
Discourses on Slavery in European Religious History

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Abstract

This article argues that abolitionism in European religious history did not emerge directly or inevitably from Christianity, but through a long, contested process in which Stoic philosophy, Christian theology, biblical interpretation, colonial critique, and African agency interacted. It first examines slavery discourse in the Roman Empire, comparing Stoic critiques by Seneca and Epictetus with early Christian responses by Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and Eustathius. While several authors affirmed human unity and questioned domination, most did not demand legal abolition or organised reform. The article therefore distinguishes between moral or theological abolitionism, which undermined justifications for slavery, and activist abolitionism, which challenged the institution in law and practice. It then traces how this distinction was reshaped in the colonial-modern period, when biblical texts were used both to defend and oppose slavery. Through Las Casas, Quakers, Wesley, Clarkson, Newton, Equiano, and other African voices, abolitionism appears as a conflict over Scripture, natural justice, human nature, testimony, and empire. The article concludes with John Philip and John William Colenso in South Africa, showing how abolitionist reasoning expanded beyond slavery to expose colonial dependency, coerced labour, and racialised subordination as hidden forms of domination.

Keywords: Slavery, abolitionism, European religious history, Stoicism, Early Christianity, Biblical Hermeneutics

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Introduction: Abolitionists and Abolitionist Movements

Determining the identity of the first abolitionist and tracing the origins of abolitionist movements within European religious history is a complex task. One might initially think of the "Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," established in London in May 1787.¹ However, one of its members, Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846 C.E.), acknowledged some earlier influences on this movement. Notably, he referenced the Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers, who had denounced slavery as far back as the 17th century. Additionally, he highlighted the Dominican friar

¹ Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: John Newton, Slavery and the World's Most Enduring Song* (Oxford: Lion, 2005), 131.

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566 C.E.) as an individual precursor who spoke out against the enslavement of Indigenous people in the newly established Spanish colonies.² Clarkson was convinced that Christianity, being in its essence incompatible with slavery, had significantly contributed to the suppression of slavery in medieval European culture, before the revival of slavery with the beginning of European colonialism. The question remains whether the history of abolitionist movements can be traced back beyond this time, at least to the Christianisation of the Roman Empire in the fourth century C.E. – it would be surprising if the idea of abolition would not have been touched upon in the Christianised Empire. Indeed, in recent scholarship, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394 C.E.) has been called “the first great abolitionist Christian theologian.”³ So, two different phases in the history of abolitionist movements will be covered in this paper: first, slavery discourses in the Roman Empire (1st – 4th centuries), including pagan philosophical traditions that may have influenced early Christian Theology, and may have lived on within, alongside or in opposition to Christianity in European religious history;⁴ second, the development of the slavery/abolition discourse in the European colonies (16th – 19th centuries).

The first part will be subdivided into two sections: before and after the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. The first section will focus on Stoic philosophers Seneca (1-65 C.E.) and Epictetus (50-135 C.E.), known for their critical view of slavery, in comparison with Christian theologians Clement of Alexandria (150-225 C.E.) and Cyprian (200-258 C.E.). The second section will focus on Gregory of Nyssa, in comparison with John Chrysostom (344-407 C.E.), and will ask whether Christian criticism of slavery went beyond the Stoic position. The second part will provide an overview of the use of the Bible in pro- and anti-slavery literature in the European colonies, focusing on 18th- and 19th-century America. This overview will also raise the question of African agency within Western European slavery discourses. The summary and outlook will present two examples of critical reflections in 19th-century South Africa: a critique of the colonial system and the development of a new historical Bible criticism.

Discourses on Slavery in the Roman Empire before Christianisation

Aristotle (384-322 C.E.), the philosopher known for his reflections on “natural slavery,” already had to argue against “Others,” who “think that it is contrary to nature to be a master, because the fact that one man is a slave and another free is by convention, whereas in nature they do not differ at all, which is why it is not just either; for it is the

² Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1786), 2.

³ Christopher J. Kellerman, *All Oppression Shall Cease: A History of Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Catholic Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2022), 22.

⁴ See Ulrich Berner, “Greek Mythology in European Religious History,” in *Studying Religion, Past and Present*, ed. Nickolas P. Roubekas, Dimitris Xygalatas, Luther H. Martin, and Donald Wiebe (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 53–61.

result of force.”⁵ This critical attitude which might have become the basis for an abolitionist movement, was carried on by Stoic philosophers, resurfacing in Seneca’s “letters to Lucilius”, pertaining to moral questions. In one of these letters, Seneca articulates his views on how the master-slave relationship ought to be appropriately defined: “I am glad to hear, ..., that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. It is just what one expects of an enlightened, cultivated person like yourself.”⁶

This opening sentence clearly indicates Seneca's intention to temper the hierarchical structure of Roman society, which typically excludes slaves from any personal or friendly relationships with free citizens. A fictitious dialogue unfolds, introducing an opponent who embodies the typical free citizen and slaveholder. This opponent persistently emphasises, “They’re slaves,” while Seneca counters with alternative terms: “No. They’re human beings,” and “No, they’re friends, humble friends.” Ultimately, Seneca responds to the slaveholder by stating, “Strictly speaking, they’re our fellow-slaves, if you once reflect that fortune has much power over us as over them.”⁷

Referring to fortune, which implies that the master-slave relationship could be reversed at any time, already indicates Seneca’s conviction that there are no essential differences in human nature that would legitimise the distinction between free citizens and slaves. Focusing on commensality as one aspect of the proposed “friendly” relationship between master and slave, Seneca declares that he laughs “at those people who think it degrading for a man to eat with his slaves”. He evokes an imaginary situation, certainly drawn from social reality: the master is dining all night, surrounded by a crowd of slaves who are “forbidden to move their lips to speak, let alone to eat”. This is, in Seneca’s view, “the most arrogant of conventions,” which he assumes did not exist in ancient republican Rome. Passing over “other instances of our harsh and inhuman behaviour” towards slaves, “the way we abuse them as if they were beasts of burden instead of human beings,” Seneca goes on to describe and criticise the luxurious lifestyle of the slave-holding elite.

