, Ann Hughes and David Loewenstein (eds.), *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (2 vols., Oxford, 2009), vol. 1, p. 412.

⁴⁶ A. Hessayon, ‘Winstanley and Baptist thought’, *Prose Studies*, 36 (2014), pp. 15–31.

considered unwarranted. Among them were preaching not from inward experience but knowledge gained through hearing, reading and studying; expounding Scripture for financial gain; keeping the Sunday Sabbath; administering communion; infant baptism; and the preaching of the Gospel by University trained clergymen who thereby persecuted the ‘Spirit within’ that had made Moses (a shepherd), Amos (a fruit gatherer), the Apostles (fishermen) and Christ (a carpenter) preachers.⁴⁷ This work had commenced with an address to the scholars of Oxford and Cambridge and all those calling themselves ministers of the Gospel. Here Winstanley declared that regardless of their ability to render Hebrew and Greek into English, scholars and clergymen did not possess the original Scriptures as written by the Prophets and Apostles – merely copies of questionable accuracy. Consequently their contradictory translations, inferences, conjectures and doctrines were akin to a savage beast ripping asunder the Gospel, whose inner truth could not be apprehended through corrupt flesh but be judged only by the Spirit of the risen Christ, which was now spreading through his sons and daughters.⁴⁸ Within the main text Winstanley adopted a catechetical format, explaining that the Gospel was God the Father himself whereas the Scriptures contained only testimonies of his appearance to comfort believers. And in these ‘latter’ days when God was manifesting himself to rule in the flesh of his saints, the writings of the Prophets and Apostles would cease, their validity being superseded by the everlasting Gospel: the Lord himself.⁴⁹

Reiterating his invective against the clergy in *The New Law of Righteousnes*, Winstanley also drew a comparison between the ‘bitter’ ‘zealous Scribes and Pharisees’ that had killed Christ (Matthew 23:14–15, 23–33) and his latter day betrayers – subtle, proud, fleshy preachers and teachers motivated by greed, that were hindering Christ from rising within the cloudy hearts of his Saints. These deceitful Pharisees of Winstanley’s own age, who despised poor men and women that spoke of God from an ‘inward testimony’, calling them ‘Locusts, factious, blasphemers, and what not’, would be stoned out of their pulpits and whipped out of God’s Temple in the manner of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple at Jerusalem and overthrowing their tables (John 2:15).⁵⁰ For their ‘fine language’ was but ‘a

⁴⁷ *Complete Works of Winstanley*, vol. 1, pp. 449–52.

⁴⁸ *Complete Works of Winstanley*, vol. 1, pp. 409–10.

⁴⁹ *Complete Works of Winstanley*, vol. 1, pp. 429–36.

⁵⁰ *Complete Works of Winstanley*, vol. 1, pp. 487, 510, 523, 528, 530, 536–37, 547, 563–64.

husk without the kernall', 'words without life'; their stinking outward religious services, preaching, praying and public worship an 'abomination to the Lord'.⁵¹

In early 1650 the Diggers' spiritual and temporal community, with its open fluid membership, was infiltrated by people Winstanley would call 'Ranters', and in a subsequent vindication he disassociated the Diggers from the Ranters' perceived sexual excesses by distinguishing between community of goods and community of women.⁵² Ranters were generally demonised as a lustful, ungodly crew given to all manner of wickedness. Their allegedly lascivious habits and sinful theatrical antics – cursing, excessive drinking, revelling, roaring, smoking and whoring – were envisaged as a threat to patriarchal norms and societal order, their teachings denounced by Presbyterian moralists and scandalised former co-religionists alike as detestable doctrines inspired by the Devil.⁵³ So too was their supposed parodying of religious ceremonies and espousal of antiscripturian notions. Hence Abiezer Coppe's allusion to the whore of Babylon (Revelation 17:4–6) as 'the holy Scripturian Whore' was misunderstood, perhaps intentionally, as derogatory comparison with the Bible,⁵⁴ while Coppe's comrade Andrew Wyke reportedly placed Scripture on a par with a ballad.⁵⁵ Another associate, Joseph Salmon was denounced for making Scripture 'a nose of wax' by forcing allegorical senses on what were plainly historical and doctrinal passages. Similarly, Richard Coppin was censured for maintaining that 'the holy Scriptures are a leaden Lesbian rule, a nose of Wax, a meer Cypher, which may be made to signifie any thing'.⁵⁶

