

# Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society

Volume 13

2009

S T Kimbrough, Jr.  
*Editor*

Charles A. Green  
*Assistant Editor*

**PAPERS PRESENTED**  
**AT**  
**THE 20TH ANNUAL MEETING**  
**OF**  
**THE CHARLES WESLEY SOCIETY**  
*October 2009*  
*Epworth By The Sea, St. Simons Island, Georgia*

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*Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society 2009*  
Published in the United States by  
The Charles Wesley Society  
*Editor, S T Kimbrough, Jr.*  
*Assistant Editor, Charles A. Green*

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# Charles Wesley and Slavery

S T Kimbrough, Jr.

When Charles Wesley was born in the year 1707 in Epworth, some British traders were actively engaged in African slave trade. To what extent he may have been influenced by the knowledge of this reality during his childhood and youth we do not know. There does not appear to be evidence that his upbringing by parents Samuel and Susanna would have prejudiced him against persons of other races. Apparently his first encounter with the horrors of slavery was after his departure from the colony of Georgia, when he made his way overland to the port city of Charlestown to depart for England.

The entry in his Journal for Monday, August 2, 1736 reads as follows:

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 Lasserre's, should, as he himself informed Lasserre, first nail up a negro by the ears, 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 Colonel Lynch is universally known to have cut off a poor negro's legs; and to kill several of them every year by his barbarities.

It were endless to recount all the shocking instances of diabolical cruelty which these men (as they call themselves) daily practice upon their fellow-creatures; and that on the most trivial occasions. I shall only mention one more, related to me by a Swiss gentleman, Mr Zoubertbuhler, an eyewitness of Mr Hill, a dancing-master in Charlestown. 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.

These horrid cruelties are the less to be wondered at, because the government itself in effect countenances and allows them to kill their slaves by the ridiculous penalty appointed for it, of about 7 pounds sterling (half of which is usually saved by the criminal's informing against himself). This I can look upon as no other than a public act to indemnify murder.<sup>1</sup>

We do not know exactly what Charles means by the words "I had observed much, and heard more, of the cruelty of masters towards their negroes." Had he "observed much, and heard more" while on board the ship *Simmonds* on his way to America, while in Georgia, or is he referring to earlier knowledge while in England? Unfortunately we do not know. What we do know for certain is that at age twenty-nine in Charlestown he became an eyewitness to the terrifying

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<sup>1</sup> S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 46–47; henceforth cited as *Manuscript Journal*, followed by volume and page numbers.

inhumanity of slavery. He was apparently actively engaged in conversation with Mr. Lasserre and Mr. Zoubertbuhler about slavery, for he records information the two men have shared with him about three slaver owners: Mr. Star, Colonel Lynch, and Mr. Hill, all of whom relate instances in which they have tortured their slaves in hideous ways. Of these three persons apparently Charles had met only Mr. Star, though it seems that the information about Star's abuse of slaves came from Mr. Lasserre rather than directly from Mr. Star to Wesley.

Charles seems overwhelmed by "these horrid cruelties" toward African slaves and by the reality that the British government sanctioned the killing of slaves by their masters with payment of a miniscule penalty ca. of seven pounds sterling. In his judgment this is "a public act to indemnify murder."

This brief passage in Wesley's Journal is crucial to the subject of this paper for the two realities it establishes: (1) Charles had a first hand encounter with slavery in an American colony, and (2) he concluded that the British government, that he would support for his entire life, was absolutely wrong to allow the murder of slaves by their owners.

In 1735, the year before Charles Wesley arrived in America, the House of Commons passed legislation banning slavery within the colony of Georgia, though it was already entrenched to the north in the area that would eventually become known as South Carolina. Interestingly Georgia was the only one of the British colonies where slavery was prohibited. The Trustees who founded the colony promoted the ban based on pragmatic political and economic reasons, rather than strong moral grounds. The Spanish presence in nearby Florida was a threat to the security of the colony and Spain was offering freedom to those who would serve in the military. For this reason any slaves brought into Georgia would most certainly be tempted to aid the Spanish thus threatening the relatively weak English colony.

The Georgia Trustees also genuinely believed that it would be better to avoid another plantation economy and to establish a settlement where persons worked for themselves. They envisaged an economy free of slave labor. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the eventual emergence of slavery in Georgia, it should be noted that on May 19, 1749 the Trustees of the colony petitioned the king to repeal the Act of 1735 that prohibited slavery. The petition was approved on October 26, 1749 and slavery became legal in Georgia as of January 1, 1751. Two of the staunchest advocates of this action were James Habersham and George Whitefield. Interestingly the latter became a slave owner.

The point of this brief review is to emphasize that during Charles Wesley's five-month stay in Georgia he had no direct contact with slaves or the institution of slavery. This is not to suggest that he heard nothing about slavery while there. What we may assume from the record of his Journal is that his initial encounter with slavery took place upon his arrival in Charlestown.