After citing examples of social relationships that had been reversed by fortune, he challenges his opponent by asking:

How about reflecting that the person you call your slave traces his origin back to the same stock as yourself, has the same good sky above him, breathes as you do, lives as you do, dies as you do?

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics: Books I and II*, trans. and comm. Trevor J. Saunders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 20-23.

⁶ L. Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, selected and trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin Books, 1975), ep. 47.

⁷ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, ep. 47.

Having clearly expressed his views on the unity of humankind, Seneca briefly revisits the topic of “the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans tend to be especially arrogant, harsh, and insulting.” Not wanting to delve into what he calls “this endless topic of debate,” he advises, “treat your inferiors in the way you would like to be treated by your own superiors.” Challenging the defender of Rome’s hierarchical society, Seneca reflects on the very concept of a slave: “Show me a man who isn’t a slave; ... all are slaves to hope or fear.” This renewed argument for human unity leads him to suggest to slave owners: “Have them respect you rather than fear you.” As he concludes his letter, Seneca raises the crucial question of abolition: “... someone will tell us that I’m now inviting slaves to proclaim their freedom....” However, Seneca then steps back, hesitant to give a clear answer. He compares this to religion, saying, “... what is enough for a god, in the shape of worship, cannot be too little for a master. To be really respected is to be loved; and love and fear will not mix.”

Seneca has highlighted the unity of humankind and advocated for a respectful relationship between masters and slaves, even going so far as to recommend sharing meals together. Given this emphasis, it is reasonable to conclude that he might support abolition and the liberation of slaves. However, his reluctance to take this step raises important questions about the true intent behind his views on slavery. The memory of slave rebellions was still alive within the Roman Empire, suggesting that his counsel to treat slaves with kindness could be interpreted as a strategic approach to prevent future uprisings. This interpretation is particularly plausible considering Seneca’s position as a member of the slaveholding, ruling elite, which relied on the institution of slavery.⁸

However, it is important to remember that Seneca’s critique of cruelty was approaching a statement that resembles a declaration of universal human rights: when citing a well-known example of severe cruelty, he did not hesitate to state:

... though the laws allow a slave to be ill-treated to any extent,
there are nevertheless some things which the common laws of life
forbid us to do to a human being.⁹

So, it is more likely that Seneca’s refusal to demand abolition stemmed from pragmatic considerations, recognising that slavery was an integral part of the empire’s economy. The argument that slavery is just “necessary” for economic reasons would also be used by Christian theologians in the modern world.

The limits of Seneca’s critique become clearer when the discussion turns to Epictetus, whose social position and philosophical outlook frame the question of slavery from a markedly different perspective. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus presents a distinct

⁸ See Keith Bradley, “Seneca and Slavery,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 37 (1986): 167.

⁹ L. Annaeus Seneca, *Minor Dialogs Together with the Dialog on Clemency*, trans. Andrew Steward (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), xviii.

case, as he was not part of the ruling elite, having been a slave himself and having experienced harsh treatment firsthand. Nevertheless, he was permitted to study philosophy, and after gaining his freedom, he established his own philosophical school. Therefore, he was undoubtedly not in a position to openly address the issue of abolition. In any event, akin to Seneca, he did not hesitate to underscore the unity of humankind, perhaps even more explicitly. According to his student Arrian, when he was asked, “how is it possible to eat acceptably to the gods,” he, like Seneca, evoked the imaginary situation of the master waiting for his negligent slave to serve him. Starting from this, he developed his perspective on the proper, self-restrained behaviour of the master toward his slave, countering the slaveholder’s view by responding:

... will you not bear with your own brother, who has Zeus as his progenitor and is, as it were, a son born of the same seed as yourself and of the same sowing from above...? ... Do you not remember what you are and over whom you rule – that they are kinsmen, brothers by nature, that they are the offspring of Zeus?¹⁰

When the fictitious dialogue partner opposes him again, pointing to the fact that there is a class of human beings that can be bought and sold - “But I have a deed of sale for them, and they have none for me” - Epictetus now makes a decisive distinction between different kinds of law: he accuses the slaveholder of looking only at the “wretched laws of ours, the laws of the dead, ... not to the laws of the gods.” Thus, he rejects the idea that the laws regulating social reality are based on or derived from a higher order, natural or divine laws that give them legitimacy. Like Seneca, Epictetus emphasises the unity of humankind, perhaps even more clearly, by adding that master and slave are “brothers by nature” and by distinguishing between human and divine laws.

It should be noted that not all Stoic philosophers followed Seneca and Epictetus or shared their critical view of slavery. Musonius Rufus (25-95 C.E.), known as Epictetus’ teacher, for instance, would follow their criticism only as far as luxury and gluttony are concerned; he would not, however, question the institution of slavery as such.¹¹ It is widely recognised that Stoic philosophy and Early Christian theology overlap considerably in the realm of ethics. The question must now be raised whether this overlap includes a critical attitude towards the institution of slavery. It is also well known that the New Testament contains no explicit condemnation of slavery. On the contrary, slaves are admonished to obey their masters: “... with fear and trembling, in

¹⁰ Epictetus, *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, the Manual, and Fragments*, trans. W. A. Oldfather, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1979). Diss. 13.

¹¹ Musonius Rufus, “Letter 18B,” in *Musonius Rufus: Lectures and Sayings*, trans. Cynthia King, ed. William B. Irvine (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), Part B.

singleness of heart, as to Christ..." (Ephesians 6:5).¹² This obedience is demanded of slaves towards any kind of master: "...not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to the harsh" (1 Peter 2:18 NKJV; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:20-24; Colossians 3:22-24; Titus 2:9; 1 Timothy 6:1ff). Masters, too, are advised not to be overly harsh to their slaves and to recognise that God does not look at persons differently (Ephesians 6:9). This double admonishment, however, does not in any way call into question the social institution of slavery in the Roman Empire. In the Old Testament, slaveholding was clearly part of the social reality in ancient Israel, regulated in some respects (Leviticus 25), but never questioned or condemned as such. Therefore, the Sacred Scriptures of Early Christian Theology do not offer an unambiguous basis for developing abolitionist ideas.