These charges doubtless added flesh to the bones of a stereotype, a polemical construction with prominent antiscripturian aspects. Among them were accusations that Ranters blasphemously derided the Scriptures, claiming that they were above and beyond them, and consequently that they were not constrained by biblical-based morality since the Scriptures

⁵¹ *Complete Works of Winstanley*, vol. 1, p. 566.

⁵² *Complete Works of Winstanley*, vol. 2, pp. 167, 235–40.

⁵³ A. Hessayon, 'Abiezer Coppe and the Ranters', in Laura Knoppers (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 346–74.

⁵⁴ Abiezer Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule* (1649), p. 5; Michael Sparke, *A second beacon fired by Scintilla* (1652), p. 7.

⁵⁵ *HMC, F.W. Leybourne-Popham, Esq.* (Norwich, 1899), p. 57; cf. *A Perfect Diurnall*, no. 14 (11–18 March 1650), p. 128.

⁵⁶ Walter Rosewell, *The Serpents Subtilty Discovered* (1656), pp. 1, 16; cf. Edward Hyde, *A Wonder and yet no Wonder* (1651), p. 24.

bore no authority in regulating their outrageous conduct.⁵⁷ Furthermore, they were said to spurn Scripture, pronouncing it a ‘dead Letter’ fit for the flames,⁵⁸ or else slighting it as a collection of fables to be cited only in jest. Allegedly one supposed Ranter even declared the Bible to be an extremely cunning piece of witchcraft, with another maintaining that it was the cause of all human misery, religious turmoil and political division. Nor would there ever be peace in the world ‘till all the Bibles ... were burned’.⁵⁹ Despite the Ranters swift demise their menacing spectre lingered, invoked by pamphleteers seeking to turn a profit, including one who reworked various antiscripturarian motifs into a believable if embellished caricature of their ‘*Diabolical & Blasphemous*’ tenets:

*That the Sacred BIBLE was but a meer Romance, and Contradictory to it self; only invented by the Witts of Former Ages, to keep People in subjection, and (as they term it) in Egyptian slavery; likewise, That there was as much truth in the History of Tom Thumb, or The Knight of the SUN, as there was in that Book.*⁶⁰

In *Grace Abounding* (1666) John Bunyan recalled having read some Ranter books so it is suggestive that he had once been beset with blasphemous thoughts: whether there was a God, and ‘whether the holy Scriptures were not rather a fable, and cunning story, than the holy and pure Word of God?’ Bunyan’s Mr Badman echoed these dark musings questioning whether the Scriptures were the word of God and likening them to a ‘Nose of Wax’ easily moulded to purpose. Besides containing internal contradictions and a ‘thousand impossibilities’, they were, Badman continued, the ‘cause of all dissensions and discords that are in the Land’.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Anon., *The Rovting of the Ranters* (1650), p. 2; Raunce Burthall, *An Old Bridle for a Wilde Asse-Colt* (1650), p. 6; Gilbert Roulston [pseud.], *The Ranters Bible* (1650), p. 4; Nicholas Culpeper, *An ephemeris for the year 1652* (1652), p. 30; John Reeve, *A Remonstrance from the Eternall God* (1653), p. 3; Thomas Collier, *A Looking-Glasse for the Quakers* (1656), p. 7.

⁵⁸ John Holland, *The Smoke of the Bottomlesse Pit* (1651), pp. 3, 4; Samuel Tilbury [pseud.], *Bloudy Newse from the North, and The Ranting Adamites Declaration* (1651), p. 1; J.F., *A new Proclamation* (1653), p. 5.

