

THE ORIGINS, CHARACTER, AND INFLUENCE OF JOHN WESLEY'S THOUGHTS UPON SLAVERY

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John Wesley claimed that he had gone as a missionary to Georgia mainly "to convert the Indians," but instead found himself led along the way to a deeper spiritual experience.¹ In fact his ministry there spurred him to accomplish much more for Blacks than he was able to do for Native Americans. Unlike his pupil George Whitefield, who eventually yielded to the plea of expedience, Wesley was strongly in favor of Georgia's original ban on slave-holding, and evinced both curiosity and sympathy when he witnessed its workings in South Carolina. His first visit to Charleston, South Carolina, was at the end of July 1736. He preached for Alexander Garden, and was moved "to see several Negroes at church," with one of whom he conversed about her religion, though he had to relinquish his design of visiting Alexander Skene's pioneer plantation where there were "about fifty Christian Negroes."² It was perhaps prophetic that on August 20 he spent two hours reading *The Negro's Advocate*.³ On his next visit he had two missionary sessions with a black woman from Barbados named Nanny, to whom in simple language he taught his basic view of Christianity. He also conversed with several blacks on William Bellinger's plantation, concluding that it would be of great value to engage a travelling missionary similarly moving from plantation to plantation in order "to instruct the American Negroes in Christianity."⁴ Wesley's third and last visit to South Carolina was on his hasty and hazardous journey to sail for England, and blacks are not mentioned. Once on board ship, however, he "began instructing a Negro lad in the principles of Christianity."⁵

Although in South Carolina Wesley sought out chiefly "the most serious of the planters," who at least permitted the Christianizing of their slaves, he also seems to have met some who were brutal and sadistic, apparently including one who "thought fit to roast his slave alive."⁶ He never

¹*The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1938), Vol. I, p. 422.

²*Journal*, July 31-August 2, 1736.

³*Journal*, Vol. I, p. 260 (diary). This was probably *The Negro's and Indian's Advocate, suing for their Admission into the Church*, by Morgan Godwyn (London, 1680), p. 174. Godwyn also published a 12-page *Supplement* the following year.

⁴*Journal*, April 23-4, 26-9, 1737, and diary.

⁵*Ibid.*, December 26, 1737; January 7, 1738.

⁶*Thoughts upon Slavery*, III: 11.

ventured into print on this subject in any detail, but the private journal in which his brother Charles described their experiences during that first visit to South Carolina was published posthumously:

Mon. Aug. 2 [1736]. I had observed much, and heard more, of the cruelty of masters towards their Negroes, but now I received an authentic account of some horrid instances thereof. The giving a child a slave of its own age to tyrannize over, to beat and abuse out of sport, was, I myself saw, a common practice. Nor is it strange that being thus trained up in cruelty, they should afterwards arrive at so great perfection in it; that Mr. Star, a gentleman I often met at Mr. Laserre's, should, as he himself informed L[aserre], first nail up a Negro by the ear, then order him to be whipped in the severest manner, and then to have scalding water thrown all over him, so that the poor creature could not stir for four months after. Another much applauded punishment is drawing their slaves' teeth. One Col. Lynch is universally known to have cut off a poor Negro's legs, and to kill several of them every year by his barbarities. . . . I shall only mention one more, related to me by a Swiss gentleman, Mr. Zouberbuhler, an eye-witness, of Mr. Hill, a dancing-master in Charleston. He whipped a she-slave so long that she fell down at his feet for dead. When by the help of a physician she was so far recovered as to show signs of life, he repeated the whipping with equal rigour, and concluded with dropping hot sealing-wax upon her flesh. Her crime was overfilling a tea-cup.⁷

In later life Wesley avowed: "Ever since I heard of it first I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid slave trade."⁸ It is not surprising to find that after preaching in Moorfields, London, on Sunday, June 29, 1740, he "collected for the Negro school"—though which one remains uncertain.⁹ Among the many Americans with whom he kept in touch was Samuel Davies, later President of Princeton, who wrote him in 1755 from his pastoral charge in Hanover, Virginia:

The poor Negro slaves here never heard of Jesus or his religion till they arrived at the land of their slavery in America, whom their masters generally neglect. . . . These poor Africans are the principal objects of my compassion, and, I think, the most proper subject of your charity.¹⁰

Wesley sent him a parcel of books, and rejoiced to read Davies' description of how the blacks sat up all night singing Wesley's hymns.¹¹ Wesley's "perfect detestation" of the slave trade appeared in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, published in that same year of 1755, in a comment on I Timothy 1:10: "*Man-stealers*—the worst of all thieves, in comparison of whom highwaymen and house-breakers are innocent!" (In this

⁷*The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 2 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, n.d.), August 2, 1736, the text checked against the manuscript original in the Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

⁸Letter to Granville Sharp, October 11, 1787; cf. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), Vol. VIII, p. 17.