Now, looking at Clement of Alexandria, it appears that this Christian theologian is very close to Musonius Rufus, but not to Seneca or Epictetus. He shares the Stoic criticism of a luxurious lifestyle, with a special emphasis on gluttony.¹³ Slavery, in Clement's view, is just a part of luxury: too many slaves, in his view, are as unnecessary as too great a number of cups and vessels for the dining table.¹⁴ Obviously, he does not question the view that slaves are part of the master's property like the vessels needed for dinner. His critique pertains only to any kind of exaggeration in luxury – he disapproves only of too great a number of slaves in one household.

On the appropriate attitude toward slaves, Clement advises that masters and mistresses should keep their distance from their slaves, especially in situations where they would be close together.¹⁵ He even quotes the philosopher who was known for his reflections on "natural slavery," as Aristotle said, he would not even laugh with slaves – obviously a warning against every kind of personal or even friendly relationship between master and slave.¹⁶ Clement's strategy, it seems, was to avoid interfering with Alexandria's hierarchical social structure, where he lived and tried to win converts to Christianity. It is obvious that he was not willing to make Christians total outsiders in Roman society, for instance, by insisting on food taboos – so he allowed Christians to accept invitations to a banquet with "unbelievers" and eat whatever would be offered.¹⁷

¹² Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural references are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

¹³ Clement of Alexandria, *The Educator*, 2.1.1, in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Simon P. Wood (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954).

¹⁴ Clement, *Educator* 3, 4, 7.

¹⁵ Clement, *Educator* 2, 5, 11.

¹⁶ Clement, *Educator* 3, 12.

¹⁷ Clement. *Educator* 2, I. (10). For more details on Clement's theology, see Ulrich Berner, "Eating and Morality in (Late) Stoic Philosophy and (Early) Christian Theology," in *Faith and Food*, ed. Afe Adogame, forthcoming.

As the institution of slavery was omnipresent in Roman society, it is not surprising that Christian theologians would often refer to it, comparing the master-slave relationship in social reality to the relationship between God and humanity. This is what, for instance, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was doing in his letter to Demetrianus, the Proconsul of Africa. The Roman Empire was suffering from quite a few misfortunes – wars, famine, and pestilence – and the pagan Proconsul attributed these misfortunes to the Christians, as happened quite often in the third century. The bishop, of course, would oppose him, giving back the allegation: these misfortunes have come “not because your gods are not worshipped by us, but because God is not worshipped by you.”¹⁸ Then he takes up the theme of slavery as a starting point for a comparison to the religious realm: “From your slave you yourself require service, and though a man, you compel your fellowman to submit and to be obedient to you...”

Speaking of slaves as “fellowmen” may remind the reader of the Stoic emphasis on the unity of humankind. This association will be confirmed by following Cyprian’s argument through the following sentences:

... and although you have the same lot in respect of being born, the same condition in respect of dying, and although you have like bodily substance and a common order of souls, and although you come into this world of ours and depart from it after a time with equal rights, and by the same law...

These statements, indeed, carry on the critical view of slavery, as propagated by Seneca and Epictetus, in the following sentences, even taking up Seneca’s allusions to the cruel treatment of slaves by their Roman masters:

... yet, unless you are served by him according to your pleasure, unless you are obeyed by him in conformity to your will, you..., flog and scourge him: you afflict and torture him..., and even frequently with the sword and imprisonment.

After this description of Demetrianus’s attitude towards his slave - his demand for obedience and his reaction, the severe punishment of disobedient slaves - Cyprian comes to the point he has been driving at, that is, interpreting the misfortunes ravaging the province as God’s punishment for the disobedience of Demetrianus, who keeps worshipping the pagan gods: “And, wretch that you are, you do not acknowledge the Lord your God while you yourself are thus exercising lordship?”

This argument is based on a comparison: “exercising lordship” is transferred from the earthly to the religious realm, thus describing God as the ruler of the universe who has the right to demand obedience and to punish disobedience – in contrast to the

¹⁸ Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum* 2.5, in *Treatises*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church* 36 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 5.

proconsul who usurps this right of exercising lordship. Cyprian does not explicitly say that he would disapprove of the cruel punishment Demetrianus used to apply. However, his closeness to Seneca and Epictetus in denying essential differences between master and slave suggests that Cyprian, as a Christian theologian, would not hesitate to employ the Stoics' critical view of slavery.¹⁹

The fact that this continuity remains a hidden one might be explained by considering the historical context and the precarious situation of Christians before the change in politics brought about by Emperor Constantine. Of course, it could also be argued that Cyprian drew his arguments from the biblical creation myth, which does not distinguish between free and unfree people. The closeness to Stoic arguments, however, is unmistakable; indeed, Stoic and Christian views could concur in such a critical view of slavery, as will become clear when looking at Gregory's 4th homily on Ecclesiastes.

Christian Discourses on Slavery in the Christianised Roman Empire

John Chrysostom, a prolific writer and for some years bishop of the Capital, Constantinople, used to speak very often about slavery – the appropriate behaviour of slaves and the proper treatment of them.²⁰ In his view, enslaved persons were required to obey their masters, even when those masters were unbelievers, as he states in Homily IV on Titus 2:9-10, one of his homilies on Paul's Letter to Titus. Chrysostom goes further, arguing that the master contributes more to the welfare of the enslaved person than the enslaved person contributes to the master; on this basis, he maintains that enslaved persons ought to respond with gratitude.²¹ It will not come as a surprise that this argument will resurface in the modern pro-slavery discourse. The point he is making to his congregation is this comparison: we should imitate slaves by being obedient and grateful to God. He adds the reflection that slaves are free according to their nature, their unfree situation being caused by fortune only – and yet they will honour their master out of fear.²² Here Chrysostom is, in part, in line with Seneca and Epictetus, denying that the distinction between free and unfree people is based on natural laws. He would not, however, follow Seneca by propagating love instead of fear as the right motivation for obedience. In any case, his view of the unity of human nature does not lead to demanding a change in the relationship between slaves and master – replacing fear with respect and love.

¹⁹ Ramelli has offered a different interpretation, assuming that Cyprian would approve of Demetrianus' harsh treatment of slaves.

