

JAMES GEORGE DECK

David C F Wright DD

James George Deck was the man who introduced the Brethren to New Zealand. He was a very fine writer of hymns and poems and one of his beautiful poems appears below

The Word of God – A Poem by J. G. Deck

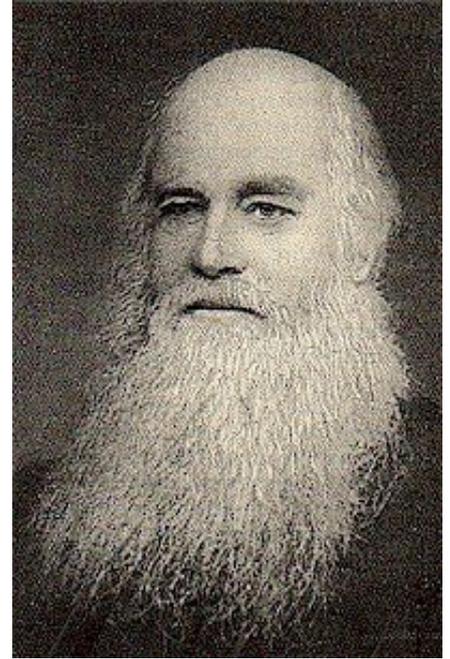
Some tell me that the Bible
Is not God's sacred Word,
And brand as cunning fables
The records of the Lord;
That Moses is a fiction,
And prophets never spake,
And e'en the blessed gospels
As myths I should forsake.

There was a time I listened
To these old serpent's lies -
My foolish heart sore tempted
The Bible to despise:
Its holiness rebuked me,
Its precepts crossed my will;
I wished to silence conscience,
And thus my lusts fulfil.

I cared not for the Saviour,
This present world I loved;
Its lusts, and wealth, and glory,
Alone my passions moved.
I cared not for a heaven,
I hoped there were no hell;
I wished for no hereafter,
I loved my sins too well.

Alas! in mad rebellion,
I hoped there were no God:
I cared not for His favour,
Though trembling at His rod;
I wished His word a fable
That warned of wrath to come;
"No God," my heart would mutter,
"No future weal, or doom!"

And yet my mother taught me,
In tones so sweet and mild,
To know its holy pages
E'en when I was a child;
She read to me of Jesus,
Of all His grace and love;
And sought with tears my blessing –
His blessing from above.



Oh, why did I so madly
My mother's law forsake?
Oh, why did I so basely
God's righteous precepts break?
Oh, why did I so blindly
His warnings all despise,
And from the Friend of Sinners
Avert my heart and eyes?

His mercy still pursued me
While wand'ring far away;
His hand with sickness smote me,
To wound, but not to slay:
His Spirit then convinced me,
And brought my guilt to light;
I saw my lost condition,
How awful was the sight!

The serpent's crafty teachings,
The heart's deceptive lies,
The sceptic's subtle reasonings,
All vanished from mine eyes:
Naked, and lost, and guilty,
Beneath God's searching eye-
Eternity before me-
Oh, whither could I fly?

Oh then what beautiful sunshine
Burst on my raptured sight!
It chased away the darkness,
And all was life, and light:
I saw how grace and glory
In God's free gospel shone;
Before the cross, my terrors
And unbelief were gone.

I love the blessed Bible,
I know it all is true;
It is a faithful mirror
In which myself I view:
It shows me all my weakness,
My folly and my shame;
But makes thereby more precious
My Saviour's grace and name.

Oh what a light in darkness!
Oh what a balm in woe!
What streams of consolation
Through all its pages flow!
What mines of richest treasure,
What glories fresh I meet,
While, pondering the Scriptures,
I sit at Jesus' feet!

His name, like sweetest music,
Falls ever on mine ear;
I go to it, expecting
My Saviour's voice to hear:
A monument of mercy! ,
Oh, may my life proclaim
The truth of God's salvation,
The glory of His name!

James George Deck was born on 1 November 1807 in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, England, the eldest child of Mary, nee Welch, and her husband, John Deck, who were members of the Church of England. James's mother was a godly praying woman and all her children were converted at a young age. One of her daughters, who became Mary Jane Walker, marrying Dr Rev Walker of Cheltenham, wrote hymns including Jesus I will trust Thee.

It is believed that the Deck family had Huguenot ancestry. The father John Deck was born in 1781 was a well-to-do postmaster in Bury and one time its Mayor.