⁹*Journal*, diary for that date.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, July 27, 1755.

¹¹*Ibid.*, March 1, 1756; cf. also January 28, 1757.

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category he lumped together not only "most traders in Negroes," but "procurers of servants for America, and all who list soldiers by lies, tricks, or enticements.")

An even greater influence upon Wesley's efforts to help the slaves, however, especially in promoting a gradual change of emphasis from Christianization to emancipation, was Nathaniel Gilbert (1722-74) and his brother Francis (c. 1725-79). Francis Gilbert had become one of Wesley's preachers, and his older brother, greatly impressed by Wesley's *Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, left his large and prosperous plantation in Antigua (where he owned hundreds of slaves) to meet Wesley, bringing with him his wife and children, as well as three houseslaves. On December 19, 1758, Wesley baptized two of these slaves, exclaiming: "One of these is deeply convinced of sin, the other rejoices in God her Saviour, and is the first African Christian I have known. But shall not our Lord in due time have these heathens also 'for his inheritances'?"¹² Gilbert returned to Antigua in 1759 not only to become the father of Methodism in the West Indies, but to Christianize his slaves.¹³ It seems likely that it was through the Gilberts that Wesley came into touch with Anthony Benezet (1713-84), a Quaker and his major inspiration in writing *Thoughts upon Slavery*.

Nathaniel Gilbert wrote to Benezet on October 29, 1768: "Your tracts concerning slavery are very just, and it is a matter I have often thought of, even before I became acquainted with the truth. Your arguments are forcible against purchasing slaves, or being anyway concerned in that trade."¹⁴ By that time Benezet had published three sizeable pamphlets on this subject, as well as many upon other themes: *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes* (Germantown, 1759); *A Short Account of that Part of Africa, inhabited by the Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1762); and *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies, in a short Representation of the calamitous State of the enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions* (Philadelphia, 1766). The first went through two editions, the second through five, and the third through six. It was to these, and also to Benezet's more substantial and most influential book, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*,¹⁵ published in Philadelphia in 1771, that Wesley paid his own testimony in 1787, claim-

¹²*Journal*. The woman "Bessy" remained a comfort to Gilbert when he wrote to Wesley on July 22, 1765.

¹³See Frank Baker, "The Origins of Methodism in the West Indies," *London Quarterly Review*, 185: 9-17 (June 1960), especially pp. 10-14.

¹⁴George S. Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937), p. 418.

¹⁵The full title is: *Some Historical Account of Guinea, its situation, produce, and the general disposition of its inhabitants. With an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade, its nature, and lamentable effects. Also, a re-publication of the Sentiments of several Authors of Note, on this interesting Subject; particularly an Extract of a Treatise, by Granville Sharp.*

ing that his own zeal for emancipation was really kindled by "Mr. Benezet's tracts, and what Mr. Sharp has written upon the subject."¹⁶

Exactly when or in what order Wesley began to read Benezet we cannot tell for certain, though probably his *Journal* entry for February 12, 1772, marks the beginning:

I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the slave trade. I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern; and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.

It appears that Wesley wrote almost immediately to Benezet, both thanking him and offering to cooperate with Granville Sharp (1735-1813), the father of the English emancipation movement, an abridgement of whose *Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of tolerating Slavery* (1769) had appeared as an appendix to Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea*.¹⁷

After receiving Wesley's letter (which is not extant), Benezet wrote his first letter to Sharp in England, on May 14, 1772:

I have long been desirous to advise with such well-disposed persons in England as have a prospect of the iniquity of the slave trade, and are concerned to prevent its continuance. And I should have wrote thee thereon, had I known how to direct; particularly as I had taken the freedom to republish a part of thy acceptable, and I trust serviceable, treatise. But now . . . I make free affectionately to salute thee, and to send thee some copies . . . of a treatise lately published here on that iniquitous traffic, giving the best account of its origin, progress, etc., we have been able to procure. . . .

