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### WHY DID CHRISTIANS JUSTIFY AFRICAN SLAVERY?

By David Meager

The main reason why the British were involved in the transatlantic slave trade was for economic exploitation. That there was so little public opposition to it seems to be for a number of reasons. People just accepted that slavery was a way of life and the horrors involved in the transatlantic slave trade were out of sight and therefore out of mind. Although many opposed the abuses of the transatlantic slave trade, they were actually in favour of keeping Africans as slaves. George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards both kept slaves, and 'The Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts' owned many slaves in the Caribbean. Many combined a misapplication of the Old Testament with a mixture of racist and 'God cursed' views regarding African people. These views seem to be held by the early British Christian settlers of the New World.

#### Applying the Church to Old Testament Israel

Reformed Christians recognise that there is a link between Old Testament Israel and the Church (both being God's chosen people). It seems as though many Christians at the time of the transatlantic slave trade took this too far. They assumed instead that Christendom was the new Israel and therefore that they could treat pagan peoples in the same way as Israel had done in the Old Testament. As God's chosen people they believed that they had the right to enslave 'inferior' nations. This also meant that, like the Israelites, fellow Christians were not to sell each other as slaves to pagan nations, and this seems to have been the practice in Britain and much of Europe from the time of William the Conqueror (see the last *Cross†Way* article). These views can be seen especially clearly in the attitudes and practices of the founding Puritan Fathers of the New World. If these views are characteristic of the general Christian attitudes of the time then this could help to explain why there was so little moral opposition in Britain to the transatlantic slave trade, and why some Christians kept slaves.

#### New World Christian attitudes to slavery

##### God's chosen Israel

According to Robert Dabney (1820-1898), the Southern Presbyterian, in his book *'A Defense of Virginia and the South'* The Pilgrim Fathers saw themselves as God's chosen people and were therefore at liberty to treat the native Indians as God had allowed Israel to treat its pagan neighbours, *'the pious 'Puritan Fathers' found it convenient to assume that they were God's chosen Israel and the pagans about them were Amalek and Amorites. They hence deduced their righteous title to exterminate or enslave the Indians.... The Promptitude with which the 'Puritan Fathers' embarked in this business [the African slave trade] may be comprehended, when it is stated that the Desire [the first slave ship to Africa] sailed upon her voyage in June 1637 [only 17 years after the Pilgrim Fathers landed]....the commerce of New England was born of the slave trade. p33.*

The founders of the state of Massachusetts also seem to have had similar attitudes. According to Douglas Harper (compiler of 'Slavery in the North' website), *Massachusetts, like many American colonies, had roots in a scrupulous fundamentalist Protestantism. Christianity was no barrier to slave-ownership, however. The Puritans regarded themselves as God's Elect, and so they had no difficulty with slavery, which had the sanction of the Law of the God of Israel...A Massachusetts law of 1641 specifically linked slavery to Biblical authority, and established for slaves the set of rules "which the law of God, established in Israel concerning such people, doth morally require."*

### **Racial inferiority/God's curse**

Coupled with this misapplication of the Old Testament it seems as though many Christians at the time believed that the black African people were a God cursed inferior race. According to Lorenzo Johnston Greene *'The interweaving of Christianity and white supremacy is considered a defining quality of Southern slavery. Yet this also happened in the North. Not only was slavery sanctioned by the God of the Old Testament, it was a positive duty of his chosen people in the New World, because it brought the Gospel to the pagans of Africa. Thus could a Rhode Island elder rejoice, without any apparent consciousness of irony, when a slave ship coasted in to the wharf, that "an overruling Providence has been pleased to bring to this land of freedom another cargo of benighted heathens to enjoy the blessings of a Gospel dispensation.'* *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776.*

According to Douglas Harper, *The Calvinist doctrine of predestination easily supported the Puritans in a position that blacks were a people cursed and condemned by God to serve whites.*

Similar racist views were even held right up to the 19th Century by some Christians. According to Robert Dabney (1820-1898), it was part of God's natural order in a fallen world that 'superior' races should enslave 'inferior' races for their own spiritual, moral and material good, and for the social stability of everybody else. According to Dabney *'while we believe that 'God made of one blood all nations of men to dwell under the whole heavens,' we know that the African has become, according to a well-known law of natural history, by the manifold influences of the ages, a different, fixed species of the race, separated from the white man by traits bodily, mental and moral, almost as rigid and permanent as those of genus.'* pp352-353.