²⁰ See Chris L. de Wet, *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

²¹ John Chrysostom, *Homily IV on Titus, on Titus 2:9-10, in NPNF 1.13.*

²² Chrysostom, *Homily IV on Titus.*

There is, however, one point at which Chrysostom's argument might be read as opening onto a more critical reflection on slavery. In Homily 40 on 1 Corinthians, he moves beyond the conventional critique of luxury, arguing that two slaves should suffice, and invokes Paul as an exemplary figure who worked for his own livelihood and did not rely on enslaved labour. Presenting Apostle Paul as a model for a Christian way of life could give an impetus to create a movement for abolition, unless it is meant only for propagating humility and industry as Christian virtues.²³

Gregory of Nyssa is really a different case, compared to Chrysostom. Two sources are worth considering: one of his homilies on Ecclesiastes and one of his Easter sermons. Commenting on King Solomon's statement, "I got me slaves and slave-girls and homebred slaves were born for me...", Gregory says in a very critical tone: "Do you notice the enormity of the boast? This kind of language is raised up as a challenge to God." Thinking that he is "the owner of men and women," Gregory asks, "What is he doing but overstepping his own nature through pride, regarding himself as something different from his subordinates?" Alluding to the biblical creation myth (Genesis 1:26), Gregory goes on to state that the authority of human beings is limited; their rule "is confined to control over things without reason...Irrational beasts are the only slaves of mankind." But by putting slaves, cattle and sheep on one and the same level, as property, the human species is divided into two species – "enslaved to itself", which is against the Biblical account that humans are created equally free as the "owner of the earth": "Whenever a human being is for sale, therefore, nothing less than the owner of the earth is led into the sale-room."²⁴

Having condemned the idea of slavery by demonstrating its incompatibility with the Christian view, as set out in the Bible, Gregory embarks on another line of argument that will remind the reader of the Stoic position of Epictetus and Seneca:

Your origin is from the same ancestors, your life is of the same kind,...Is there any difference in these things between the slave and his owner? Do they not draw in the same air as they breathe? Do they not see the sun in the same way? Do they not alike sustain their being by consuming food?... Are not the two one dust after death?

The last sentence of this section goes back to a special Christian view: "Is there not one judgment for them? – a common Kingdom and a common Gehenna?" It appears that

²³ John Chrysostom, "Homily 40 on First Corinthians," in *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series, vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Talbot W. Chambers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 243-49.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 4 on Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 2:7)," in *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall, trans. S. G. Hall and Rachel Moriarty (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 72-84.

Gregory's "condemnation of,"²⁵ or "opposition to" slavery,²⁶ whether or not designated as "abolition," is based on two lines of argument, a biblical and a philosophical one, coming together as mutually enforcing each other. Gregory has not, however, made it explicit that he draws the second step from a different tradition: a philosophical one.²⁷ Those authors who celebrate Gregory of Nyssa as "(the first) Christian abolitionist theologian"²⁸ have correctly stated that he has abolished all arguments that would give legitimacy to the institution of slavery. So, one could say, following Wickham: "... Gregory's arguments are, in the end, arguments for the abolition of slavery." However, Wickham has to add the assumption: "What he has to say is consistent with the toleration of the system..." For, as he admits: "... the congregation is not being invited, ... to campaign for a change in the law."²⁹

The same assumption has to be applied to one of Gregory's Easter sermons, where he speaks about various kinds of liberation as an appropriate response to the day of Christ's resurrection: "Now is the prisoner freed, the debtor forgiven, the slave is liberated by the good and kindly proclamation of the church, ..." ³⁰ Liberating slaves ("manumission") according to their merits and as an act of benevolence of the master, had been an old tradition in the Roman Empire, and Constantine, the first Christian emperor, had granted this right to the church - this is the legally valid ritual Gregory is here alluding to. It is, however, hardly possible, to infer that Gregory "urges ... all the heads of households in his audience to manumit all slaves."³¹ For Gregory goes on to say:

Even the one who still remains in servitude benefits. Though his offences be many and serious and surpassing mitigation and pardon, the master is moved by the peacefulness of the day and

²⁵ David Bentley Hart, "'The Whole Humanity': Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001): 51; Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 178.

²⁶ Hans Boersma, "'This Is the Day Which the Lord Has Made': Scripture, Manumission, and the Heavenly Future in Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (2012): 658.

²⁷ Cf. Rachel Moriarty, "Human Owners, Human Slaves: Gregory of Nyssa, Hom. Eccl. 4," in *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 61-71.; Daniel J. Pratt Morris-Chapman, "John Wesley and Methodist Responses to Slavery in America," *Holiness: The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge* 5 (2019): 37-58.

²⁸ See Daniel F. Stramara Jr., "Gregory of Nyssa: An Ardent Abolitionist?," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41 (1997): 37-60.

²⁹ Lionel R. Wickham, "The Date of Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies on Ecclesiastes," in *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 179.; Cf. Mary E. Sommar, *The Slaves of the Churches: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 66: "It was not at all a call for the abolition of slavery as an economic practice ..."; Boersma, "This Is the Day Which the Lord Has Made," 659: "... we have no evidence of Gregory lobbying for a change in the empire's legal system ..."

³⁰ Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery*, 174.

³¹ Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery*, 174.

accepts with kindness the one rejected and regarded as in disgrace, as Pharaoh did the cupbearer from the prison.³²

Obviously, Gregory does not expect, let alone demand, that all slaves would or should be liberated. So, it appears, the sermon is more an appeal to the individual conscience of slaveholding Christians, to think of such an act of benevolence in a special case, in continuity of the old Roman tradition of "manumission." Attacking the institution as such, however, by proclaiming the right of slaves to be disobedient and leave their masters, was not tolerated: Eustathius, bishop of Sebaste, who had done just this, was immediately excommunicated at the council of Gangra, in the middle of the 4th century.³³

This bishop would have been the first Christian abolitionist in a strict sense: not only abolishing pro-slavery arguments but also taking action towards challenging the legislation. However, there was no chance to start an abolitionist movement within the church. All Christian emperors, beginning with Constantine, maintained that the distinction between free-born citizens and slaves remained valid.³⁴ So, there is no other way but to split the definition of abolitionist: Gregory, like his Stoic precursors,³⁵ and, possibly, Cyprian,³⁶ was an abolitionist in the wide sense: abolishing all pro-slavery arguments, not, however, becoming an activist for changing the legal system, but leaving it to the reader to draw personal consequences.