⁵⁹ Holland, *Smoke*, pp. 3, 4; Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography* (1654), p. 144; Alexander Ross, *Pansebeia: Or, A View of all Religions in the World* (1655), p. 388.

⁶⁰ J.M., *The Ranters Last Sermon* (1654), p. 4.

⁶¹ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (7th edn., 1692), pp. 20–22, 46–47; John Bunyan, *The life and death of Mr. Badman* (2nd edn., 1680), pp. 255–56.

Many early Quakers were understandably concerned to distinguish between the Ranters' sinful behaviour and their own upright conduct because a number of critics tarred them with the same brush. And for good reason since there appeared to hostile observers little theological difference between them. Thus both were attacked not only for falling into ecstatic trances and public nakedness but also for maintaining that the Light (Christ) was within everyone, denying the validity of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, anticlericalism and antiscriturism. Although Quakers were regularly suspected of wanting to burn their Bibles,⁶² few – so far as can be ascertained – actually did so.⁶³ A more common charge was that Quakers denied the Scriptures to be the word of God.⁶⁴ Indeed, they were accused of dissuading people from reading the Scriptures, telling them that the outward letter was 'carnal', 'dust' and Antichrist, whereas the spiritual inner word of God could not be apprehended with 'carnal eyes'.⁶⁵ Moreover, they claimed that Scripture should not be expounded (the absence of early Quaker biblical commentaries is striking), and that studying

⁶² Francis Higginson, *A brief relation of the irreligion of the northern Quakers* (1653), pp. 5, 29; *The Weekly Post*, no. 123 (17–24 April 1655), p. 1780; Anon., *The Quakers dream* (1655), p. 3; Christopher Fowler and Simon Ford, *A sober answer to an angry epistle* (1656), p. 47; John Deacon, *The Grand Impostor examined* (1656), p. 46; William Grigge, *The Quakers Jesus* (1658), p. 50; Thomas Underhill, *Hell broke loose* (1660), p. 44; Richard Blome, *The Fanatick History* (1660), p. 110.

⁶³ Friends House Library, MS Swarthmore IV 14; Adrian Davies, *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 17, 197; Avner Shamir, 'Bible burning and the desecration of bibles in early modern England', Unpublished Roskilde University Ph.D. dissertation, 2010, pp. 108, 126–29.

⁶⁴ Anon., *The Black and Terrible Warning Piece* (1653), p. 1; Higginson, *Brief relation*, pp. 4, 57, 61; Thomas Weld, *The perfect Pharise* (1654), pp. 22–23; Ross, *Pansebeia*, p. 383; Edward Underhill (ed.), *Records of the Churches of Christ, gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham. 1644–1720* (1854), pp. 115–16; *Perfect Proceedings of State Affairs*, no. 290 (12–19 April 1655), pp. 4604–05; Fowler, *Daemonium Meridianum*, p. 155; Christopher Fowler, *Daemonium Meridianum: Satan at Noon. The Second Part* (1656), p. 58; Richard Baxter, *The Quakers Catechism* (1655), pp. 11, 26, 30; Deacon, *Grand Impostor*, p. 46; Richard Baxter, *One Sheet against the Quakers* (1657), p. 4; Underhill, *Hell broke loose*, pp. 24, 25, 44; Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, p. 60; Roger Williams, *George Fox Digg'd out of his Burrowes* (Boston, 1676), pp. 137, 219; cf. G.F. Nuttall, 'Nothing else would do: Early Quakers and the Bible', *Friends Quarterly*, 22 (1982), pp. 651–59, reprinted in Geoffrey Nuttall, *Early Quaker Studies and the Divine Presence* (Quinta Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ R.S. Mortimer, 'Allegations against George Fox in North Lancashire', *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, 39 (1947), pp. 16, 17; James Nayler and George Fox, *Saul's Errand to Damascus* (1653), pp. 7–8, 10, 11, 15, 16; Higginson, *Brief relation*, pp. 5, 57; Fowler, *Daemonium Meridianum*, p. 134; James Nayler, *A Publike Discovery* (1656), pp. 9–10.