In addition to Charles Wesley's Journal entry of August 2, 1736, there are a few other documents of primary interest related to the subject of slavery that shall be addressed in this paper: (1) Charles's Journal record of direct contact with and ministry to "a poor black that had robbed his master" (July 12, 15, 17, 18, 1738); (2) a few poetical references to American slavery; (3) depositions in the Court of King's Bench<sup>2</sup> of William Floyd, a mariner from the City of Bristol, and Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John of Old Town, Old Calabar, on the coast of Africa, who were captured and enslaved but were eventually freed during a sojourn in England and became acquainted with Charles Wesley while staying in Bristol; (4) Charles Wesley's personal letters to William Perronet (Jan. 23, 1774) and Vincent Perronet (Nov. 1, 1775); (5) a series of letters from the above-mentioned slaves, Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John to Charles Wesley.

While much concentration in the study of slavery is placed on the colonies of the British Commonwealth, it was also practiced in England proper.<sup>3</sup> In eighteenth-century England to have servants at your command to do the simplest of things as well as hard labor was thought by many to be a sign of good breeding, aristocracy, and wealth. While some masters may have treated their slaves equitably, many were horribly abused. At the time of Charles Wesley's return to England, the trade of British slave ships was thriving especially in Bristol.

(1) In his Journal record of July 1738, Charles provides an account of his ministry to a slave who had been imprisoned for stealing from his master. It is a moving encounter.

**Wednesday, July 12.** Preached at Newgate to the condemned felons. Visited one of them in his cell, sick of a fever—a poor black that had robbed his master. I told him of One who came down from heaven to save lost sinners, and him in particular. Described the sufferings of the Son of God, his sorrows, agony, and death. He listened with all the signs of eager astonishment. The tears trickled down his cheeks while he cried, "What! Was it for me? Did God suffer all this for so poor a creature as me!" I left him waiting for the salvation of God.<sup>4</sup>

...

**Saturday, July 15.** Preached there again with an enlarged heart and rejoiced with my poor happy black, who now believes the Son of God loved him, and gave himself for him.<sup>5</sup>

...

**Monday, July 17.** Rose free from pain. At Newgate preached on death (which they must suffer the day after tomorrow). Mr Sparks assisted in giving the Sacrament. Another clergyman was there. Newington asked me to go in the coach with him. At one with the black in his cell, James Hutton assisting. Two more of

<sup>2</sup> See the extracts of the depositions in *The Arminian Magazine* (1783):98–9, 151–3, 211–12.

<sup>3</sup> See Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation*. (London: John Murray Publishers, Ltd., 1995), and Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> *Manuscript Journal*, 1:136.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

the malefactors came. I had great help and power in prayer. One rose, and said he felt his heart all on fire, so as he never found himself before; was all in a sweat; believed Christ died for him. I found myself overwhelmed with the love of Christ to sinners. The black was quite happy. The other criminal was in an excellent temper; believing, or on the point of it.<sup>6</sup>

...  
**Tuesday, July 18.** The Ordinary read prayers and preached. I administered the Sacrament to the black, and eight more, having first instructed them in the nature of it. Spake comfortably to them afterwards.

In the cells, one told me that whenever he offered to pray, or had a serious thought, some thing came and hindered him; was with him almost continually; and once appeared. After we had prayed for him in *faith*, he rose amazingly comforted, full of joy and love, so that we could not doubt his having received the atonement.

At night I was locked in with Bray in one of the cells. We wrestled in mighty prayer. All the criminals were present, and all delightfully cheerful. The soldier, in particular, found his comfort and joy increase every moment. Another, from the time he communicated, has been in perfect peace. Joy was visible in all their faces. We sang:

Behold the Saviour of mankind,  
 Nail'd to the shameful Tree!  
 How vast the Love that Him inclined  
 To bleed and die for Thee! etc.<sup>7</sup>

It was one of the most triumphant hours I have ever known.

Yet on

**Wednesday, July 19,** I rose very heavy and backward to visit them for the last time. At six prayed and sang with them all together. The Ordinary would read prayers, and preach[ed] most miserably. Mr Sparks and Mr Broughton present, I felt my heart full of tender love to the latter. He administered. All the ten received. Then he prayed and I after him.

At half-hour past nine their irons were knocked off, and their hands tied. I went in a coach with Sparks, Washington, and a friend of Newington's (Newington himself not being permitted). By halfhour past ten we came to Tyburn.<sup>8</sup> Waited till eleven, then were brought the children appointed to die. I got upon the cart with Sparks and Broughton. The Ordinary endeavoured to follow, when the poor prisoners begged he might not come, and the mob kept him down.

I prayed first, then Sparks and Broughton. We had prayed before that our Lord would show there was a power superior to the fear of death. Newington had quite forgot his pain. They were all cheerful; full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them and waited to receive them into paradise. Greenaway was impatient to be with Christ.

The black had spied me coming out of the coach, and saluted me with his looks. As often as his eyes met mine, he smiled with the most composed, delightful countenance I ever saw. Read caught hold of my hand in a transport of joy. Newington

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "On the Crucifixion," st. 1, *CPH* (1737), 46. This poem by Samuel Wesley Sr was salvaged after the fire at the Epworth rectory in February 1709, and was first published in this *Collection*.

<sup>8</sup> Tyburn, Middlesex, was the site for hangings in London, near present-day Tyburn Convent on the northern edge of Hyde Park.

seemed perfectly pleased. Hudson declared he was never better, or more at ease, in mind and body. None showed any natural terror of death—no fear, or crying, or tears. All expressed their desire of our following them to paradise. I never saw such calm triumph, such incredible indifference to dying. We sang several hymns, particularly,

Behold the Saviour of mankind,  
Nail'd to the shameful Tree . . .