In any case, his dogmatic position, though not going beyond the Stoic tradition, is rightly emphasized as being exceptional, especially when compared to the position of Augustine, who developed a dogmatic theory – referring to Adam's fall and hereditary sin – that gave legitimacy to the institution of slavery. According to Augustine, slavery would exist – and slaves would be under the obligation to obey – as long as this material world will exist. After the Last Judgement, however, the situation would be different, as it had been in paradise.³⁷

Abolitionists and Abolitionist Movements in the Epoch of European Colonialism

Clarkson pointed to Las Casas, the "pious bishop of Chiapa," as the first among the "well-disposed individuals..., who have humanely exerted themselves to suppress the abject personal slavery..." reintroduced with the beginning of this epoch. He

³² Gregory of Nyssa, "Discourse on the Holy Pascha," 8-9.

³³ Cf. Kellerman, *All Oppression Shall Cease*, 21ff; Sommar, *The Slaves of the Churches*, 74.

³⁴ See, for instance, the edict by Constantine: Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 29.

³⁵ Concerning the relationship to the Stoic tradition, cf. Moriarty, "Human Owners, Human Slaves," 65ff.

³⁶ Cf. Moriarty, "Human Owners, Human Slaves," 67ff, for a different interpretation of Cyprian.

³⁷ Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 208-219.

presented Las Casas as an “amiable man” who opposed the enslavement of the Indians in the new Spanish colonies.³⁸

A totally different, even contrasting image was given by David Walker, in the third article of his “Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World”: he presents Las Casas as that “very very notoriously avaricious Catholic priest,” that “wretch,” who was responsible for the beginning of the transatlantic Slave Trade.³⁹ Both these images are one-sided, each giving half of the truth: Clarkson was not aware of or did not mention, that, indeed, Las Casas had proposed to replace the Indians with Africans – an idea which he later regretted.⁴⁰ Walker, on the other hand, was not aware of or did not mention the fact that Las Casas, indeed, was moved by compassion for the Indians who were suffering in the Spanish system of enslavement.⁴¹

In any case, it should be noted that Las Casas liberated all the Indians who had been given to him as a reward for his participation in the conquest, before he began his lifelong fight for the rights of the colonised people – a move towards abolitionism, although limited to the indigenous population of the Caribbean. Las Casas can indeed be regarded as an abolitionist in the full, strict sense, as he not only abolished the arguments which would give legitimacy to enslaving the Indians, such as the argument that they do not behave like rational human beings,⁴² he was also publicly attacking the institution of slavery in the presence of the Emperor Charles V, demanding a change in the legislation.⁴³

Clarkson was also right to credit the Quaker community with keeping the idea of abolitionism alive in the 17th century. The “Germantown Declaration,” signed by four members of the “Friends” in 1688, should be mentioned, even if it did not have a lasting impact: “We are against the traffik of men-body.”⁴⁴ And at last, in 1757 and 1761, in Philadelphia and London respectively, the decision was taken to commit “Quakers everywhere to a future of antislavery campaigning.”⁴⁵ Clarkson himself relied on their support during his travels in England.⁴⁶

³⁸ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 2.

³⁹ David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 37ff.

⁴⁰ Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind Is One: A Study of the Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on the Religious and Intellectual Capacity of the American Indians* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).

⁴¹ Hanke, *All Mankind Is One*, 1974.

⁴² See Hanke, *All Mankind Is One*, 1974.

⁴³ See Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1965).

⁴⁴ See Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657–1761* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 72–76.

⁴⁵ Carey, *From Peace to Freedom*, 1.

⁴⁶ See Justice Anquandah Arthur, “Confronting the Ills of Society: Thomas Clarkson and the Slave Trade,” *PJTM* 5, no. 1 (2024): 97–110.

As slavery was part of social reality in ancient Israel, and as it is not explicitly condemned in the New Testament, it is not surprising that the defenders of slavery in 18th- and 19th-century America quoted from the Bible. They would, for instance, refer to Ephesians 6, 1 Corinthians 7, and 1 Peter 2:18 to argue that slavery was compatible with Christianity.

In 1739, George Whitefield, a renowned revival preacher representing the Calvinist wing of Methodism, travelled through the Southern slaveholding states of North America. At first, he was shocked to see the cruel treatment of the slaves, abused as if they were beasts.⁴⁷ Though disapproving severely of such a treatment, Whitefield goes on to say that “Enslaving or misusing their Bodies would, comparatively speaking, be an inconsiderable Evil, was proper Care taken of their Souls.”⁴⁸ It is clear what he was aiming at: the slaveholders should allow that their slaves would be instructed in Christianity, which they were not inclined to do because they feared that “teaching them Christianity would make them proud, and consequently, unwilling to submit to Slavery.” To counter this argument, Whitefield refers to the New Testament:

Do you find any one Command in the Gospel, that has the least Tendency to make People forget their relative Duties? Do you not read that Servants, and as many as are under the Yoke of Bondage, are required to be subject, in all lawfull Things, to their Masters, and that not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward?⁴⁹

In the following sentences, Whitefield does not emphasise the obligation of the master to treat his slaves gently. He discovers even something good in harsh treatment: in his view, framed by his Calvinistic theology, he comes to the conclusion that,

Your present and past bad Usage of them, however ill-designed, may thus far do them good, as to break their Wills and increase the Sense of their natural Misery, and consequently better dispose their Minds to accept the Redemption wrought for them by the Death and Obedience of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

Being fully convinced of the compatibility of Christianity and slavery, as proved by the commands in the New Testament, Whitefield became a slaveholder himself. Selena Hastings (Lady Huntingdon), who financed many Methodist chapels across England and a theological college, “followed Whitefield’s lead on the issue of slavery...She inherited Whitefield’s large plantation and orphanage at Bethesda, and expanded

⁴⁷ George Whitefield, *Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield: Viz. Letter I. To a Friend in London, Concerning Archbishop Tillotson; Letter II. To the Same, on the Same Subject; Letter III. To the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina, Concerning Their Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1740), 13.

⁴⁸ Whitefield, *Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield*, 14.