James was drawn to the Army, encouraged by his father and received a military training in Paris. His father bought a commission to the 14th Madras Native Infantry of the East India Company, serving as lieutenant from 1824 to 1826. A severe attack of cholera brought him home to England in 1826. He had aspirations to be the MP for Bury after his military service...

Returning to England, he was converted to evangelical Christianity in 1826. His sister Clara took him to hear a Church of England clergyman and he was converted.

Before his return to India in 1830, he attended a private Church of England theological college at Hatherleigh in Dartmoor where his private tutor was Samuel Field. James came to realise that the Church of England had beliefs contrary to the Bible. His brother became the Bishop of Newfoundland.

James Deck married Alicia Field, daughter of his tutor on 22 April 1829 and they were to have ten children, nine of which survived. These were Samuel John 1832, Mary Alicia 1833 John Field 5 July 1835, James George 1837, Clara Agnes 1839, Sarah Rachel 1840 Margaret Jane (known as Daisy) 1843, Fanny Harriet 1845, Henry Augustus 1848, who only lived for a few days, ,and Alice Anne Catherine 1852

Deck began to have serious doubts about both the Army and military service and he resigned his commission in 1835.

After his return to England he and his wife were re-baptised, contrary to Church of England teachings.

James and Alicia Deck were drawn to the Plymouth Brethren, and Deck became an evangelist in the area of Taunton, and then Weymouth. He was sensitive and a deep thinker and he wrote very devotional Christian hymns and poetry which was used in the Brethrens earliest hymn books.

As divisions and schisms emerged in the Brethren, Deck sought to reconcile the opponents, but his two written tracts on the subject won him no friends. He then suffered a stroke and partial paralysis which led him to emigrate to New Zealand for the climate and to escape the troubles.

He wanted the brethren to be more open with each other and following the Plymouth and Bethseda splits of 1846 and 1848 respectively wanted to make peace between all parties. However his exclusive principles meant that he could not accept the independence of assemblies and he agreed with Darby who spoke of the glorified united body of Christ. Some brethren took his views as acceptance both of the Open Brethren

position and their independence. He was regarded by some as a renegade. He issued a Second Letter on Receiving and Rejecting Brethren in 1852 advocating that an assembly could put out of fellowship any assembly that had gone astray and thereafter fellowship with them would no longer be possible.

He had written this hymn probably in 1838:

O Lord, with sorrow and with shame
We meekly would confess
How little we, who bear Thy Name
Thy mind and ways express,

Give us Thy meek, Thy lowly mind;
we fain would like Thee be
And al l our rest and pleasure find
In learning, Lord, of Thee.

Not all brethren acknowledged what was expressed in this hymn.

To add to Deck's dilemma his mother was dying at this time in 1852. Darby invited Deck to meet him that summer of 1852 in London, a meeting of humiliation to resolve any problems. The meeting went badly. Wigram said that this attitude of humiliation was being taken too far. Darby told Deck not to admit that the Exclusives had made any mistakes.

Deck, his wife and surviving children arrived on the Cornwall in Wellington in 1853. They purchased land in the Waiwhero district, eight miles from Motueka, in Nelson province where tragedy struck.

Alicia Deck died of an ear abscess in December 1853, and on 17 July 1855 James Deck married Lewanna Atkinson at Motueka. Their children were Eve 1857, Edward 1858, Henry O'Brien 1859 (or 1860) and Charles James known as Jim.

In 1859, Deck stayed for six months with his second son in Invercargill when his son was a dentist. Here a Wesleyan minister, the Rev Rishworth, accused Deck of not being an evangelist but of being a charlatan.

James Deck continued to become well known as a preacher and advocated Christian unity and debated with other non conformists. His godly influence and example resulted in Brethren assemblies being formed between Nelson and Motueka. Motueka became known as the centre of the brethren.

In May 1865, both Lewanna Deck and her fifth and youngest child Martin Luther died of measles.

This was the year when Deck wrote to Edward Cronin admitting to have slipped into sharing communion with the Open Brethren and Cronin declared that Deck was now out of fellowship.

Deck felt he could not impose the regulations of a 'mother' church in the UK upon New Zealand brethren and it would be wrong to discuss with them the troubles among the brethren in the UK.

On 25 September 1872 Deck wrote a 13 page letter to Darby listing his own errors. This shows Deck's ultra-sensitivity and may highlight the poor way that problems between Exclusives and Open Brethren were dealt with.