My friend John Westly promises he will consult with thee about the expediency of some weekly publication in the newspaper on the origin, nature, and dreadful effects of the slave trade. . . .¹⁸

Sharp replied on August 21, 1772, from Old Jewry, London: "You need not have made an apology for having abridged my book. . . . I send you a copy of your own book as reprinted here, and some other pamphlets lately published on the subject. . . ." ¹⁹In accordance with his promise to Benezet, Wesley also wrote to Sharp, informing him that he wished "to write against the slave trade." Sharp thereupon sent Wesley "a large bundle of books and papers on the subject."²⁰

It may have been Benezet's *Africa* or *Caution* which Wesley read in February 1772, but if so it seems certain that Benezet would send him a copy of the Philadelphia edition of *Guinea*. Sharp also would send him (if

¹⁶Letter to Samuel Hoare, August 18, 1787, in *Letters*, Vol. VIII, pp. 275-76.

¹⁷Cf. Brookes, *Benezet*, p. 447.

¹⁸Brookes, *Benezet*, pp. 290-91, from Wilson Armisted, *Memoirs of Anthony Benezet*, 1859, revised.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 418-19.

²⁰Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, (1975), p. 240, quoting a letter from Sharp to Benezet dated January 7, 1774.

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needed) a copy of the London edition, for he claimed that but for his broadcasting them to judges, nobility, "and many others," the publisher would have been out of pocket.²¹ Certainly when Wesley set to work upon his own *Thoughts upon Slavery* in 1773, it was Benezet's *Guinea* which formed the basis of about thirty per cent of his own publication, though a *Guinea* abridged, paraphrased, re-ordered, and augmented from four other sources, as well as from Wesley's own experience and meditation—indeed the latter supplied the bulk of his *Thoughts*.

Benezet's *Guinea* was a book of almost two hundred pages, but its fifteen chapters and four appendices were not very well organized, and there was much overlapping of subject matter. This had been true also of his earlier publications. *Africa*, *A Caution*, and *Guinea* progressively built upon their predecessors, the author (or compiler) utilizing some material three times over in slightly different ways and with slightly different texts, so that each must be examined carefully before it becomes possible to be certain which in fact Wesley used. Wesley's work, though it also contains some overlapping, is much more tightly organized and written. In accordance with his normal practice, Wesley divides the work into numbered sections and sub-sections.

Section I forms a brief introduction, defining slavery and summarizing its history. This he took mainly from a lengthy legal work arising out of the zealous campaigns of Granville Sharp, son of Thomas Sharp, prebendary of Durham, and grandson of John Sharp, Archbishop of York, and himself originally intended for Holy Orders. In 1765 Sharp had befriended a runaway slave, Jonathan Strong, and devoted his leisure to studying the law of personal liberty in England. He canvassed support in 1769 by his *Representation of the Injustice . . . of tolerating Slavery*. He became involved in many legal suits on the issue, and his advocacy achieved perhaps its most signal success with the judicial decision that "as soon as any slave sets his foot upon English territory he becomes free." The counsel who won this decision in the Court of King's Bench was Francis Hargrave (1741?-1821), who in 1772 published *An Argument in the Case of James Sommersett, a Negro*, from which Wesley presents some abridged and paraphrased passages.²²

Wesley's Section II describes the areas of Africa from which the slaves come, and their customs and character. After two introductory paragraphs by Wesley himself almost the whole of this section is abridged and paraphrased from Benezet's *Guinea*, with Wesley adding a page of summary:

Upon the whole, therefore, the Negroes who inhabit the coast of Africa . . . are so far

²¹Brookes, *Benezet*, p. 447.

²²Wesley abridges and paraphrases passages from pp. 14-15 and 22-24. For Lord Mansfield's decision of June 22, 1772, see *State Trials*, ed. Thomas B. Howell, 34 vols. (London: Hansard, 1809-28), Vol. XX, pp. 80-82.

from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described, that on the contrary they are represented by them who had no motive to flatter them as remarkably sensible . . . ; as industrious to the highest degree . . . ; as fair, just, and honest in all their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise; and as far more mild, friendly, and kind to strangers than any of our forefathers were. . . .