⁴⁹ Whitefield, *Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield*, 15.

⁵⁰ Whitefield, *Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield*, 15.

slave-holding there...."⁵¹ It is important to note that this is only one strand in the Methodist movement, the Calvinist one, heavily opposed by the rival faction of the Arminian movement within Methodism.⁵²

William Graham (1745-1799), a minister of the Presbyterian Church, based his conviction that Christianity "was never designed to alter the political or civil Status of men, but only to bring them to the Love of God."⁵³ His conviction is anchored in a broad range of scriptural testimonies, confined to the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 6, Titus, and 1 Timothy.⁵⁴ Having given such a broad scriptural basis for constructing an appropriate attitude towards slaves, he felt justified to conclude that Christianity "does not point out any mode of their Emancipation ..."⁵⁵

As late as 1841, Thornton Stringfellow (1788-1869), a Baptist minister, published a pamphlet to counter the "bitter fruits," and "false doctrines" of abolitionism.⁵⁶ His contribution to the slave controversy is based on a broad overview of biblical texts, including the Old Testament. Of particular interest is his exegesis of Genesis 16, the story of Sarah and Hagar: he points out that the angel sent by God does not criticise Abraham and Sarah for their behaviour, but instead addresses Hagar as Sarah's slave – this, in Stringfellow's view, clearly indicates that the master-slave relationship is not in any way questioned or criticised, with Abraham's God on the side of the slave-owner.⁵⁷ Later, he published "Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery" in 1856, already in its fourth edition, providing an extremely broad overview of the biblical testimonies from the Old and New Testaments.

Regarding these few examples of the proslavery literature produced by ordained ministers of various denominations, it is easy to imagine that it would be a difficult task for the abolitionists to argue on the basis of biblical texts that slavery is incompatible with Christianity. John Wesley (1703-1791), representing the Arminian strand within the Methodist movement, may have recognised this problem. When he published his polemical "Thoughts upon Slavery" in 1774, he did not touch upon biblical statements on slavery. Instead, he made great efforts to reject the various negative prejudices concerning Africa and Africans by presenting a thoroughly

⁵¹ Ryan Hanley, "Calvinism, Proslavery and James Albert Gronniosaw," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 36 (2015): 373.

⁵² See Hanley, "Calvinism, Proslavery and James Albert Gronniosaw," 374.

⁵³ William Graham, "Lecture 30th: An Important Question Answered," in *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740–1829: An Anthology*, ed. Jeffrey Robert Young (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 169.

⁵⁴ Graham, "Lecture 30th," 169-170.

⁵⁵ Graham, "Lecture 30th," 170.

⁵⁶ Thornton Stringfellow, "A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony of the Institution of Slavery," in *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 137.

⁵⁷ Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery*, 4th ed., with additions (Richmond, VA, 1856).

positive image of the respective African countries and their inhabitants. He then informed the readership about how African slaves were procured, transported to America, and treated, summarising his description of the cruel living conditions with a rhetorical question: "Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world should live such a life?"⁵⁸ He then asked whether these things "can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy," leading to the clear conclusion that they are inconsistent with natural justice or mercy.

One important argument raised by defenders of slavery was that it was necessary to cultivate the land in the hot climate and to secure the nation's wealth and glory. Wesley rejected this pragmatic argument on the basis of his own experience in the respective colonies and, with the ethical argument that wealth must not be gained by neglecting virtue. At last, Wesley addresses those groups of people who are directly involved in the institution of slavery: the captains, the merchants and the plantation owners, appealing to their sentiments of compassion and sympathy, not, however, to their religious identity as Christians. Wesley had written this condemnation of slavery after visiting the colonies and seeing with his own eyes the living conditions of African slaves.

A different case is Thomas Clarkson, arguably the most interesting member of the "Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade," founded in London in 1787. Not based on travel experiences but on historical study, Clarkson developed, as a young man, a commitment to the abolitionist movement that would change his life.⁵⁹ Like Wesley, he was deeply convinced that Christianity, in its essence, is incompatible with any form of slavery, and he shared Wesley's vision of the historical development of European culture – slavery declining under the influence of Christianity until it was revived in the 16th century.⁶⁰ In Clarkson's view: "A melancholy instance of the depravity of human nature... that there are always men, of every age, country, and persuasion, who are ready to sacrifice their dearest principles at the shrine of gain."⁶¹

Clarkson's treatise is subdivided into three parts, the first one giving an overview of the history of slavery, drawing upon sources from Antiquity. Clarkson cites only one reference to the Bible: the story of Joseph and his brothers, used as an example to show that the "commerce of the human species was of a very early date."⁶² Clarkson concludes this overview by recounting a contemporary instance of the enslavement of peoples: the Dutch colonists at the Cape hunting down the "Boshies-man nation." Clarkson comments: "With what horror do these passages seem to strike us!" What indignation do they seem to raise in our breasts, when we reflect, that a part of the

⁵⁸ John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (London: R. Hawes, 1774), 68.

⁵⁹ See Arthur, "Confronting the Ills of Society," 97–110.

⁶⁰ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 21–23.

⁶¹ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 23.

⁶² Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 19ff.

human species are considered as *game*...⁶³ The second part is devoted to "The African Commerce or Slave Trade," leading to the conclusion that "it is contrary to the principles of *law* and *government*, the dictates of *reason*, the common maxims of *equity*, the laws of *nature*, the admonitions of *conscience*, and, in short, the whole doctrine of *natural religion*."⁶⁴ The third part is devoted to "The Slavery of the Africans in the European Colonies." Clarkson begins by evoking an imaginary scene: a long column of African slaves in chains, driven to the slave ships for transport to America; an African observer comments by asking, "What is Christianity but a system of murder and oppression?"⁶⁵ Clarkson responds with a contention about "the generous Englishman at home", who... would be enraged at the conduct of his countrymen, and resist their tyranny."⁶⁶

Obviously, it is his strategy to appeal to the compassion and sympathy of the English readers by giving a realistic account of the cruel conditions of the African slaves in the colonies. To counter one of the arguments European colonists used about the capacities of African slaves, Clarkson quotes from the poetical work of Phyllis Wheatley and comments: "If other examples of African genius should be required, suffice it to say, that they can be produced in abundance..."⁶⁷

In the concluding chapters, it becomes clear that Clarkson's position – "that slavery is incompatible with the Christian system" – is deduced from certain general Christian doctrines: "brotherly love," "universal benevolence," and the fundamental doctrine that all human beings will exist in a future state and will have to give an account of their actions at the Last Judgement. In Clarkson's view, this would not apply to slaves as unfree beings. In the very last sentence of the treatise, Clarkson goes beyond condemning the African Slave Trade as contrary to natural religion, adding that it is also contrary to "the revealed voice of God."⁶⁸

At the same time, John Newton joined the abolitionist movement in London by publishing his "Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade." His arguments are based on very specific, personal experiences related to his professional activities before his ordination as a minister of the Anglican Church. Newton is also celebrated as the author of a well-known hymn:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;

⁶³ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 26.