Dabney supports his arguments by showing how the Africans had benefited spiritually, morally and materially in Virginia by being delivered from a pagan and debauched lifestyle, and how after their liberation (after the American Civil War) the Virginian slaves were worse off.

### **Good treatment of slaves**

However, although these views certainly seem racist and incompatible with the Gospel, many Christian slave owners at the time did try to put into practice the humanitarian aspects of the Old Testament Law. According to Douglas Harper, *The Puritan influence in Massachusetts lent a particular character to slavery there and sometimes eased its severity.*

Furthermore, according to Catharine Sedgwick (1789-1867) of Stockbridge, Mass *'The slaves in Massachusetts were treated with almost parental kindness. They were incorporated into the family, and each puritan household being a sort of religious structure, the relative duties of master and servant were clearly defined. No doubt the severest and longest task fell to the slave, but in the household of the farmer or artisan, the master and the mistress shared it, and when it was finished, the white and the black, like the feudal chief and his household servant, sat down to the same table, and shared the same viands.'* [Reminiscence by Catharine Sedgwick (1789-1867) of Stockbridge, Mass.]

Robert Dabney defended his view that slaves were better off by appeal to the good treatment they received from their masters:

*'Of a nation of four millions lifted, 'sitting clothed, and in their right mind;' of more than half a million adult communicants in Christian churches. This much abused [criticised] system has thus accomplished for the Africans...more than all the rest of the Christian world together has accomplished for the rest of the heathen.*p282

*'Our slaves generally ate more meat, wore more and better clothing, and lived in better houses,*

than their fathers did.' p314

*'Southern slaves received, on the average, better and more certain compensation than any labouring people of their capacity in the world. It came to them in the form of that maintenance, which the master was bound by the laws, as well as his own interests, to bestow upon them. During childhood, they were reared at his expense; in sickness they received maintenance, nursing, and the same medical advice which he provided for his own children; all at his expense. When they married and had children their families were provided for by the masters without one additional toil or anxiety on their part. When they died, their orphans had, in the master's estate, an unflinching provision against destitution; and if old age overtook them, they received, without labour, the same supplies and comforts which were allotted to them in their prime.'* p273-274

### **Slavery not abolished in Britain**

In the last Cross†Way article we saw that slavery had been abolished in Britain, however, Dabney points out that Britain had not in fact abolished slavery on its own shores by the 18th Century as although fellow Brits may not have enslaved each other, there were, however, 15,000 negro slaves in England in 1772 at the time of the Mansfield-Somerset case (see the previous Cross†Way article) who were publicly bought and sold in the markets of London. Hogarth's pictures which *'fixed the follies and peculiarities of fashionable life...frequently contain the African 'valet'; showing that the possession of [these] servants was demanded by high life.* p64-66.

### **Conclusion**

If we are shocked by these views it must be stated that many Christians at the time were firmly opposed to the forced enslavement and ill treatment involved in the transatlantic slave trade, and the Old Testament does allow a form of regulated slavery which the New Testament does not nullify (see Cross†Way article in issue 102). However, their application of the Old Testament does seem to be flawed and their views towards Africans racist. If this was the majority view then it does help to explain why Britain morally justified itself in the slave trade and the lack of public opposition.

The next article will examine the transatlantic slave trade and the rise and success of the abolitionist movement, and slavery up to the present day.

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