Scripture was redundant.⁶⁶ All of which followed from their belief that the outward written text of the Bible had been superseded by the light within.

While Quakers rarely cited from the Apocrypha, a few were concerned with the fate of ‘those Scriptures mentioned, but not inserted in the Bible’.⁶⁷ This interest in extra-canonical texts is illustrated in a letter of March 1658 to Margaret Fell concerning the anticlerical overtones of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs together with a request that any Friends evangelising in Holland confer with Dutch Jews about extant copies of the Book of Enoch.⁶⁸ Possibly about 1659 a catalogue of extra-canonical writings appeared in *Something concerning Agbarus, Prince of the Edesseans* listing items such as the prophecy of Enoch (Jude 14); the book of Jehu (2 Chronicles 20:34); the book of the battles of the Lord (Numbers 21:14); the book of Nathan, the prophecy of Ahijah and the visions of Iddo (2 Chronicles 9:29); the book of Shemaiah (2 Chronicles 12:15); the book of Jasher (2 Samuel 1:18); the book of Gad (1 Chronicles 29:29); a lost Pauline epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:9); the first epistle to the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:3); the epistle to the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16) and numerous books attributed to Solomon.⁶⁹ Occurring verbatim in a known Quaker work printed in 1659 and placed in some Bibles owned by Quakers together with the forged Pauline epistle to the Laodiceans, this catalogue may have been compiled by the controversialist Samuel Fisher (1604–1665).⁷⁰

In *Rusticus ad Academicos* (1660) Fisher defended the Quakers from the calumny that they slighted the Scriptures by highlighting at enormous discursive length the Bible’s inherent flaws.⁷¹ By turns learned and satirical, among his central arguments were that during the

⁶⁶ Higginson, *Brief relation*, p. 4; Weld, *Perfect Pharise*, p. 27; Deacon, *Grand Impostor*, p. 46.

⁶⁷ Anon., *Something concerning Agbarus, Prince of the Edesseans* (no date = 1659), p. 1; H.J. Cadbury, ‘Early Quakerism and uncanonical lore’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 40 (1947), pp. 179–91.

⁶⁸ FHL, MS Swarthmore I 243, printed in H.J. Cadbury, ‘Hebraica and the Jews in Early Quaker Interest’, in Howard Brinton (ed.), *Children of Light. In Honour of Rufus M. Jones* (New York, 1938), p. 160.

⁶⁹ Anon., *Something concerning Agbarus*, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Edward Billing, *A Word of Reproof, and Advice to my late Fellow-Souldiers* (1659), p. 44; Thomas Comber, *Christianity No Enthusiasm* (1678), p. 58; N. Keene, ‘“A Two-Edged Sword”: Biblical Criticism and the New Testament Canon in Early Modern England’, in Hessayon and Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship*, pp. 104–06.

⁷¹ Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination. Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630–1660* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 137–82; Katz, *God’s Last Words*, pp. 70–73.

process of transmission the Bible had become corrupted by scribal errors and consequently that the extant manuscripts had textual discrepancies;⁷² that the English translators had made several mistakes in their rendering of the original sense;⁷³ that the Hebrew Bible had been written without punctuation or vowel points (both later additions, the latter determining the pronunciation of consonant groups);⁷⁴ and that the creation of the Biblical canon had been an arbitrary process:

Was it *God* or was it *Man* that set such distinct Bounds to the Scripture, so as to say such and such a set number of Books, *viz.* those that are sum'd up together before your *Bibles*, excepting the *Apocrypha*, which stands between them, shall be owned as *Canonical*, and the rest, though such as were of the same *divine Inspiration*, be rejected as *humane*, no otherwise accounted on then other *meer mens Writings*, not to be received with such high respect as the other? ... Who was it God or Man, the Spirit in the Scripture it self, or the *Scribes* in their *Synods*, *Councils*, and *Consistories* that so Authorized or Canonized these, and expunged those? Was it not meer Men in their *Imaginations*?⁷⁵