In Section III Wesley describes how the slaves are “procured, carried to, and treated in America.” Here also he depends in part upon Benezet’s *Guinea*, though he does introduce also one page from Benezet’s *Africa* and the closing three pages from Sharp’s *Representation*—and this from the original rather than from the excerpt given in Benezet’s *Guinea*. At various points Wesley intersperses his own comments, emphasizing the white brutality which remains a continuing motif with him:

“That their own parents sell them is utterly false: whites, not Blacks, are without natural affection!”²³

“Such is the manner wherein the Negroes are procured! Thus the Christians preach the gospel to the heathens!”²⁴

“It is no wonder so many should die in the passage, but rather that any should survive it.”²⁵

“Did the Creator intend that the noblest creature in the whole world should live such a life as this? ‘Are *these* thy glorious works, Parent of Good?’ ”²⁶

The remaining half of Wesley’s *Thoughts upon Slavery* owes very little directly to the writings of others. In Section IV he asks “whether these things can be defended on the principles of even heathen honesty, whether they can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy?” He refutes the claim that slavery is authorized by law by stating:

“Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still. . . . I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of even natural justice.” This he substantiates by two pages abridged from William Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, in which Blackstone had pointed out that “the three origins of the right of slavery assigned by Justinian [capture in war, self-sale, birth] are all built upon false foundations.”²⁷

Slavery arises, claims Wesley, neither from idealism nor even from necessity, pointing out that in Georgia he and his family of eight people (like the group of forty Germans) employed their spare time “in felling of trees and clearing of ground, as hard labour as any Negro need be

²³*Thoughts upon Slavery*, III: 2.

²⁴*Ibid.*, III: 4.

²⁵*Ibid.*, III: 5.

²⁶*Ibid.*, III: 7, quoting Milton, *Paradise Lost*, v. 153.

²⁷William Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 4 vols. (1765-69), Vol. I, pp. 411-13, heavily abridged. Wesley may well have adapted this passage in IV: 3 of the *Thoughts* from Sharp’s *Representation*, pp. 141-44, though he did know Blackstone’s original.

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employed in," adding: "And this was so far from impairing our health that we all continued perfectly well, while the idle ones all round about us were swept away as with a pestilence. It is not true, therefore, that white men are not able to labour, even in hot climates, full as well as black."²⁸

The true motive for slavery, Wesley argues, is "to get money."²⁹ Nor is it ever necessary in this pursuit "to violate all the laws of justice, mercy, and truth."³⁰ Indeed, neither for the individual nor for the nation is wealth really necessary: "Better no trade than trade procured by villany. It is far better to have no wealth than to gain wealth at the expense of virtue. Better is honest poverty than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat, and blood of our fellow-creatures."³¹

Even if slavery were truly necessary, Wesley continues, treating slaves with such brutality could never be excused by their supposed stupidity, stubbornness, and wickedness. He notes the example of Hugh Bryan of South Carolina, who used "mildness and gentleness," and whose many Negroes "loved and revered him as a father, and cheerfully obeyed him out of love."³²

In Section V Wesley went on "to make a little application of the preceding observations." He exhorted captains of slave-ships to have compassion, and to fear eternal retribution: "Whatever you lose, lose not your soul: nothing can countervail that loss. Immediately quit the horrid trade. At all events be an honest man."³³ Merchants he urged: "Have no more any part in this detestable business. Instantly leave it to those unfeeling wretches 'who laugh at human nature and compassion.' Be *you* a man! Not a wolf, a devourer of the human species! Be merciful, that you may obtain mercy!"³⁴ He then turned to "every gentleman that has an estate in our American plantations . . . , seeing *men-buyers* are exactly on a level with men-stealers. . . . It is *your* money that pays the merchant, and through him the captain, and the African butchers. *You*, therefore, are guilty, yea, principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies, and murders. You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion; they would not stir a step without *you*."³⁵ He closes his appeal: "Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion! Be gentle toward all men, and see that you in-

²⁸*Thoughts*, IV: 6.

²⁹*Ibid.*, IV: 4.

³⁰*Ibid.*, IV: 5.

³¹*Ibid.*, IV: 7.

³²*Ibid.*, IV: 9. For Hugh Bryan or Brian see *Journal*, April 26, 1737 (diary).

³³*Thoughts*, V: 3.

³⁴*Ibid.*, V: 4, including a line of verse used on other occasions by Wesley, which has not yet been traced to its source.