⁶⁴ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 46.

⁶⁵ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 49.

⁶⁶ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 50.

⁶⁷ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 66.

⁶⁸ Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 91.

Was blind, but now I see...

This hymn refers to his conversion from a blasphemer to a believer, which he experienced after surviving a shipwreck. After this conversion, however, he continued in his profession as captain of a slave ship, involved in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Even after changing his profession – for reasons of his health – and after being ordained as an Anglican priest, preaching and composing hymns at Olney, he did not reflect on his former profession as sinful. This perspective reveals the Calvinistic framework of his conversion, particularly the doctrine of predestination: “What I did I did ignorantly; considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted me...” The following sentence, it seems, mirrors the biblical precepts given to the Christian master concerning the appropriate treatment of his slaves: “and having no concern, in point of conscience, but to treat the slaves, while under my care, with as much humanity as a regard to my own safety would admit.”⁶⁹

However, coming into contact with the recently formed group of abolitionists, he changed his mind, almost a second conversion: “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”⁷⁰ Like Wesley and Clarkson, he did not argue as a theologian – and perhaps rightly so – believing that his firsthand experience as a slave-ship captain was the strongest support for the abolitionist cause. The list of arguments he provided was pragmatic and, in essence, political: it listed the detrimental effects of the slave trade in several respects: first, on the English people, for instance, the loss of many seamen; and second, of course, on the slaves purchased on the African coast.

Again, like Wesley and Clarkson, he appeals to the readers’ sympathy and compassion by giving vivid examples of the cruel conditions on board to which the slaves are exposed.⁷¹ At this point, he does not miss the opportunity to counter a standard argument of the proslavery authors: he states, based on his own experience, that “the state of slavery” in Africa “is much milder than in our colonies”, that it “may be deemed a state of ease and liberty compared with their situation on board our ships.”⁷² He also aligns with Wesley in insisting on the ethical principle that wealth must not be gained by unjust means. He adds an allusion to the New Testament, referring to Matthew 27:6 with regard to the wealth flowing from the African Trade; he should think himself “bound to say to Government, to Parliament and to the nation, ‘it is not lawful to put it into the treasury, because it is the price of blood.’”⁷³

⁶⁹ John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (London, 1788), in *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton), 1750–1754, with Newton’s Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, ed. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 99.

⁷⁰ Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 98.

⁷¹ Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 103–105.

⁷² Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 107, 111.

⁷³ Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 100.

This overview would be incomplete if the question of African agency were neglected – African voices within the Western-European Slavery discourse. It is not surprising that a few African authors joined the abolitionist movements, using their autobiographies to reinforce anti-slavery arguments: Olaudah Equiano should be mentioned first, as arguably the most important figure. After gaining his freedom, he became an active member of the British public sphere, writing articles for newspapers and travelling across England, successfully offering his autobiography for subscription.⁷⁴ Ottobah Cugoano might be named alongside Equiano. It would be rewarding, certainly, to further investigate the collaboration of these African ex-slaves and the group of English abolitionists, and the impact of these African voices on the critical discourse leading to the abolition of the African Slave Trade; Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass and David Walker have to be named, with regard to the American context.⁷⁵

It may come as a surprise that African ex-slaves joined the other side, thereby confirming the pro-slavery arguments of the Calvinistic faction within the Methodist movement: J.A.W. Gronniosaw wrote in favour of the Whitefield faction, expressing gratitude for being freed from African superstitions and led to Christianity. In one of her poems, Phyllis Wheatley celebrated Whitefield, the slaveholding missionary.⁷⁶ Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein must be mentioned as a precursor, already in the 18th century: having been freed in Amsterdam, he wrote a treatise defending the institution of slavery as fully compatible with Christianity.⁷⁷ Interpreting these divergent attitudes among African ex-slaves would certainly require thorough studies of the situations they were exposed to, for instance, financial dependencies, and, of course, the theological orientation of their owners – in these three cases, the Calvinistic version of Reformed Christianity. In any case, the African voices within the Western-European slavery discourse must not be ignored.

Summary and Outlook

⁷⁴ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 1-3.

⁷⁵ See Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (London: J. Phillips, 1787); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Author, 1861); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845); David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Boston: 1830).

⁷⁶ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, "A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself" (Bath: 1772), in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 32-58.

⁷⁷ See Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein's *The Agony of Asar: A Thesis on Slavery by the Former Slave, Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, 1717-1747* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers).

The abolitionist movement, consisting of seven members and beginning its work in London in 1787, certainly obtained considerable additional support when Newton and Equiano joined the group. Their contributions mutually reinforced each other, confirming the antislavery polemics through eyewitness testimony from both sides: British slave traders and African slaves. The first aim – the prohibition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – was achieved in 1807, and the final aim – the prohibition of slavery in the British Empire – in 1834. However, the question must be asked whether hidden forms of slavery may arise in a colonial context – other means of legal oppression, designed to keep the colonised people in a state of permanent bondage by denying them equal rights with the colonisers. It is the merit of John Philip, a Scottish missionary in South Africa, that he drew attention to this question very early – a question that could also be asked today.