Yet among contemporaries the most notorious instance of early Quaker engagement with extra-canonical sources was undoubtedly James Nayler, who provocatively wore his hair long and centre-parted with accompanying shaped beard not just in imitation of the Nazarites (Judges 13:5), but so as to replicate Christ's likeness as delineated in the apocryphal account of Publius Lentulus.⁷⁶

The Muggletonians too, who believed a pair of artisans John Reeve (1608–1658) and his cousin Lodowick Muggleton (1609–1698) to be the 'two Witnesses of the Spirit' foretold in

⁷² Samuel Fisher *Rusticus ad Academicos in Exercitationibus Expostulatoriis* (1660), part ii, pp. 3–6, 123, 128.

⁷³ Fisher *Rusticus*, part ii, pp. 132–34, part iii, p. 3; cf. George Fox, *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded* (1659), pp. 373–74.

⁷⁴ Fisher *Rusticus*, part ii, pp. 105–22; cf. Thomas Browne, *Certain Miscellany Tracts* (1684), p. 132.

⁷⁵ Fisher *Rusticus*, part ii, pp. 74–105 (at p. 76).

⁷⁶ *Pvblivs Lentvlvs, his Nevves to the Senate of Rome, concerning Jesus Christ* (no date; reprinted, 1650); Anon., *The Quakers Quaking* (1657), p. 3; Anon., *A True Narrative of the Examination, Tryall, and Sufferings of James Nayler* (1657), p. 6; Ralph Farmer, *Sathan Inthron'd in his Chair of Pestilence* (1657), pp. 25–27; Grigge, *Quakers Jesus*, pp. 68–69; cf. Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), book 5, cap. 7, pp. 245–46.

the Revelation of St. John, challenged the accepted biblical canon.⁷⁷ On the one hand they excised writings attributed to Solomon, notably the Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Partly this was because they thought the Ranters – whom they loathed – had justified their transgressive sexual behaviour through reference to the Song of Songs’ erotic imagery; partly so that their distinctive doctrine about the soul’s destiny could not be controverted by a passage in Ecclesiastes.⁷⁸ As Reeve put it; Solomon was ‘a very wise man, but I never read, that he was a holy, or prophetic Man; therefore, it doth not appear to me, that he was a Pen-man of Holy-Writ’.⁷⁹ On the other, Muggleton was acquainted with the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and through them knew of prophecies recorded in the books of Enoch. Although Muggleton did not assert these works were canonical, he nonetheless considered the Enochic writings to be inspired supposing they confirmed his belief in a corporeal rather than an immanent deity; ‘gods becoming flesh’ to quote a follower. As late as 1837 the Muggletonians issued their own edition of *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* from a copy printed in 1693 for the London Stationers’ Company.⁸⁰

Finally, mention should be made of an assortment of figures accused of venting various antiscriturian notions. These included the pseudo-Christ William Franklin (c.1610–fl.1650) who about 1646 may have become acquainted with some of those that denied ‘Ordinances, Scriptures, Christ’;⁸¹ a Somerset women reportedly pretending to prophecy, who with others

⁷⁷ A. Gordon, ‘Ancient and modern Muggletonians’, *Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool*, 24 (1870), pp. 224–26; Cadbury, ‘Early Quakerism and uncanonical lore’, pp. 183 n. 16, 184 n. 20; Hill, *English Bible*, pp. 366–67.