And the hymn entitled “Faith in Christ,” which concludes,

A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,  
Into thy hands I fall.  
Be thou my Life, my Righteousness,  
My Jesus, and my all.<sup>9</sup>

We prayed Him, in earnest faith, to receive their spirits. I could do nothing but rejoice. Kissed Newington and Hudson. Took leave of each in particular. Mr Broughton bade them not be surprised when the cart should draw away. They cheerfully replied they should not, expressed some concern how we should get back to the coach. We left them going to meet their Lord, ready for the Bridegroom. When the cart drew off, not one stirred, or struggled for life, but meekly gave up their spirits. Exactly at twelve they were turned off. I spoke a few suitable words to the crowd, and returned, full of peace and confidence in our friends' happiness.

That hour under the gallows was the most blessed hour of my life.

Charles Wesley's encounter with this slave condemned to death for his crime of robbery is extremely important in understanding his posture toward the institution of slavery. One must not forget that his 1736-Journal entry in Charlestown included the indictment that a specific British law indemnified the murder of slaves. Now he was back in England and a different British law had condemned a slave to death for robbing his master. In contrast to the rage of the Charlestown entry, Wesley here is not overtly concerned with misdirected British law, rather with ministering to a black man, who with a group of non-blacks has been sentenced to death. According to his Journal, Wesley devotes eight days of pastoral ministry to the prisoners, testifies to their professions of faith and their calmness in the face of death, and he accompanies them to their execution. Here we get a glimpse of an evangelical Anglican pastor-priest deeply concerned about the lives, the souls, of these men. Here we see a practitioner of God's grace poured out for all humankind, a hallmark of the Wesleyan movement. There is no privileged class in God's realm. All are the recipients of God's loving grace in Jesus Christ. Wesley shares with the black the central meaning of the gospel and what God has done for him and all others in Jesus Christ and that the salvation offered is for him. The black man is moved to tears.

The formulation of one sentence in the Journal entry of July 17th is of vital importance to this discussion. Wesley writes, “At one with the black in his cell.”

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Watts, “Faith in Christ,” included by John Wesley in *CPH* (1737), 52, st. 6. Original found in Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London: Humfreys, 1707), Bk. 2, no. 90.

To the defenders of the institution of slavery it would have been blatant blasphemy to claim that a white and a black could experience oneness. What can Charles possibly mean with the words “one with the black”? Most likely he means unity in Christ, but perhaps more. While he never articulated a Christian anthropology as such, here is its basis. There is a common humanity that issues from a Creator whose caring concern for all human beings has been expressed in a self-emptying love that itself is the paradigm for the unity of humankind.

From an ecclesiological perspective there is more to be mentioned in Charles’s account. On July 18th he records: “The Ordinary read prayers and preached. I administered the Sacrament to the black, and eight more, having first instructed them in the nature of it. Spake comfortably to them afterwards.” Here Charles functions in his priestly role and shares the elements of Holy Communion with the black and others. How extraordinary is this? There is no mention of baptism, no mention of reception into communicant status of the Church of England. Wesley does say that he instructs the prisoners in the “nature” of the sacrament.

This picture of an Anglican priest administering the sacrament to a black man and other condemned prisoners in an English prison is a revealing portrait of the spirit of the Methodist movement, which in 1738 was in its nascence.

(2) There are only a few references in Charles Wesley’s poetry to American slavery. His poem “For the Heathen” was published in *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind* (1758).<sup>10</sup> From the outset of the Wesleyan movement John and Charles fostered the practice of intercessory prayer among the adherents. Friday noon was a common time appointed for such prayer. It is not surprising that the formulation of prayers for affairs of the nation (peace and war, e.g., involvement in the Seven Year’s War [1756–63]) and for general concerns of all humankind (childbirth, education, God’s sustenance of daily life), would find their way to the printed page from Charles’s pen. Such was the collection *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind*. One poem of this collection is of particular interest to the subject of this paper. It is titled “For the Heathen.”

1. Lord over all, if thou hast made,  
     Hast ransom’d every soul of man,  
     Why is the grace so long delay’d,  
     Why unfulfil’d the saving plan,  
     The bliss for Adam’s race design’d  
     When will it reach to all mankind?
2. Art Thou the God of Jews alone,  
     And not the God of Gentiles too?  
     To Gentiles make thy goodness known,  
     Thy judgment to the nations shew,  
     Awake them by the gospel-call,  
     Light of the world, illumine all.

<sup>10</sup> *Hymns of Intercession for all Mankind*. (Bristol: Farley, 1758), No. 34, 27–8.

3. The servile progeny of Ham  
 Seize as the purchase of thy blood,  
 Let all the heathen know thy name;  
 From idols to the living God,  
 The dark Americans convert,  
 And shine in every pagan heart.
4. As lightning lanc'd from east to west,  
 The coming of thy kingdom be,  
 To Thee by angel-hosts confest,  
 Bow every soul<sup>11</sup> and every knee,  
 Thy glory let all flesh behold,  
 And then fill up thy heavenly fold.<sup>12</sup>

This poem is the third in a series of prayers for specific religious and ethnic groups: Hymn 32 “For the Jews,” Hymn 33 “For the Turks,” Hymn 34 “For the Heathen,” and Hymn 35 “For the Arians, Socinians, Deists, and Pelagians, etc.” “For the Heathen” is one of two poems by Charles Wesley with lines dedicated specifically to African slaves. In stanza three he speaks of the “servile progeny of Ham” and refers to them as “dark Americans.” His prayer is that they shall be converted. Interestingly it is this stanza that was chosen by his brother John Wesley to conclude his treatise, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774).