³⁵*Thoughts*, IV: 5.

variably do unto everyone as you would he should do unto *you*.”³⁶ Wesley’s closing paragraph contains a prayer that God, “who has mingled of one blood all the nations upon earth,”³⁷ should free both the slaves from their captivity and their captors from their sins, a prayer then repeated in a stanza from Charles Wesley’s poem, “For the Heathen” (1758).

Wesley sent a draft of the work to Granville Sharp, who replied on December 20, 1773:

Dear sir, I have perused with great satisfaction your little tract against slavery, and am far from thinking that any alteration is necessary. You have very judiciously brought together and digested . . . some of the principal facts cited by my friend Mr. Benezet and others, which you corroborate with some circumstances within your own knowledge; and have very sensibly drawn up the sum of the whole argument into a small compass, which infinitely increases the power and effect of it. . . .’

At the same time Sharp thought that it was probably unwise to offer Wesley’s work for publication with a collection of similar pieces being published by Dilly, even though it would greatly enrich them, claiming, it “will certainly have much more weight with many persons if it be separately printed, and published with your name.”³⁸ Sharp reported also to Benezet:

A few days ago he sent me his manuscript to peruse; which is *well drawn up*, and he has reduced the substance of the argument respecting the gross iniquity of that trade into a very small compass: *his evidence*, however, seems chiefly extracted from the authors quoted in your several publications.³⁹

The first edition of *Thoughts upon Slavery* seems to have appeared from the press of Robert Hawes in Lamb Street, London, in January or February, 1774, in octavo, 53 pages selling for a shilling, rather than in the smaller duodecimo format recommended by Sharp. On February 2 Sharp wrote to Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia that he had sent two copies “of Mr. Westly’s Tract against Slavery.”⁴⁰ On February 28 John Horton wrote to Charles Wesley in Bristol: “The Tract on Slavery I saw as soon as published, and expected to have seen your supplement to it; about three hundred were given away at your brother’s expense.”⁴¹ It was also surely in February or March that Wesley sent a copy of *Thoughts upon Slavery* to Benezet, accompanied by a covering letter which read in part: “Mr. Oglethorpe, you know, went so far as to begin settling a colony without Negroes. . . . It is certainly our duty to do all in our power to check this

³⁶Ibid., V: 7.

³⁷Acts 17:26.

³⁸Undated manuscript draft in Wesley College, Bristol; dated for its publication in *Wesley Banner*, 1849, p. 140.

³⁹Anstey, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁴⁰Brookes, *Benezet*, p. 447.

⁴¹Letter in the Methodist Archives, Manchester. The “supplement” was possibly a group of hymns which might have been planned, but never appeared.

growing evil. . . ."⁴² To this Benezet replied on May 23: "The Tract thou hast lately published, entitled *Thoughts on Slavery*, afforded me much satisfaction. . . . Wherefore I immediately agreed with the printer to have it republished here."⁴³ This new edition, incorporating several lengthy footnotes and a 25-page appendix by Benezet, appeared from the press of Joseph Crukshank in that same year, in a collection entitled *The Potent Enemies of America laid open*.

In England three more editions appeared in 1774, this time in duodecimo, with 28 pages, all from the press of Robert Hawes. These sold merrily for twopence each, and Wesley wrote from Whitehaven to London on May 6, 1774: "I could have sold, if I had had them before the day, more than five hundred *Thoughts on Slavery*. You should directly send all that remain but ten or twenty, to meet me at Edinburgh, Newcastle, and Scarborough."⁴⁴ In 1775 the tract was reprinted in Dublin. The original shilling octavo edition continued on sale for several years along with the others, and one of Wesley's catalogues of 1777 advertised: "137 *Thoughts on Slavery*, large 1s. small 2d." (All these were described as *Thoughts on Slavery*, although all the actual printed copies during Wesley's lifetime read "upon.")

The value of the work was speedily recognized. *The Monthly Review*, often strongly critical of Wesley's publications (as is reflected in the reviewer's closing phrase), devoted three pages to it, admitting that perhaps Wesley unduly idealized the blacks, but going on to assert: "This pamphlet contains many facts on good authority, or as good as could be found, . . . and the writer has made many pertinent observations . . . which do honour to his humanity, the more so as the subject is treated in a liberal manner, without being debased by any peculiar tincture—which was perhaps to be apprehended."⁴⁵ In the following month a slave-holding correspondent claimed that he was kind to his slaves, and that Georgia's laws protected them from undue cruelty; that though he believed Wesley's statement about a slave being roasted alive, he had never personally heard of such an incident.⁴⁶ Wesley replied on November 30, quoting two advertisements from the *Williamsburg Gazette* and a North Carolina newspaper, offering a small reward for each runaway slave brought back alive, but a much larger one for "his head severed from his body."⁴⁷ Wesley was quoting "a letter from Philadelphia, now before" him—in fact of May 23, 1774.⁴⁸

⁴²Roberts Vaux, *Memoirs of Anthony, Benezet*, 1817, p. 53, undated.