⁷⁸ Laurence Claxton [= Lawrence Clarkson], *Look about you, For the Devil that you fear is in you* (1659), pp. 95, 98; Lawrence Clarkson, *The Quakers Downfal* (1659), pp. 5–7; Lawrence Clarkson, *A Paradisical Dialogue betwixt Faith and Reason* (1660), pp. 57–58; Clarkson, *Lost sheep Found*, p. 26; John Harwood, *The Lying Prophet Discovered and Reproved* (1659), pp. 2–3; Lodowick Muggleton, *The Neck of the Quakers Broken* (1663), p. 24; Lodowick Muggleton, *A Looking-Glass for George Fox* (1668), pp. 63–64; Lodowick Muggleton, *The Answer to William Penn* (1673), pp. 9–10.

⁷⁹ John Reeve, *Joyful News from Heaven* (1658; 1706 edn.), pp. 11–16 (at p. 13).

⁸⁰ Muggleton, *Answer to Penn*, pp. 29, 32–33; John Reeve and Lodowick Muggleton, *Veræ Fidei Gloria est Corona Vitæ. A Volume of Spiritual Epistles* (ed. Tobiah Terry, 1755; 1820 edn.), pp. 516, 587; A. Hessayon, ‘Og King of Bashan, Enoch and the Books of Enoch: Extra-Canonical Texts and Interpretations of Genesis 6:1–4’, in Hessayon and Keene (eds.), *Scripture and Scholarship*, pp. 34–37.

⁸¹ Humphrey Ellis, *Pseudochristus* (1650), p. 7; Ariel Hessayon, ‘Franklin, William (b. c.1610)’, *ODNB*.

of her crew denied ‘Christ, and the Scriptures wholly’, but had since gone mad;⁸² another woman who considered herself ‘wrapt up into God’ and ‘looked upon the scriptures as nothing’;⁸³ soldiers stationed at the garrison in Cork under the command of Colonel Robert Phaire who in March 1653 were alleged to have been ensnared by a spirit of delusion, asserting ‘y^t God is nothing, y^t heauen is not locall, y^t y^e Scriptures viz. the ould and new testam^t are not the word of God’;⁸⁴ an army officer who supposedly insisted that the Bible was riddled with internal contradictions and so no more to be believed than the Koran or indeed other books;⁸⁵ and another soldier who reportedly confessed to ‘denying God, jeering at Christ, and Scripture, and all Religion’.⁸⁶ In addition, there were legal proceedings against little-known artisans and rustics; a tailor accused of saying that all the bishops and prelates in the kingdom were false prophets who had falsely translated the Bible;⁸⁷ a Southwark haberdasher charged with maintaining that the Bible was but a fable;⁸⁸ a Somerset man who reportedly compared the Scriptures to fables or a ballad, asserting that prayer and devotion were unnecessary and that salvation was assured if believers lived in Christ;⁸⁹ a Scotsman charged at Dumfries in May 1656 with denying the Trinity, the existence of the soul, heaven and hell, and that the Scriptures were the word of God;⁹⁰ and two Wiltshire weavers indicted for blasphemy in 1656, one of whom allegedly affirmed that God was in all things, while the other publicly professed that:

there was no God or power ruling above the planets, no Christ but the sun that shines upon us, that the twelve patriarchs were twelve houses, that if the Scripture were a making againe then Tom Lampire of Melksham would make as good Scriptures as the Bible, there was neither heaven nor hell except in a man’s own conscience, for if he had a good fortune and did live

⁸² *A Perfect Diurnall*, no. 13 (4–11 March 1650), p. 110; BL, Add MS 37,345, fol. 54.

⁸³ Underhill (ed.), *Records of Churches of Christ*, pp. 89–90.

⁸⁴ National Library of Wales, MS 11,440D, p. 131.

⁸⁵ Anon., *A List of some of the Grand Blasphemers and Blasphemies* (1654), brs.

⁸⁶ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 211 (22–29 June 1654), p. 3584; *Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 40 (27 June – 4 July 1654), p. 305.

⁸⁷ TNA: PRO, SP 16/387, fol. 103.

⁸⁸ TNA: PRO, SP 16/437, fol. 52.