In stanza three of Part II<sup>13</sup> of Hymn 10 of a poem titled “To the American Rebels” Charles Wesley once again used the phrase “The servile progeny of Ham.” In the poem he is longing for the day when Jesus shall make wars cease and bring everlasting peace to all humankind.

The savage Tribes, an unjust Race,  
 Americans shall then embrace  
 Their God so long unknown;  
 The servile progeny of Ham  
 Shall prostrated at Jesus' name  
 Their dear Redeemer own.

In the concluding stanzas four and five of the poem he carries forth the theme of the series of poems in *Hymns of Intercession* by longing for the day when Muslims and Jews will recognize Jesus as the true Messiah and celestial love shall reign over a “new-made earth.”

<sup>11</sup> The original is “sort” but was changed to “soul” in the 1759 edition and following.

<sup>12</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> *MS Patriotism*, 23–4. S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds. *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1988, 1990, 1992), 1:74; henceforth cited as *Unpub. Poetry* followed by volume and page number.

The Crescent to the Cross shall yield,  
 The Turks and Heathen be compel'd  
 Their Sovereign to confess,  
 And Jews, who pierc'd his hands and side,  
 Discern Jehovah crucified,  
 Their true Messiah bless.

Then all religious Babels cease,  
 And all into the kingdom press  
 Of God reveal'd below.  
 And fountains open'd from above  
 In streams of pure celestial love  
 The new-made earth o'erflow.

Charles's message in this poem regarding the enslaved Africans in America is essentially the same as in his poem "For the Heathen," namely, a plea for their conversion. However, it is not mere conversion for conversion's sake, rather that the earth will be made new through overflowing streams of "pure celestial love." In this "new made earth" Americans will embrace the "savage tribes," namely, Native Americans. While Charles's own modes of expressing his hopes for Native Americans, African Americans, Muslims, and Jews may be very inadequate, one thing is clear, he longs for a world in which all human beings live in harmony. He holds in tension what is very difficult to maintain—an exclusive faith and an inclusive love.

Why did Charles, who penned so many poems on national affairs, never address the subject of slavery in poetry, as he had done in the prose of his *Journal* in 1736?

Did he feel that his brother's treatise, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774) was sufficient? Was his concern only an evangelical one, i.e. the conversion of slaves, and not with the evils of the institution? Was he aware of the anti-slavery poems of William Cowper (1731–1800), who was asked by John Newton after his conversion to the anti-slavery movement to write ballads that could be set to music and sung in the streets of England's cities and towns? Cowper's poem, "The Negro's Complaint," reflects the horrors of the Middle Passage, of which he no doubt had heard from Newton.

Forc'd from home and all its pleasures,  
 Afric's coast I left forlorn;  
 To increase a stranger's treasures,  
 O'er the raging billows borne;  
 Men from England bought and sold me,  
 Paid my price in paltry gold;  
 But though theirs they have enroll'd me  
 Minds are never to be sold.  
 Still in thought as free as ever,  
 What are England's rights, I ask,

Me from my delights to sever,  
Me to torture, me to task?  
Fleecy locks and black complexion  
Cannot forfeit nature's claim;  
Skins may differ, but affection  
Dwells in white and black the same.  
Why did all-creating Nature  
Make the plant for which we toil?  
Sighs must fan it, tears must water,  
Sweat of ours must dress the soil.  
Think, ye masters iron-hearted,  
Lolling at your jovial boards;  
Think, how many backs have smarted  
For the sweets your cane affords.  
Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,  
Is there one who reigns on high?  
Has he bid you buy and sell us,  
Speaking from his throne, the sky?  
Ask him, if your knotted scourges,  
Fetters, blood-extorting screws,  
Are the means that duty urges  
Agents of his will to use?  
Strewing yonder sea with wrecks,  
Wasting towns, plantations, meadows,  
Are the voice with which he speaks.  
He, foreseeing what vexations  
Afric's sons should undergo,  
Fix'd their tyrants' habitations  
Where his whirlwinds answer—No.  
By our blood in Afric wasted,  
Ere our necks receiv'd the chain;  
By the mis'ries which we tasted,  
Crossing in your barks the main;  
By our suff'rings since ye brought us  
To the man-degrading mart;  
All sustain'd by patience, taught us  
Only by a broken heart:  
Deem our nation brutes no longer  
Till some reason ye shall find  
Worthier of regard and stronger  
Than the colour of our kind.  
Slaves of gold! whose sordid dealings  
Tarnish all your boasted pow'rs,  
Prove that you have human feelings,  
Ere you proudly question ours.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See [www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/18century/topic\\_2/cowper.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/18century/topic_2/cowper.htm).

Did Charles Wesley feel that such sentiments expressed by Cowper and others were sufficient and therefore his poetical input was not required? This is a tantalizing question, but we shall probably never know its answer.