Deck moved to Wellington, where his preaching and advocacy of church reform made a large impact among lay people, although it outraged their ministers. He made evangelistic tours of several regions, preaching in churches of many denominations. As a result, the Brethren movement had a far more significant impact on church life in New Zealand than it had in England. Informal assemblies were

founded in many towns. Deck, with his long white beard, balding head, somewhat mystical temperament and delicate health, exercised an informal and unassertive leadership among them.

He did not generally maintain contacts with any English Brethren, and never explained to his churches the issues which had split the English church. This was considered to be dereliction in England when his ecumenically minded son John Field Deck returned there to study medicine and dentistry.

His father's so-called Exclusive Brethren friends were angered to hear that the New Zealand assemblies practised an open attitude towards other Christians. Under pressure, Deck wrote to Exclusive Brethren leaders in England in 1872, acknowledging any errors he may have made, as we have already said... Many of his own assemblies, particularly those in the south led by his sons Samuel and John, were not so willing to submit to Exclusive regulations. Two of his daughters married clergymen.

Visits to New Zealand by leading English Exclusive Brethren, George Vicesimus Wigram in 1874-75 and 1877, and John Nelson Darby in 1875-76, restored Deck to favour, but the assemblies associated with his sons separated over the issue. Deck nevertheless maintained warm relations with his older sons and their assemblies.

By now Deck's health was failing. He had suffered from angina for some time.

Until his death on 14 August 1884 he lived at Sandridge, in Thorp Street, Motueka, where his daughters ran a school. The Deck family remained prominent among Exclusive Brethren, but were also respected in the broader evangelical world. His son John and his wife, Emily Young, moved to Australia in 1877 and helped in the formation of the Queensland Kanaka mission (later the South Sea Evangelical Mission), the first Brethren missionary body to be founded in the antipodes.

Deck's sensitive temperament, his warm disposition, and his fervent preaching made the Plymouth Brethren a significant force in New Zealand.

He was one of the most original of the Christian pioneers in New Zealand. Because he owed allegiance to no foreign church or theology, his assemblies adapted to the local environment to a degree which was rare among colonial churches. He was an intelligent thinker, aware of the problems of religious reform movements. His gifts as a poet and hymn writer, evident in his Hymns and sacred poems, were of a high order. His style was simple; exalted Christ and Christianity in unobtrusive rhythms and simple language.

The poems and hymns, most of which were written between 1838 and 1844 are, however, little known outside the context of Brethren worship, where they remain universally popular but they should be made known throughout the Christian church worldwide.

The Brethren have a breaking of bread service on a Sunday morning in which they remember the Lord by taking bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ. With this in mind Deck wrote this hymn:

O Lord a few of Thine
Are gathered to Thy Name:
May hearts o'erflow with joy divine
As we Thy promise claim.

We are, O Lord, Thine own,
The purchase of Thy Blood;
By Thee we would approach the throne,
Confiding in our God.

In us the Spirit dwells,
The witness of God's love ;
Our hearts rejoice while He reveals
Thy glorious things above.

Another example of his hymns extolling Christ follows:

O Jesus, Lord, 'tis joy to know
Thy path is o'er of shame and woe
For us to meekly trod:
All finished is Thy work of toil;
Thou reapest now the fruit and spoil,
Exalted by our God.

Thy holy head, once bound with thorns,
The crown of glory now adorns,
Thy seat, the Father's throne:
O Lord, e'en now we sing Thy praise,
Ours the eternal song to raise,
Worthy the Lord alone.

As Head for us Thou sittest there,
Thy members here Thy blessings share,
Of all Thou dost receive:
Thy wisdom, riches, honours powers,
Thy boundless love has all made ours,
Who in Thy Name believe.

We triumph in Thy triumph, Lord,
Thy joys our deepest joys afford,
The fruit of love divine :
While sorrowing, suffering, toiling here,
How does the thought our spirits cheer,
The throne of glory's Thine.

Belonging to Christ is another theme taken up by Deck:

Jesus ,my Saviour, Thou art mine,
The Father's gift of love divine;
All Thou hast done, and all Thou art
Are now the portion of my heart.

Poor, feeble, wretched as I am,
I now can glory in Thy Name ;
Now cleansed in Thy most precious Blood
And made the righteousness of God.

All that Thou hast, Thou hast for me
All my fresh springs are hid inThee ;
In Thee I live ; while I confess
I nothing am, yet all possess.

O Saviour, teach me to abide,
Close sheltered at Thy wounded side,
Each Hour rejoicing "grace on grace"
Until I see Thee face to face.

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