As a superintendent of the London Missionary Society, Philip began travelling to South Africa in 1819. At first, he had a high opinion of the liberal progress the new British administration would bring compared with the Dutch administration, which had been known as an oppressive system.⁷⁸ To his disappointment, however, he had to realise that conditions for the colonised people, then designated “Hottentots”, had not improved, or had even worsened. Philip did not blame individual representatives of the new administration, but the colonial “system” as such.⁷⁹ After reviewing the “Colonial Proclamation of 1809”, promulgated after the final takeover as a British colony and praised as the “Magna Charta of the Hottentots”, he concluded that it did not remove the unjust claims of the farmers on the indigenous population: “The very reverse is the case: it legalizes these claims and it consigns the Hottentots and their posterity to universal and hopeless slavery.”⁸⁰

According to Philip, the prohibition of the slave trade in 1807 caused a scarcity of imported slaves in the colony. So colonists pressured the indigenous population to work for them. This development led to conflicts between missionaries and colonists, who disliked the missionary stations where “the Hottentots are treated like rational beings.” Philip adds an interesting comparison:

The proprietors in our sugar islands are not more alarmed by any plan for the abolition of slavery, than the inhabitants of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope are by any exertions to improve the character of the Hottentots.⁸¹

This is the most important point, and it remains Philip’s merit, to have realised that the colonial legislation, pertaining to nominally free people, actually operated as a hidden form of slavery. In response, he developed a clear vision of the missionary’s

⁷⁸ John Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vols. 1 (London: James Duncan, 1828), 116.

⁷⁹ Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vol. 1, 35, 61, 130, 150, 154.

⁸⁰ Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vol. 1, 148.

⁸¹ Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vol. 1, 141.

task and the function of missionary stations: to protect oppressed people and offer places of refuge.⁸² In his view, Christianization should be an ecumenical work, beyond denominational boundaries.⁸³ His theological conviction, which did not allow for any racism, was derived from two sources: the idea of “certain rights which human beings possess and of which they cannot be deprived but by manifest injustice,” and from the biblical account of God creating humankind as a unity.⁸⁴ Since he did not avoid running into conflict with the colonisers and criticising governmental measures, he might be designated an abolitionist, though in a new, slightly altered sense, as he was fighting a hidden form of slavery.

The pro-slavery theologians would have remained in their conviction as long as it was the basic belief that each sentence of the Bible is the Word of God, to be taken in its literal meaning, so that, for instance, the biblical precepts concerning slavery were still valid and had to be applied. A new, critical hermeneutical approach to biblical studies was needed, it appears, to create space for a critical discourse on exegetical ground. John William Colenso (1814-1883), the first Anglican Bishop of Natal, South Africa, developed this new hermeneutic. His Bible criticism, contending that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, met with strong opposition in the Anglican Church, leading to a trial for heresy and to his excommunication.⁸⁵

Although Colenso drew on the most recent Western European Bible criticism, then emerging in Germany, it has rightly been emphasised that his theology derived from his encounter with African culture.⁸⁶ The most interesting point, however, is that he developed this critical view in response to questions from his Zulu assistant, William Ngidi, with whom he was collaborating on translating the Old Testament. In the preface to the first volume of his “critical examination” of the Pentateuch, Colenso told his readers, referring to Exodus 21:4:

I shall never forget the revulsion of feeling, with which a very intelligent Christian native, with whose help I was translating these words into the Zulu tongue, first heard them ... His whole soul revolted against the notion, that the Great and Blessed God, the Merciful Father of all mankind, would speak of a servant or maid as mere ‘money’ ...⁸⁷

Colenso’s contention that the whole narrative of the Pentateuch is unhistorical was not meant to destroy faith in the “Living Word of God” contained in the Bible, which is

⁸² Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vol. 1, 30.

⁸³ Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vol. 1, 30.

⁸⁴ Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, vol. 1, 26, 32.

⁸⁵ See John William Colenso, *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1862).

⁸⁶ John William Colenso, *St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: Newly Translated, and Explained from a Missionary Point of View*, ed. Jonathan A. Draper (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003).

⁸⁷ Colenso, *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, 9.

not identical with it; that is, we are not under the obligation to regard every sentence as divinely inspired. Just a few years before his “examination” of the Pentateuch, Thornton Stringfellow, one of the pro-slavery theologians, commented on the same text, Exodus 21, which made William Ngidi revolt against this law, which defined slaves as the owner’s “money”, as sanctioned by God.

In Stringfellow’s view, this law is “the common-sense principle, which has been adopted substantially in civilised countries where involuntary slavery has been instituted from that day until this.” So, he was sure that modern Christian slaveholders are entitled to punish disobedient slaves, in order to force them into submission, even if this would lead to their death within three days: “And he who believes the Bible to be of divine authority, believes these laws were given by the Holy Ghost to Moses.”⁸⁸

Such an application of biblical precepts on slavery is exactly what Colenso sought to prevent through his critical hermeneutical approach. At the end of the first volume of his “examination” of the Pentateuch, he reveals what he was aiming at: referring to Numbers 31, the war on Midjan, he says: “But how thankful we must be, that we are no longer obliged to believe, as a matter of fact, and with vital consequence to our eternal hope, the story related in N. XXXI...”⁸⁹

Thus, Colenso’s new hermeneutical approach created space to refute biblical pro-slavery arguments on exegetical grounds. Laws or stories such as those in Exodus 21 or Numbers 31, which report the treatment of slaves or defeated enemies, can no longer be cited as legitimising slavery once the unhistorical character of the whole Pentateuch is acknowledged. Those laws and stories that conflict with general Christian and philosophical principles raise questions about God’s righteousness, and Colenso follows this in his commentary on Romans, written “from a missionary point of view.” In his view, God has given this righteousness to all members of humankind, without privileging any chosen people. As Paul tells the Jews that they do not have any kind of superiority over the Pagans, so the European Christian colonisers cannot claim superiority over the indigenous Zulu population, Colenso infers “by extension.”⁹⁰ His version of Christianity is universalistic, based on an appreciation of other religions, with the consequence that conversion to Christianity need not be a total break with the past. The ongoing task of missionising, in his view, would be to tell people who may not yet have realised it that God loves all humankind. Since he kept fighting for the rights of the Zulu, even lobbying at the British Parliament, he could

⁸⁸ Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery*, 31.

⁸⁹ Colenso, *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, 143.

⁹⁰ Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Inspiration*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 386 (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2003).

also be described as an abolitionist, though again in a slightly altered sense, as he was confronting a hidden form of slavery.

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