While Cowper speaks in specifics of the human humiliation and degradation inflicted by England's exercise of slavery, in stanza three of "For the Heathen" Charles refers to the slaves as "the heathen" and possessors of "pagan hearts" in need of transformation. While the plea for their conversion is consistent with his encounter with the black prisoner in his Journal account of 1738, stanza 3 of "For the Heathen" reflects nothing of the pastoral concern encountered there: shared prayer, oneness with the black, and the administration of the Eucharist. Yet, John Wesley, who, after a scathing indictment of the institution of slavery in his treatise, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, expresses his evangelical concern for the Africans by concluding his prayer for them with stanza 3 of his brother's poem.

(3) Next we turn to the depositions in the Court of King's Bench of William Floyd, a mariner from the City of Bristol, and Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John<sup>15</sup> of Old Town, Old Calabar, on the coast of Africa, who became acquainted with Charles Wesley while staying for a time in Bristol.

British slave ships came frequently to Old Calabar to procure slaves and had dealings for a number of years with the Grandee, afterwards King of Old Town, Ephraim Robin John. Since some locals wanted to conduct their own slave business and profit thereby, they formed the settlement of New Town. As the rivalry increased between the two factions, some British captains saw the opportunity to capitalize on the situation to their own benefit and profit and eliminate one of the parties. William Floyd explains in his deposition how the captains of a group of slave ships anchored off the coast of Old Calabar conspired to trick the leaders of Old Town to come to their ships under the guise of resolving the friction between the two towns. Their conspiracy resulted in the massacre of some 300 persons from Old Town who came to the ships in good faith to negotiate the resolution.

In the party from Old Town were two brothers of Ephraim Robin John, Amboe Robin John and Little Ephraim Robin John, and the latter's nephew, Ancona Robin Robin John. The people from Old Town did not suspect that the invitation from the British captains was a trap, but at the agreed upon signal the crews of the ships began attacking those who had come aboard, as well as firing on those in the canoes. In addition, people from New Town were hidden along the shore and counter attacked killing many, who were fleeing the attack from the ships.

<sup>15</sup> Their story has been well chronicled by Randy J. Sparks in his book, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). See the related brief but succinct and insightful study of Joanna Cruickshank, "Charles Wesley, the Men of Old Calabar and the Abolition of Slavery," *Aldersgate Papers* 7(Sept. 2009):8-16. (This publication is the official journal of the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research in Melbourne, Australia.) She focuses quite sharply the significance of the correspondence for an understanding of slavery from the perspective of slaves and for a clearer understanding of Charles Wesley's view of slavery.

Amboe Robin John was beheaded by the men from New Town and Little Ephraim and Ancona Robin Robin John were put into irons and, along with others who were captured, sold into slavery.

The second part of the deposition published in *The Arminian Magazine* consists of sworn testimony of the events of the conspiracy and massacre as told by Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John. After a detailed description of the horrible events of that day, they explain that they were sold to a French doctor on the island of Dominica in the Caribbean where they were kept for seven months. The captain of a ship that arrived in Dominica after hearing their story promised to take them back to Old Calabar, if they would come to the ship at night. However, he betrayed his promise and sold them to a Mr. Mitchell in Virginia with whom they were for five years.

A Bristol Captain by the name of O'Neile, Commander of the ship *Greyhound*, had two men on board who were from Old Calabar and who knew the plight of the Robin Johns. Captain O'Neile also promised to take them back to old Calabar, but told them first they would have to go to Bristol. Once again they escaped their master and made it on to the vessel by night and were brought to Bristol. The captain also broke his promise to them and put them on a ship about to depart for Virginia in order to send them back to Mr. Mitchell.

The third extract of the deposition is once again the testimony of William Floyd, who procured a warrant from the Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, whereby the men were brought from the ship before it could set sail for Virginia. In the court record there is a brief account of Charles Wesley's involvement with the two Africans.

While they were at Bristol, Mr. Charles Wesley was desired to visit them. From that time they came to him every day. He taught them to read, and carefully instructed them in the principles of Christianity. They received the truth with all gladness, appeared to be deeply penetrated therewith: and after some time, desired to be baptized. There is reason to believe, they were then baptized with the Holy Ghost. After they had been in England eight or nine weeks, the people of Bristol furnished them plentifully with every thing they thought might be of use, and they set sail, with a fair wind, and abundance of prayers, for their own country.<sup>16</sup>

Near the African coast, however, a storm stranded the ship on a desert island, where, after a little over two weeks, they were rescued by a ship bound for Bristol. During an additional three-month sojourn there they received further instruction in the Christian faith, reading, writing, gardening, agriculture, and the making of butter and cheese. After this stay in Bristol, a second voyage was successful and they arrived in Old Calabar.

The next three items for consideration come from the 1770s, when the Anti-Slavery movement was gaining considerable traction in England. These are: (4) personal letters to William Perronet (Jan. 23, 1774) and Vincent Perronet (Nov. 1,

<sup>16</sup> *The Arminian Magazine* 6 (1983):211.

1775), (4) a series of letters from two slaves Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, and (5) the account of these two slaves as published in *The Arminian Magazine* (1783).