⁴³*Arminian Magazine*, 1787, pp. 44-48.

⁴⁴Cf. *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XXXII, 45.

⁴⁵*Monthly Review*, September 1774, pp. 234-37.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, October, pp. 324-25.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, December, pp. 487-88.

⁴⁸*Arminian Magazine*, 1787, p. 47.

Wesley continued to take the same firm stand against English abettors of slavery long after his own country was almost cut off from the American market. In 1776 he claimed that however long its history, "the African trade . . . is nevertheless iniquitous from first to last."⁴⁹ In his *Journal* for April 4, 1777, at Liverpool, he noted: "Many large ships are now laid up in the docks, which had been employed for many years in buying or stealing poor Africans, and selling them in America for slaves. The men-butchers have now nothing to do at this laudable occupation. Since the American war broke out, there is no demand for human cattle. So the men of Africa, as well as Europe, may enjoy their native liberty." In his *Serious Address to the People of England* (1778) he studied the changed state of the nation:

"Nay, but we have also lost our Negro trade." I would to God it may never be found more! That we may never more steal and sell our brethren like beasts—never murder them by thousands and tens of thousands! O may this worse than Mahometan, worse than pagan, abomination, be removed from us for ever! Never was anything such a reproach to England since it was a nation as the having any hand in this execrable traffic.⁵⁰

In the same year Anthony Benezet added still another to his list of anti-slavery works—*Serious Considerations on Several Important Subjects, viz: On War and its Inconsistence with the Gospel. Observations on Slavery. And Remarks on the Nature and bad Effects of Spirituous Liquors*.⁵¹ "Observations on Slavery" occupies pages 27-40, and is little more than an introduction leading to the unacknowledged republication, slightly edited, of Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery*, V.2-6, described as "an address or expostulation made by a sensible author."⁵²

Wesley's preachers in America had also been following his lead, led by Francis Asbury. Meeting in conference in Baltimore in April 1780, they agreed "to require those preachers who hold slaves to give promise to set them free." Thus far the original printed *Minutes*. Thomas Haskins' manuscript account of the occasion, however, continued, "on pain of future exclusion."⁵³ The Conference went on to "acknowledge that slave-keeping is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature; and hurtful to society, contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not another should do to us and ours," adding, "We pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves, and advise their freedom." Haskins phrased this, "insist on their freedom," and

⁴⁹*A Seasonable Address to . . . the Inhabitants of Great Britain*, 1776, ¶13.

⁵⁰§ 5.

⁵¹Philadelphia: Crukshank, 1778, p. 48, issued anonymously; cf. Evans, *American Bibliography*, No. 15737.

⁵²Pp. 33-35 contain also a lengthy footnote repeated from Benezet's *Guinea*, pp. 121-23n—possibly from the converted slaveship captain, John Newton.

⁵³*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences* (Philadelphia: Tuckniss, 1795), p. 38; cf. *Virginia United Methodist Heritage*, Fall 1977, p. 27.

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added: "Shall we read the minutes in every society? And the thoughts of slave-keeping, which was approved last Conference, and tell the people they must have but one year more before we exclude them?"⁵⁴ This was difficult to enforce, especially where it was in opposition to state law, but when the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in 1784 another attempt was made to impose emancipation upon pain of excommunication. This was done by a lengthy section in the first *Discipline*⁵⁵ and by an additional clause in the printed *General Rules*,⁵⁶ but both failed, and were withdrawn for a more propitious but long-delayed opportunity.⁵⁷

Wesley continued to promulgate his views on slavery, with increasing cooperation from others. In his *Arminian Magazine* from 1781 onwards he included nine extracts from the *Poems* of "Miss Phillis Wheatley, a Negro." On November 9, 1783, he wrote to Captain Richard Williams of Truro, who had himself offered a poem for the magazine: "I think the lines on Slavery will do well! They are both sensible and poetical." For some reason, however, this poem did not appear in the magazine, though Wesley did send it on to the *General Post* and a Bristol newspaper.⁵⁸