⁸⁹ E. Bates Harbin (ed.), *Quarter Sessions records for the county of Somerset, 1646–1660*, Somerset Record Society, 28 (1912), pp. xlii, 291, 338.

⁹⁰ *Mercurius Politicus*, no. 316 (26 June – 3 July 1656), pp. 7064–66.

well, that was heaven, and if he lived poor and miserable, that was hell, for then he would die like a cow or horse.⁹¹

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In *The Considerator Considered* (1659) Brian Walton, principle editor of the London Polyglot Bible (1653–57), defended his enterprise from an attack by John Owen, vice-chancellor of Oxford University.⁹² Among Owen’s objections were that by publishing each book of the Bible in a variety of ancient languages displayed together on the same and facing pages, Walton had made it easier for scholars to detect possible textual corruptions. This would give ammunition to the Papists and ‘Fanaticall Anti Scripturists’, and while it was one thing for learned men to debate these matters, it was quite another to put a weapon ‘into the hands of men of *Atheisticall* minds and *Principles*, such as this Age abounds withall’.⁹³ Although Walton dismissed these fears, his dispute with Owen raises an important issue: namely the relationship between learned criticism undertaken by university-educated men familiar with Hebrew, Greek and Latin (which had begun proliferating in England), and autodidactic criticism by generally less well schooled sectarians who tended to know the Bible only in the vernacular. To talk of ‘high’ and ‘low’ biblical criticism would be overly simplistic, as it would be to suggest that knowledge trickled down from scholars to merchants, artisans and rustics – although there is evidence, as we have seen, that damaging observations by Erasmus and Broughton were recycled.⁹⁴ Moreover, while the lowly social status of most sectarian biblical critics is clearly important, as is the fact that they felt emboldened to challenge clerical and judicial authority, not all had gleaned their information from cheap print, disputations and sermons alone. A handful like Coppe, Erbery and Fisher had attended university; Oates was the son of clergyman; and Walwyn (maternal grandson of a bishop) had received formal tuition. Indeed, the sources used by plebeian antiscripturists

⁹¹ *HMC, Various Collections, vol. I* (1901), pp. 132–33; B.H. Cunningham (ed.), *Records of the county of Wiltshire, being extracted form the Quarter Sessions Great Rolls of the Seventeenth Century* (Devizes, 1932), p. 231; Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 228.

⁹² P.N. Miller, ‘The “Antiquarianization” of Biblical Scholarship and the London Polyglot Bible (1653–57)’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62 (2001), pp. 463–82; Katz, *God’s Last Words*, pp. 88–93.

⁹³ John Owen, *Of the Divine Originall, Authority, self-evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures* (1659), pp. 147–48, 161; cf. Brian Walton, *The Considerator Considered* (1659), pp. 8, 25, 149–50.

⁹⁴ It would be interesting to see if Robert Gell’s prolix *An Essay toward the amendment of the last English Translation of the Bible* (1659) was appropriated in the same way.

are clearly something requiring further detailed investigation. And while it would be a truism to state that manifestations of antiscriturism during the English Revolution were the product of religious, political and social turmoil characteristic of that milieu, context nonetheless matters.

From its hostile representation to the different ways in which the outer text of Scripture was relegated to a dead letter in the writings and reported speech of Baptists, 'Seekers', Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Quakers, Muggletonians and assorted blasphemers, context alerts us to how stereotypical constructions of the Antiscriturist must be positioned within wider polemical debates and how such accusations had the capacity to damage reputations. It reminds us that sectarian attitudes to the Bible were part of a broader, generally millenarian, outlook that privileged the spirit over flesh, inner illumination over outward ordinances, divinely revealed knowledge over university-trained scholarship, latter day Apostles (in the guise of humble tradesmen) over Pharisees (ordained ministers). Furthermore, it cautions against presenting what was only an aspect of larger debates as if it were the whole. For to fully appreciate the varieties of antiscriturism we need to integrate sectarian viewpoints within a spectrum of opinions that encompassed scholarly critiques of the sacred text.