(5) There are two extant notes from the pen of Charles Wesley regarding his encounter with the slaves Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John. The first is a letter of January 23, 1774, written from Bristol to Mr. William Perronet. It is the postscript to the letter written on the reverse side of the letter that is of importance to this discussion. It reads:

P.S.—I have had with me this month or more, 2 very extraordinary Scholars, and Catechumens, 2 African Princes carried off from Old Calabar, by a Bristol-Captain after they had seen him & his crew massacre their Brother & 300 of their poor Countrymen.—They have been 6 years in Slavery; made their Escape hither; were thrown into irons, but rescued by Lord Mansfield, & [are] to be sent honourable back to their Bro[the]r, King of Calabar. This morning I baptized them.—They received both the outward visible sign, & the inward spiritual grace, in a wonderful manner & measure.

The two African Princes in question are, of course, Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John. Here is Charles's record of their baptism in which he seems to have delighted. Their correspondence with Charles Wesley is of utmost importance, since they learned English well enough to record and relate the dramatic story of their enslavement and their quest of freedom, which they ultimately achieved. Their letters to Charles have been preserved and will be examined below.

The second letter by Charles Wesley with mention of the Robin Johns was addressed to Vincent Perronet and written from Bristol on Nov. 1, 1775.

Bristol Nov. 1, 1775.

Dear Sir,

Miss Johnson gives me an Opportunity of acknowledging y(ou)r last Favor. It brought the never-failing Blessing. You cast y(ou)r bread upon the Waters, & have found it after many days. My Father was not so happy as to see the Fruit of his forty years' labours at Epworth. You have both sowed & reaped. Blessed be God, who gives seed to the sower & meat to the Eater. Yours is indeed *Aquila senectus*; & when y(ou)r work is finished, You will mount up with Eagles' Wings.

My Brother is sent back from the Gates of death in an awful Crisis of Affairs. His Example, I am persuaded, confirms Multitudes in their Loyalty; & will bring many back, who were carried away by the stream. Several other wise ends may be answered by his longer continuance; & I trust he will live to see me, & very many more of his brethren & children, gathered into the garner.

My only business now is, to end well. If the Lord renews my strength to reach London, I hope to catch the first Opportunity of visiting Shoreham, once more to receive y(ou)r Blessing and encouragement, in my last Stage. My Companion presents her warmest love & duty. Miss P(erronet) will not forget an old servant, who needs her prayers, & those of the whole church. Your Sons I bear upon my heart, as my own. May they wait upon the Lord, & renew their strength, of body and soul! I believe their latter end will be better than their beginning.

God brought us thro'(ugh) the Fire 30 years ago; and his Arm is not short'ned. Have you not faith for the poor Americans? May the two sticks become One in His hand!

My 2 African Children got safe home. Their Letters were suppresst at Liverpool.

If I am prospered in my journey to town, it will be another answer of y(ou)r prayers for, dearest S(i)r,

Your ever-obliged & loving,  
C Wesley.

Near the end of the letter Wesley speaks of "My 2 African Children," who are Little Ephraim and Ancona. After their second stay in Bristol, they were finally able to travel back to their home in Old Calabar. It is this return to which Wesley refers in his letter to Vincent Perronet.

(5) The letters of the Africans and former slaves, Little Ephraim and Ancona Robin Robin John, to Charles Wesley are extremely important to this discussion.

After being declared free through the assistance of Lord Mansfield, they remained in Bristol and the surrounding area until arrangements could be made for them to return to Old Calabar, their home in Africa. This was primarily during the last half of the year 1774. In 1771 Charles Wesley and his family had moved from Bristol to London, though Charles made intermittent trips back to Bristol, as the New Room remained the center of Methodist activity in the West Country.

How did the two Africans learn of and meet Charles Wesley? According to a letter of August 17, 1774 written in Bristol by Little Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley, they learned of him through Mr. Thomas Jones who befriended them after they had been brought to Bristol by the captain who had promised to put them on another ship that would take them back to their home in Africa. Instead they were put aboard a vessel, locked in irons, and kept for eighteen days in deplorable conditions. Mr. Jones came on board the ship and requested that the captain let the two men go ashore. When he refused, Jones procured a warrant and got them off the ship. Thereafter Little Ephraim wrote to Lord Mansfield in London requesting assistance, which they ultimately received, and were freed. Mr. Jones brought the two men to his home and began to aid them with education. As they wanted to learn to read the Scriptures, the name of Charles Wesley was suggested and Little Ephraim wrote to him, "you be better minister to teach us that we may soon come to have some knowledge of God[.]" Ephraim further stated in this letter that it was a Mrs. Forrest who brought them to Charles Wesley.

The series of letters from Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John to Charles Wesley span the period from July to October 1774 and fill out to some extent the relationship of the two Africans to Charles Wesley and his family, as well as to John Wesley. They aid in understanding Charles's reference to Little Ephraim and Ancona as "My 2 African children." The letters are very important because documents written by slaves or former slaves in this period are

rare. Because of the slave trading in which the Robin Johns and their family had been engaged in Old Calabar, they had learned some English in order to communicate and conduct business. Through Charles Wesley's assistance they no doubt developed better English writing and speaking skills.

