

## Slavery, the Bible, and the Hermeneutics of Culture

- colonial period. Quakers and only a very few others protest slavery as evil
- 1772 Mansfield decision in England (plus colonial preoccupation with “liberty”) spark intensified moral scrutiny of slavery in the British empire
- era of Revolution. “The sacred cause of liberty” plus theological application lean against slavery, but never without resistance
- 1790-early 1800s Methodists, Presbyterians, and some Baptist groups denounce slavery and hope for its elimination. A take-off also in Christianity among free and slave blacks. Successful evangelism of South changes the dynamic.
- 1800 Gabriel’s rebellion in Richmond (Methodists to be exempt from violence)
- 1802-1816 Some of the best biblically-based antislavery writings: Alexander McLeod (1802), *Negro Slavery Unjustifiable*; Freeborn Garrettson (1805), *A Dialogue between Do-Justice and Professing-Christian*; Daniel Coker (1810), *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister*; George Bourne (1816), *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*. Proslavery mostly percolates below the surface
- 1820-1822 Debate over admitting Missouri as a slave state and the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston, SC, result in a full-fledged biblical defense of slavery
- 1829-1832 David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829); the founding of Wm. Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* (1831); and the Nat Turner rebellion in northeaster VA ignite all-out controversy on slavery, including what the Bible says

### National Ideology

- republican distrust of elites credentialed by authority
- democratic belief in the rights and privileges of ordinary men (not so much yet, women)
- persuasive public persuasion (oratory and print) as the key driver of popular opinion (e.g., Methodist evangelists, the Democratic politics of Andrew Jackson)
- “common sense” as the perfect technical and popular philosophy for a democratic republic needing justification to break from Britain, preserve Christianity, and teach morality to the rising generation

### Questions for those looking to Scripture for guidance

- How could responsible citizen-believers choose between conflicting prooftexts?
- How could they choose between contradictory theological or ideological convictions expressed alike in biblical language and supported by biblical exposition?
- If Scripture was God’s coherent Word, how did God’s revelation given in Jesus Christ (New Testament) affect interpretation of God’s revelation to Israel (Old Testament)?
- Could foundational loyalty to Scripture be confirmed by how individual texts were interpreted? (In other words, could a person’s profession of belief in the Bible be credited if that person willfully misinterpreted scriptural passages whose meaning was transparently clear to me?)

- How did assumptions about God's providential care for the United States shape interpretations of Scripture, and vice versa?
- When so many Americas debated the Bible and slavery so obsessively, who besides African Americans would be interested in biblical revelation concerning race?

### Proslavery

- Leviticus 24:44-46 (permission to enslave non-Israelites captured in battle)
- Genesis 17 (Abraham a slaveholder)
- the silence of Jesus when he fulfilled/changed many other OT teachings
- Philemon (Paul sends the slave Onesimus back to his owner)
- many Pauline injunctions for slaves to obey their masters "as unto the Lord" (examples: 1 Timothy 6:1-3; Ephesians 6:5-8)
- Providence (a) brought Africans to America, apart from which they would not have heard the gospel; (b) has manifestly guided the United States where slavery exists because of British actions a long time ago

### Antislavery

- Main prooftexts: Exodus 21:16 and 1 Timothy 1:9-20 (denouncing "man-stealing")
- Other prooftexts, including Jeremiah 22:13 ("Wo to him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbor's service without wages, and given him not for his work"), Proverbs 22:16 ("He that oppresseth the poor, to increase his riches, shall surely come to want")
- The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12)
- Reasoning about salvation in Christ (e.g., Garrettson, Coker, and a few others)
  - (a) God commanded Israel to settle the Promised Land (not to travel "three thousand miles to capture the poor Africans, without any special command from heaven").
  - (b) God authorized enslavement of Israel's enemies as an alternative to killing them outright.
  - (c) But, with reference to the story of Abraham, the Israelites encouraged their slaves to believe in God and then to be circumcised (Gen. 17:13).
  - (d) Once circumcised, the slaves could partake of the Passover (Num 15:13-16).
  - (e) And since they were in God's eyes now counted as part of Israel, they had to be freed from enslavement in the Jubilee Year (every seventh) since the Children of Israel were forbidden to enslave their fellow Hebrews.
  - (f) Thus, understanding the Old Testament correctly meant understanding how its provision of slavery was only a means to extend the scope of God's mercy.
- Biblical times were "differently circumstanced" than the 19<sup>th</sup> century
  - (a) John Fee (Kentucky, 1851): if "the apostles' teaching and practice sanctioned slavery, it sanctioned the slavery of the age—the slavery amongst which the apostles moved. N. B. THIS SLAVERY WAS WHITE SLAVERY . . . the large portion of those enslaved were as white, and many of them whiter than their masters."
  - (b) The NT doesn't speak out against slavery because to do so would have brought crushing opposition from the Roman empire
  - (c) The United States' black-only racial slavery is distinctly different from slavery in OT or NT times