Thanks especially to Granville Sharp and John Wesley, support of the pioneer Quakers on this issue had served to develop a strong anti-slavery sentiment in England, and this was signalized by the formation on May 22, 1787, of The Society Instituted in 1787 for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Quakers formed the working majority, but Sharp was the best known public figure, and Thomas Clarkson was the recording secretary.⁵⁹ On August 17 that year—even before he had reached London after over three months' absence in Ireland—Wesley wrote to Samuel Hoare, one of the original group, stating that Clarkson had informed him of the design "to procure, if possible, an Act of Parliament for the abolition of slavery in our plantations." He continued:

It is with great satisfaction that I learn so many of you are determined to support him. . . . What little I can do to promote this excellent work I shall do with pleasure. I will print a large edition of the tract I wrote some years since, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, and send it (which I have an opportunity of doing once a month) to all my friends in Great Britain and Ireland; adding a few words in favour of your design, which I believe will have some weight with them.⁶⁰

⁵⁴*Minutes*, as above; *Virginia Heritage*, *op. cit.*, p. 28. Slavery is not in fact mentioned either in the printed *Minutes* or in Haskins' manuscript for 1779.

⁵⁵See John J. Tigert, *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism*, 6th ed. (Nashville: Smith and Lamar, 1916), pp. 216-18, 223, 554-56.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 267-68, 291, 294, 323, 335, 351, 419-23, 442-46.

⁵⁸*Letters*, Vol. VII, pp. 195, 201, December 10, 1783.

⁵⁹See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 220-21.

⁶⁰*Letters*, Vol. VIII, pp. 275-76. Cf. Clarkson's report of the reading of this letter to the Abolition Committee on August 21, *ibid.*, Vol. VIII, pp. 6-7.

It was not in fact until October 9 that he returned to London. On the 11th he wrote to Granville Sharp, reiterating his concern, in similar words, though raising objections to the Society's plan to use paid informers against slave traders.⁶¹

On March 3, 1788, Wesley wrote in his *Bristol Journal*: "On Tuesday I gave notice of my design to preach on Thursday evening upon (what is now the general topic) slavery. In consequence of this, on Thursday the house from end to end was filled with high and low, rich and poor." He preached on Genesis 9:27, interrupted by a violent thunderstorm for six minutes, when most of the congregation rushed about panic-stricken, benches giving way in the pandemonium, all of which Wesley interpreted as Satan fighting "lest his kingdom should be delivered up." The following day was set apart "as a day of fasting and prayer that God would . . . make a way for [the slaves] to escape, and break their chains in sunder." In the issues of the *Arminian Magazine* for July and August that year Wesley published "A summary View of the Slave Trade," extracted from a larger publication showing its injustice and inhumanity.

It is well known that Wesley's witness continued on his death bed. On February 24, 1791, he commended William Wilberforce upon his own battle against slavery: "Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature." Wesley's influence upon Wilberforce was undoubted, witness the latter's docket upon this letter: "John Wesley, his last words. Slave trade."⁶² Although two months later Parliament rejected Wilberforce's plea, he was not "worn out by the opposition of men and devils," but went on until in 1807 the English slave trade was abolished—a few days before his death—and in 1833 a bill was passed emancipating slaves throughout the British Empire. In this long struggle the Methodist people were noteworthy for their massive support, and Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery* continued to challenge men of all religions and of none. The following thirty years saw at least thirteen new editions published in the United States, as the Abolition Societies here continued the battle, until at last—to vary slightly Wesley's last words to Wilberforce—"even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) vanished away."

⁶¹Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 23. Of this edition, strangely enough, not a copy appears to be extant, although the inventory taken of the stock in the Methodist Book Room just after Wesley's death in 1791 listed a total of 1,068 copies, all duodecimo, and the next edition was dated 1792. There seems to be another hint about this edition in a letter sent from Bristol by Wesley on March 10, 1790, to Henry Moore in London: "I have received the parcel by the coach. I quite approve of your sending the note to all our Assistants, and hope it will have a good effect. I would do everything that is in my power toward the extirpation of that trade which is a scandal not only to Christianity but humanity!"

⁶²Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 265. The letter was perhaps prompted by Wesley's reading the biography of a Negro slave, Olandah Equiano, nicknamed Gustavus Vassa.