It is apparent that the Robin Johns had met Charles and his family prior to the letters of July 18 and 29, 1774, the first extant letters that are preserved. The correspondence reveals their acquaintance to be more than casual. In the letter of July 29th Little Ephraim and Ancona comment that they have "received with severall good Books of Christ which Perruse as much as our weak abillitys." Wesley is genuinely concerned that they increase their knowledge of the faith and English language through study.

In this same letter they wish to express "our Kind Love to your wife and two Sons and Daughter," but add "admitt our Love to all our Brethren." Thus their relationships extended beyond the bounds of the Wesley family and no doubt Charles and John sought to bring them into a wider circle of Christian community.

From the letter of Little Ephraim and Ancona dated August 5, 1774, and written from Bristol, we learn that Charles wrote letters to them as well: "Yours of the 31st July we have received and return you our most sincere thanks." There are a number of other very revealing comments in this letter. They express their concern that Charles has been ill, which they have heard from their friend Mr. Jones, and they have offered prayers for Charles's health. Little Ephraim and Ancona also indicate that they have heard John Wesley preach at the New Room in the morning and evening after which they drank tea with Mrs. Elizabeth Johnson. John Wesley, however, "had not time to talk with us then," because "so many people follow him." Wesley tells them, however, "he will take some opportunity of doing it before he leaves Bristol and we will be glad to inform him as far as we can remember." Apparently John had asked them to recount their experiences from capture and enslavement to freedom in England.<sup>17</sup>

The postscript to the letter of August 5, 1774 is a striking comment. "Yesterday we were at ye Lords table and we [are?] very comfortable in our mind—give me kind love to Miss Wesley and the two young gentlemen." Where were they at the Lord's table? In a parish church? At the New Room? They had been baptized by Charles Wesley, but were they ever confirmed in the Church of England? In another comment on the sacrament of Holy Communion from a letter of August 17, 1774 to Charles, Little Ephraim says, "Blessed be the Lord he gives us to reading his Word all the Daylong and it is very sweet to us[.] your Brother has been so kind as to talk to us and has given us the Sacrament thrice[.] I find him so good as to show me when I do wrong[.]" It is quite clear that John and Charles do not harbor an exclusivistic ecclesiology, for they demonstrate

<sup>17</sup> In a letter of August 17, 1774 they attempt to do this.

their full intent to include Little Ephraim and Ancona in the community of the faithful.

In the postscript of his letter to William Perronet noted above Charles Wesley speaks of Little Ephraim and Ancona as “2 very extraordinary Scholars, and Catechumens,” and goes on to say, “This morning I baptized them.—They received both the outward visible sign, & the inward spiritual grace, in a wonderful manner & measure.” There is not the slightest indication that he doubts their sincerity. A catechumen is understood as a Christian convert who is under instruction before baptism and/or one in preparation for confirmation. We have a definitive statement by Charles Wesley that Little Ephraim and Ancona were baptized, but whether they were ever confirmed is not known to this author.

A letter to Charles from Little Ephraim dated August 27, 1774 evoked concern from Charles as his response in shorthand written on the bottom of the letter reveals. Little Ephraim began the letter with the following sentence: “Dear Sir[,] one question I have to ask you before we leave England which is most on my mind that is [—] [H]ow shall I pay off good friend Mr Jones who has been so kind in laying out so much money to seave us[.] [I]f we must not sell slaves[,] I know not how we shall pay him.”<sup>18</sup> Jones is the gentleman, who essentially paid for the outfitting of a ship for their return voyage to Old Calabar.

Charles’s shorthand<sup>19</sup> response indicates that the mere opposition to slavery was not the first issue for him, rather conversion must come first, particularly for the people of England. “After they are truly converted,” averred Charles, “they will sell slaves no more; they will learn war no more.”<sup>20</sup> Here there is clear evidence that Charles Wesley unequivocally saw slave trade and the Christian faith as mutually exclusive. Most certainly he saw this as applying to Little Ephraim; however, he says further in the passage that there is little point in the British telling Little Ephraim not to deal in the slave trade, if they have not been converted and refrained from it themselves.

The indications are that after their return to Old Calabar, Ancona and Little Ephraim indeed once again became involved in slave trade.

### A Puzzlement

Given the Wesleys’ opposition to slavery and Charles Wesley’s encounter with its horrors in Charlestown, his intensive outreach and ministry to a condemned black in prison, and his friendship with and ministry to Little Ephraim and Ancona Robin Robin John, why is that in his writings, with the exception of his

<sup>18</sup> In a letter to Charles Wesley dated August 27, 1774, Elizabeth Johnson comments, “Ephraim is . . . more thoughtful and humbled . . . Seams so full for Mr Jones’s expenses” (MS DDCW 2/9 of the Methodist Archives at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester). The fact that Jones had been so kind to Little Ephraim and Ancona and had laid out so much money for their welfare and return voyage home greatly troubled Little Ephraim, as his letter to Charles Wesley suggests.

<sup>19</sup> MS DDCW 2/9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, transcribed from the shorthand.

Journal record of 1736, he does not address the evils of slavery, as does his brother John in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*?<sup>21</sup>

Charles lived for so many years in Bristol, one of the hot beds of British slave trade with ships coming in and out of the landings with slaves aboard or with ships departing for Africa in order to load their vessels with slaves. One cannot imagine that he simply ignored this.

Was he unaware of William Blackstone (1723–1780), who was appointed Vinerian Professor of English Law at Oxford in 1758, and whose Oxford lectures published in 1765 set a standard for the development of British law and whose opinions on freedom and slavery became seminal for judicial interpretation of legal rights?

Was Charles Wesley unaware of the case of James Somerset, who in 1771 was brought as a slave from Virginia to England and then managed to escape from his master? Shortly thereafter he was captured and forced to board a ship going to Jamaica. The following year, however, his case came before the Court of King's Bench, and after a prolonged trial, Lord Mansfield issued the judgment that regardless of whether there could be slaves in England, no master had the right to force a slave to go to another country. As a result James Somerset was freed. While many legal aspects of the case were unclear, practically speaking Mansfield's decision helped precipitate an end to slavery in England.

One could go on and on with a variety of questions as to Charles's awareness of and response to the Abolitionist movement and the literature of the period dealing with the injustices of slavery. Why is John Wesley so articulate in this matter and Charles essentially silent? Was he simply preoccupied as a husband, father, priest, preacher, and poet and hence had little time for the criticism of such a dastardly institution, even though he lived at one of the thresholds of its trade, namely Bristol, for over twenty years (1749–71)? By the 1770s Charles had largely withdrawn from active engagement in the Wesleyan movement, but not from the heart of its principles, devotion to its central evangelical thrust, and its theology of inclusive grace. It is interesting that in the year 1774 when the Robin Johns became acquainted with Charles and John Wesley and wrote letters to Charles, that John published his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. It was probably John who asked Little Ephraim and Ancona to record the account of their enslavement, which they did in two letters dated August 17, 1774.

The Robin Johns letters most certainly emphasize that Charles never lost his pastoral concern and his ability to include those often excluded by others. His willingness to make friends of Little Ephraim and Ancona and to bring them into the embrace of his family and other Christians is overtly clear from the letters of these Africans from Old Calabar. Sharing with them in the sacraments of baptism

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<sup>21</sup> See the careful research on John Wesley's opposition to slavery by Irv A. Brendlinger, *Social Justice through the Eyes of Wesley: John Wesley's Theological Challenge to Slavery* (Ontario, Canada: Joshua Press, 2006).

and Holy Communion is an outward sign of what he knew the church should be—open to all, for God’s grace is open to all.

It would be wrong to imply that John addressed the institution of slavery philosophically and theologically and Charles exhibited a life of pastoral and personal engagement with African slaves. Ancona Robin Robin John in a letter dated October 10, 1774, his last before departure from England for Africa, makes the following comment about John Wesley’s pastoral outreach to him and Little Ephraim in prayer: “Last night with Mr Wesley who offerd us up in a very solemn mener to God and we humbly hope his prayer will be heard.”

There is nothing in Charles Wesley’s prose or poetry comparable to John’s strong abolitionist statement in his treatise *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. The strongest statements from Charles are found in a previously undeciphered shorthand passage cited above that he penned on the bottom of a letter to him from Little Ephraim and in the words of his Journal entry of 1736 in Charlestown. Nevertheless, his ministry to the condemned black in prison and his friendship and diverse encounters with the Robin Johns provide a paradigm for human behavior, i.e. how human beings should relate to one another, and more specifically how Christians should relate to others regardless of racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic background. They must shower one another with “streams of pure celestial love.”<sup>22</sup> This is how the earth will be made new. For Charles Wesley, of course, this is the self-giving love God has revealed to all in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>22</sup> *Unpub. Poetry*, 1:74, stanza 5, line 5.

**Appendix:**  
**Letters from Ancona Robin Robin John  
 and Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley  
 and from Elizabeth Johnson  
 regarding these two former African slaves**

JRL Number	Meth. Archives Call Number	Author	Date of Work
0700530cb	DDCW 2/3	Ancona Robin Robin John	1774-08-08
0700531cb	DDCW 2/3	Ancona Robin Robin John	1774-08-08
0700532cb	DDCW 2/4	Ancona Robin Robin John	1774-08-17
0700533cb	DDCW 2/4	Ancona Robin Robin John	1774-08-17
0700534cb	DDCW 2/4	Ancona Robin Robin John	1774-08-17
0700535cb	DDCW 2/5	Ephraim Robin John	1774-08-17
0700536cb	DDCW 2/5	Ephraim Robin John	1774-08-17
0700537cb	DDCW 2/5	Ephraim Robin John	1774-08-17
0700538cb	DDCW 2/6	Ancona Robin & Ephraim Robin John	1774-02-18
0700539cb	DDCW 2/7	Ancona Robin & Ephraim Robin John	1774-02-24
0700540cb	DDCW 2/9	E. Johnson & Ephraim Robin John	1774-08-27
0700541cb	DDCW 2/9	E. Johnson & Ephraim Robin John	1774-08-28
0700542cb	DDCW 2/10	Ephraim Robin John	1774-09-26
0700543cb	DDCW 2/10	Ephraim Robin John	1774-09-26
0700544cb	DDCW 2/11	Ephraim Robin John	1774-10-10
0700545cb	DDCW 2/11	Ephraim Robin John	1774-10-10
0700546cb	DDCW 2/12	Ephraim Robin John & Ancona Robin Robin John	1774

JRL = John Rylands Library

Meth. Archives = The Methodist Archives located at the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester