

The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830

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Historians, because of their own moral sensibilities, have consistently undervalued the slaveholding ethic. However, as Donald G. Mathews has recently shown, this viewpoint was just as natural and consistent as was evangelical abolitionism.¹ The foundation upon which the slaveholding ethic and the proslavery argument was built was the scriptural defense of slavery.

Nearly every proslavery pamphlet, or article, or speaker made at least some reference to a biblical sanction of slavery. The reason for such a position should be clear. From the very beginning much of the attack upon slaveholding had always been upon moral grounds. Opponents of slavery claimed that it was a sin to hold slaves; the principle of right and wrong involved with slavery became fundamental to the argument. The South's use of the Bible to defend slavery and the master-slave relationship was thus an attempt to erect a moral defense of slavery. The emphasis from proslavery defenders was always upon a literal reading of the Bible which represented the mind and will of God himself. Slaveholding was not only justified but also moral because it was recognized as such in Holy Scripture. Slavery's defenders relied on this literal reading as a response to the emphasis upon the "principles of Christianity" used by those opposed to slavery. Proslavery advocates continually contrasted the rightness of their position, based on such a literal biblical reading, to the open-ended interpretive religion implied by those opposed to slavery. In 1820, for example, in the midst of the debates over Missouri statehood, the *Richmond Enquirer* went to elaborate lengths in a long editorial to emphasize the literal truth of the Bible and its sanction of slavery. After a long section giving various scriptural sanctions, the article concluded by giving "a plain concise statement of certain propositions that we presume few faithful believers will controvert." There were five propositions:

1

That the volume of sacred writings commonly called the bible, comprehending the old and new Testaments, contains the unerring decisions of the word of God.

¹ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), see especially pp. xv-xvii, 151-52. See also David Brian Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.212.

II

That these decisions are of equal authority in both testaments, and that this authority is the essential veracity of God, who is truth itself.

III

That since there can be no prescription against the authority of God, what ever is declared in any part of the holy bible to be *lawful or illicit*, must be *essentially so* in its own nature, however repugnant such declaration may be to the current opinions of men during any period of time.

IV

That as the supreme lawgiver and judge of man, God is infinitely just and wise in all decisions, and is essentially irresponsible for the reasons of his conduct in the moral government of the world—so it is culpably audacious in us to question the rectitude of any of those decisions—merely because we do not apprehend the inscrutable principles of such wisdom and justice.

V

That if one, or more decisions of the written word of God, sanction the rectitude of any human acquisitions, for instance, the acquisition of a servant by inheritance or purchase, whoever believes that the written word of God is *verity itself*, must consequently believe in the absolute rectitude of slave-holding.²

To these propositions most Southerners could only say “Amen.”

The first element of this biblical defense of slavery was the concept of divine decree, that is, through the curse of Cain God had decreed slavery before it had actually come into existence. Genesis 9:20–27 tells the story of Noah and Ham. After the flood, Noah became a farmer and planted a vineyard, eventually getting drunk from the wine produced. While drunk, he also became naked within his tent and was seen by Ham who told his brothers, Shem and Japeth. The latter two backed into Noah’s tent in order to cover him without being seen. When Noah awakened he knew what Ham had done, and pronounced the curse (Gen. 9:25–27) which was to become the standard explanation for the origin of slavery. This particular proof of the divine sanction of slavery was quoted extensively in the proslavery literature.³

In 1823 Frederick Dalcho, a South Carolina Episcopal clergyman, wrote an elaborate explication on this portion of the Bible. According to Dalcho, the inspiration for Noah’s curse was divine because otherwise the “future condition

² *Richmond Enquirer*, 15 February 1820. The biblical defense of slavery was commonly used throughout the Missouri controversy. For an elaborate defense from the Missouri territorial newspapers, see *Franklin (Mo.) Intelligencer*, 18 February 1820.

³ For just a few of the examples, see [Frederick Dalcho], *Practical Considerations Founded on the Scriptures, Relative to the Slave Population of South Carolina by a South-Carolinian* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1823); Richard Furman, *Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1833); *Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 2d sess., 7 January 1829, pp. 184–85. *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

of his idolatrous and wicked posterity” could not have been known by him. “The prophecy of Noah,” Dalcho continued, “was to be fulfilled, not in the individuals named, but nationally in their descendants. Canaan’s whole race was under the malediction.” Thus the descendants of Canaan, the Africans, were to be the “servants of servants,” or as Dalcho explained, “the lowest state of servitude, slaves,” to the descendants of Shem and Japeth, the present day Jews and Christians. The pamphlet then delineated the different parts of the world inhabited by Noah’s sons to prove that the prophecy had indeed come true.⁴

Finally, Dalcho called upon the authority of Bishop Newton in his *Dissertation on the Prophecies* to explain this curse. Newton saw the curse of Noah, according to Dalcho, as “particularly implying *servitude* and *subjection*.” Newton stated that the word “brethern” in Hebrew also meant more distant relations. “The descendants, therefore of Canaan, were to be subject to the descendants of both Shem and Japeth . . . this is the burden of the prophecy.”⁵

An article in the *Richmond Enquirer* carried the consequence of Noah’s curse even further. Commenting on Newton’s *Dissertation*, the writer explained that since the Africans were the descendants of Ham and “their slavery an accomplishment of Noah’s prediction,” which was “divinely inspired,” then “the present condition of the African is inevitable; all efforts to extinguish black slavery are idle. . . .” Ultimately, Dalcho reached this same conclusion. The Bible had also said, he pointed out, that the Jews would be exterminated as a nation and dispersed over the earth, but finally would be restored. However, nowhere in the Bible was there a prophecy which removed the curse of slavery from the descendants of Ham and Canaan.⁶ The obvious implication therefore was that slavery was to continue indefinitely.

The other major defense of slavery taken from the Old Testament was the justification found in Mosaic law, the argument of divine sanction. Throughout the patriarchal period of Israel, it was claimed, God had tolerated, even ordained, the practice of holding slaves. Leviticus 25:44–46 was quoted even more extensively in proslavery speeches and tracts than was the Curse on Canaan.⁷ It had everything: not only the sanction of slavery but also a reference to buying

⁴ [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations*, pp. 10–13; 15–17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14. See also *Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 2d sess., 7 January 1829, pp. 184–85.

⁶ *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819; [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations*, pp. 19–20.

⁷ Besides the sources in footnote 3, also see [Richard Nisbet], *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture. Or a Defense of the West-India Planters from the Aspersions Thrown Out Against Them by the Author of a Pamphlet Entitled ‘An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America upon Slavekeeping,’* by a West Indian (Philadelphia: NP, 1773); *Annals of Congress*, 16 Cong., 1st sess., 26 January 1820, p. 269. *National Intelligencer*, 30 July 1819.

slaves, keeping them as a possession, and then passing them on as an inheritance forever. As “An Inquisitive Slaveholder” wrote in a Virginia newspaper:

By this decisive, explicit, irrefragable authority of the written work of God, it is evident that servants . . . are commanded under the Mosaic law to be bought; and that when so bought of alien sojourners, that they and their issue become inheritable property.

Another newspaper correspondent referred to this passage and then insisted that the law of Moses was written “by the finger of the Almighty.” This had to be believed or else “flatly deny the whole of the Bible.”⁸ It is thus clearly implied that God himself not only approved but commanded the possession and buying of slaves. Congressman John C. Weems of Maryland insisted that this passage proved God recognized the “right of [slave] property by purchase.”⁹ Genesis 17:12–13, 27 with its reference to servants “bought with money” was used to further this interpretation.

In the midst of the debate over Missouri, one proslavery Missourian used this passage to draw a parallel between slaveholders and the Israelites. The Southern people, he wrote,

move like patriarchs of old, at the head of their children and grandchildren, their flocks and their herds, their “bondmen” and “bond maids” to be an inheritance for their children after them,” to be “their bond men forever.” They cannot go where they are to hold this property by an uncertain tenure.¹⁰

To make certain no one missed the point, one pamphleteer explicitly linked the Mosaic law to the Africans. He contended that it was “highly probably that the Africans we enslave are descendants of the very same Heathen that were round about the Israelites.” Since these Africans still remained unconverted and since the whites were “at least descended” from the Israelites, then the latter could enslave the former. “Will it be denied,” he argued, “that we are entitled to the liberty of enslaving the Africans and the Heathen round about us also?”¹¹

As far as the New Testament was concerned, the major passage Southerners found which accepted, indeed justified, slavery was the Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon, sometimes referred to as the Pauline Mandate. Onesimus was the slave to Philemon; he ran away from his master and fled to Rome where he was converted by St. Paul. However, this conversion changed nothing; St. Paul sent

⁸ *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 February 1820; *Maryland Republican* quoted in *National Intelligencer*, 30 July 1819.

⁹ *Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 1st sess., 10 January 1828, pp. 967–68.

¹⁰ *St. Louis Enquirer*, 29 April 1820.

¹¹ *Personal Slavery Established by the Suffrages of Custom and Right Reason. Being a Full Answer to the Gloomy and Visionary Reveries, of all the Fanatical and Enthusiastical Writers on That Subject* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1773), p. 11.

Onesimus back to Philemon.¹² One South Carolinian, writing in 1823, maintained that

All the sophistry in the world cannot get rid of this decisive example. Christianity robs no man of his rights, and Onesimus was the property of his master, under the laws of his country, which must be obeyed, if not contrary to the laws of God.

He went so far as to claim that this Epistle really sanctioned the fugitive slave law because “slaves should not be taken or detained from their master, without their master’s consent.”¹³

These three scriptural passages can be seen as the foundation for the Biblical defense of slavery. They were the basic argument; they were used most frequently and often in conjunction with each other. There were, however, also many other passages which were used as building blocks upon this foundation to erect a supposedly formidable wall around the South’s proslavery position. One of the favorite of these building blocks was the sanction given to slavery, that “constant unrebuked practice,” by the examples furnished by the patriarchs of Israel, “men admitted to direct intercourse with Heaven and under the visible protection of Jehovah.”¹⁴

Clearly, the favorite example was Abraham, “this most faithful, obedient, humane, just, disinterested, righteous man,” as one writer labeled him, “this spotless patriarch who constantly obeyed the voice of God—kept his charge, his commandments, his statutes, and his laws, and moreover found such acceptance with him as to be admitted to familiar conferences with Jehovah.” Yet, among the deeds of Abraham is found “the transaction of buying bondsmen for money.” However, not “the least intimation” is given “by any of the inspired writers that Abraham’s conduct in making such bargains—or afterwards as a slaveholder—was even in the most distant manner discountenanced by any private admonition or public suggestion of God’s displeasure for such contract or acquisition.” This silence proved that “the usage of buying and holding menials to involuntary service was never by them judged any violation of the statutes of Jehovah.” The author passionately concluded:

For how it is possible for a sincere believer to imagine, that consistently with the ideas that faithful Christians cherish concerning the essential rectitude of God in whom abides the plenitude of justice, that he would specially style himself the God of Abraham—*dignify* him with the appellation of friend—*deign* to declare that in his seed he would bless all nations; *affirm* that Abraham had obeyed his

¹² See, for example, [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations; Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 2d sess., 7 January 1829, p. 185; *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

¹³ [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations*, pp. 20–21. See also *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

¹⁴ *Richmond Enquirer*, 10 February 1820.

voice—kept his charge, his commandments, his statues, and his laws—*without exception*—or that the blessed Redeemer would have commended the works of Abraham *without any restriction*—if Abraham’s moral conduct in becoming a slave holder had been deemed repugnant to any precept or clause in the code of the Supreme Lawgiver?

So powerful was the “inference” provided by God’s acceptance of Abraham’s slave-holding that “it amounts to a positive sanction of this usage.”¹⁵

God’s sanction of Abraham’s slaveholding was further proven, Southerners maintained, by the case of Hagar (Gen. 16:1–11). Hagar was an Egyptian “handmaid”—which the South read as “slave”—to Sarai, the wife of Abraham. Sarai gave Hagar to Abraham but when the maid became pregnant Sarai dealt harshly with her and she fled. God sent an angel to Hagar and said, “Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.” Proslavery advocates argued that God by this “very act of deputing the Angel on purpose to command this fugitive bondwoman to return home and be obedient to her lawful superiors—pronounced that Hagar was Abraham’s property—pronounced the validity of such acquisition by contract. . . .” This “deliberate decision” by God “even were all other precedents wanting” proved, as far as most Southerners were concerned, “*that buying African servants and holding them for a possession—is warranted by the written word of God.*”¹⁶

Another patriarch whose precept was followed in holding slaves was Joseph. Genesis 47:13–25 gives the story of Joseph buying the Africans. One Southern writer thus labeled Joseph “the most extensive purchaser of African slaves that ever existed. Joseph incontestably bought more African servants at one sale than *belong to all the slave holders in this confederated empire.*” As with Abraham’s slaveholding, “Not a single sentence do we find in sacred writings that tends in the most distant manner, to disapprove of any one part of the conduct of this illustrious slave-buyer. . . .”¹⁷

Slavery advocates also pointed out that the “very first law” enacted by God himself after giving Moses the Ten Commandments dealt with the regulation of slaveholding (Exod. 21:1–6).¹⁸ Later in this same chapter (v. 20–21) is the provision about punishment for killing a servant. This section ends: “if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished; for he is his money.” Richard Nisbet in *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture* argued that the words “his money” clearly conveyed the idea of property, just as if they were referring to an

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. The impression is given that the writer is envious of Joseph’s business acumen: This “prodigious speculation in bondmen was effected for the moderate consideration of one year’s maintenance for each servant.”

¹⁸ Ibid, 12 February 1820.

ox or an ass. Moreover, it was also clear, Nisbet asserted, that Moses did not regard the killing of a slave as a "capital offence" but merely one punishable by a "pecuniary fine." The *Richmond Enquirer* would not go quite as far as Nisbet, but did state that a slaveholder would not intentionally kill a slave because of the economic loss involved, and then quoted this passage as authority that "the economic loss alone might be sufficient punishment."¹⁹

Other selections from the Old Testament were used intermittently too. Slavery defenders scoured the Bible, noting every place "servant" was used, then somehow working this passage into their arguments. It was pointed out, for example, that under the Ten Commandments, one of the things not to be coveted was thy neighbor's manservant or maidservant. Jacob, another of the patriarchal leaders, possessed slaves (Gen. 30:43); Solomon had them born in his house (Eccles. 2:7). The Banishment of Hagar, the bondwoman (Gen. 21:9–21), the blessing of Isaac upon Jacob, "Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee" (Gen. 27:29), and the treatment to be accorded captive women (Deut. 21:11–14) were all used at one time or another as illustrations of the biblical sanction of slavery.²⁰ Joshua in his curse of the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:23, 27), making them "hewers of wood and drawers of water" contributed what was to become a favorite phrase of the proslavery arsenal.²¹ "An Inquisitive Slaveholder" using the next chapter of Joshua discovered that God had fought against the Amorites to protect the Gibeonites, the "newly acquired servants of his slave holding people," and had even "*disturbed the solar system [made the sun stand still] and wrought a miracle on purpose to secure for Israel the inheritance of such possession.*"²²

Slavery's defenders argued from the reverse side too. In addition to the myriads of positive sanctions, they also maintained that slaveholding also received "negative sanction" in the Old Testament in that no place was there a passage of Scripture which condemned or opposed slavery. God had spoken through his prophets for over two thousand years and none of them had condemned or opposed the practice of holding slaves; therefore, slavery had to be acceptable to God.

¹⁹ [Nisbet], *Slavery Not Forbidden*, pp. 4–5; *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

²⁰ See, for example, "Petition to the General Assembly of Virginia from Brunswick County, November 10, 1785" in F. T. Schmidt and B. R. Wilhelm, eds., "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* (January 1973) 30, pp. 142–44; *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 February 1820.

²¹ For examples see *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 February 1820; *Controversy Between Caius Gracchus and Opimius in Reference to the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Georgetown, D.C.: James C. Dunn, 1827), p. 20; Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Adell and Co., 1829), p. 154.

²² *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 February 1820.

This same type of sanction, only in stronger terms, was found in the New Testament too. Since Christ came to fulfill and not to destroy, the argument ran, he therefore sanctioned the institutions and relationships existing at the time which he did not expressly condemn. Since Roman slavery existed at that time and he said nothing against it, Christ obviously accepted the institution of slavery. Indeed, he even healed the slave of the Roman centurion without speaking one word about freedom (Luke 7:1–10). The *Richmond Enquirer* reprinted an article that claimed since Christ had spoken nothing against the slavery existing under Mosaic law and since He “ ‘came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfill,’ then slavery [was] acceptable.” Moreover, he actually gave slavery “a sort of sanction” by using it in a parable. The article concluded:

If domestic slavery had been deemed by Jesus Christ the atrocious crime which it is now represented to be, could it have been passed over without censure? Would the doctrines of salvation have been illustrated by a reference to it, direct and unequivocal?—should we not have been told, not that the rich man, but that the slave-holders, could not enter the kingdom of heaven?²³

A later article in this same paper followed the identical line of reasoning. The author of this piece went to great lengths to prove that the “fundamental precepts” of the Old Testament were not changed by the New. “Tenures of involuntary service were not condemned or prohibited by the great luminaries of the New Testament.” The author argued that the “Gospel dispensation is exhibited as *never interfering with any of the civil institutions or political establishments of the world.*” Jesus obviously had to know of Roman slavery yet he said “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” and at another point he spoke about a servant “shall be beaten with many stripes.”²⁴

Along this same line, the Virginia Baptist General Committee in 1793 resolved that slavery was not a moral or religious issue and therefore was not a subject for discussion by that church body. Instead, they maintained that slavery was a political matter and any questions or problems associated with it should be left to the politicians.²⁵ Other denominations reached the same conclusion.²⁶

²³ *National Intelligencer* as quoted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

²⁴ *Richmond Enquirer*, 15 February 1820.

²⁵ W. Harrison Daniel, “Virginia Baptists and the Negro in the Antebellum Era,” *Journal of Negro History* (January 1971) 56, p. 1.

²⁶ See for example, Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, p. 759 Davis *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 207; John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), pp. 106, 109, 115; Lester B. Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America 1619–1819* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 139–40; J. Earl Thompson, Jr., “Slavery and Presbyterianism in the Revolutionary Era,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* (Spring 1976) 54, p. 136; Patricia Hickin, “ ‘Situation Ethics’ and Anti-slavery Attitudes in the Virginia churches,” in John Boles, *America: The Middle Period* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973).

An eighteenth century pamphleteer averred that Christ's "general maxims of charity and benevolence" could not be regarded as "proofs against slavery." He reasoned that "If the custom had been held in abhorrence by Christ and his disciples, they would, no doubt, have preached against it in direct terms. They were remarkable for the boldness of their discourses, and intrepidity of conduct. . . ." ²⁷ The *Southern Review* in 1828 wrote that the Christian religion had nothing to do with slavery "except, indeed, that the total silence of its Divine Author upon the subject, and the positive injunction of obedience upon bondmen . . . seem to make the inference inevitable, that he considered the institution as altogether a matter of political expediency." ²⁸ Reverend Richard Furman carried this argument to its logical end. He repeated the usual idea that if slaveholding had been considered evil, then Christ or the Apostles would not have "tolerated it for a moment in the Christian Church." But they had "let the relationship remain untouched, as being lawful and right, and insist[ed] on the relative duties." Furman concluded: "In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions." ²⁹ In an earlier letter Furman was even more explicit. Slavery, he claimed, "is not a sin, a Moral Evil. For God never did, and never will authorize men to commit Sin." ³⁰

Frederick Dalcho carried this argument one step further. He claimed that the New Testament required of servants "*obedience, submission, [and] subjection, to a bad, as well as to a good master.*" Moreover, he insisted that there was "nothing in the law of God which can, in the slightest manner, justify the disobedience and revolt of slaves." ³¹

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament, according to Southerners, also contained positive sanctions of slavery. Besides the Epistle to Philemon there was a whole catalog of quotations coming from both St. Paul and St. Peter which slavery advocates interpreted as justifying the institution. Southerners were especially pleased with these passages because all revolved around the idea of slaves being obedient and submissive to their masters (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:1-5; Titus 2:9-10; and 1 Pet. 2:18). ³²

²⁷ [Nisbet], *Slavery Not Forbidden*, p. 8.

²⁸ *Southern Review* (February 1828) 1, p. 233.

²⁹ Furman, *Exposition of the Views of the Baptists*, pp. 7-8.

³⁰ Anne C. Loveland, "Richard Furman's 'Questions on Slavery,'" *Baptist History and Heritage* (July 1975), p. 178.

³¹ [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations*, p. 25.

³² *Richmond Enquirer*, 3, December 1819; 15 February 1820. "An American" writing to the *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 January 1820, "particularly recommended" that certain people read the selection from Timothy dealing with the "perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds." (1 Tim. 6:5).

Much emphasis was also placed on Paul's letter to the Corinthians. His dictum: "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called," and "let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God" (1 Cor. 7:20, 24) was taken to mean that everyone should be happy with, and make the best of his condition. If a slave were converted, he must still remain a slave. As a group of eighteenth century Virginians expressed it:

The Freedom promised to his Followers, is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men[']s Lusts and Passions; but as to their Outward Condition, whatever that was before they embraced the Religion of Jesus, whether Bond or Free, it remained the same afterwards.³³

It is significant that the proslavery appeal was always to the authority of the Bible and never to the spirit of Christianity. The proslavery defense rested on the belief that only those things were sinful which broke a direct law of God. As Mathews says, Southern Evangelicals saw the Bible as not only justifying Southern institutions, but also providing a "stable guide to everyday living which people could count on to mean exactly what it said."³⁴ Thus, here again, is the appeal to authority.

On the other hand, many Southerners were convinced that Northerners were abandoning the Bible. In January 1820, for example, Senator William Smith of South Carolina claimed that he would not be "astonished" to find that Northerners were attempting "a new version of the Old and New Testaments," a "new model . . . to suit the policy of the times." They would "Throw off such parts as were uncongenial to their interests, and leave the residue to God." Smith finished with a particular concern of his: "They had already given the Scriptures an implied construction, as different from its literal sense, as they had that of the Constitution of the United States."³⁵

From such views, it is obviously just a short step to attacking Northerners, especially the clergy. Edwin Holland, writing on the abortive slave revolt plotted by Denmark Vesey, charged that it was due to Northern misguided missionaries and their religious tracts. Another Southerner claimed that "all the late insurrections of slaves" were because of "influential preachers."³⁶

³³ "Petition to the General Assembly of Virginia from Amelia County, November 10, 1785:" in Schmidt and Wilhelm, "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," p. 139; See also [Dalcho], *Practical Considerations*, pp. 20–21.

³⁴ Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, pp. 157, 175.

³⁵ *Annals of Congress*, 16 Cong., 1st sess., 26 January 1820, pp. 269–70.

³⁶ [Edwin C. Holland], *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated Against the Southern and Western States Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery Among Them*, by a South-Carolinian (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), pp. 11–12. This work was originally published in Charleston in 1822. [Z. Kingsley], *A Treatise on the Patriarchial or Co-operative System of Society as it Now Exists in Some Governments . . . Under the Name of Slavery, with its Necessity and Advantages*, 2d ed. (NP, NP, 1829), pp. 13–14.

The *National Intelligencer* published a long article against those “ecclesiastical members” who were not content to attend to their “ministerial functions at home” but zealously pursued a “crown of worldly glory.” The writer strongly implied that disaster was inevitably the consequence of such actions. A few months later the *Richmond Enquirer* charged that in spite of the biblical sanctions, “the zealots of humanity” had denounced slavery. In reality, the writer proposed, these “most mistaken and misguided people” were merely exchanging the “religion of 1819 years, for the humanity of the moment.” He concluded that “from the day of Diocleasian [sic] to the present moment, a blow so heavy has not been inflicted on revealed religion.”³⁷ Here again is the appeal to stick with the authority of the Bible.

Slavery’s advocates had to rely on the authority of certain passages to support their claims of biblical sanction because their opponents contended that the general spirit of Christianity was clearly opposed to the practice of slaveholding. Thus the emphasis from slavery’s defenders was on “proof,” a reliance on authority. Congressman John C. Weems, for example, challenged his opponents “to attempt a reply on proof.” Weems announced that he would not “reply to dogmatical declamation” but would be “happy to meet . . . in argument supported by proof.” Weems said he would give “chapter and verse” and then proceeded to do so, ranging from Genesis to St. Paul.³⁸ One Missourian, for example, relied heavily on St. Paul’s dictum that “where there is no law there is no transgression.” (Rom. 4:15).³⁹ Senator William Smith declared that “God was unchangeable . . . that he was without variation or shadow of turning; the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.” Opponents of slavery, however, claimed that slavery was “against the spirit of the Christian religion.” But, Smith thundered: “When, and by what authority, were we taught to separate the positive laws of God from the Christian religion?”⁴⁰ An editorial in the *Richmond Enquirer* castigated those who attempted to keep slavery from Missouri because slavery “was expressly sanctioned by the old, and recognized without censure by the new testament.” Antislavery, the article continued, “is a plain, palpable, reversal of the decree of the Almighty.” The editorial said it was only man’s “unreasoning pride” that made him “think himself wiser than his Creator.” It ended with a couplet from Pope: because of his pride, man does not hesitate to

Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod
Rejudge his justice—be the God of God.⁴¹

³⁷ *National Intelligencer*, 18 November 1819; *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 January 1820.

³⁸ *Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 2d sess., 7 January 1829, pp. 184–85.

³⁹ *Franklin (Mo.) Intelligencer*, 18 February 1820.

⁴⁰ *Annals of Congress*, 16 Cong., 1st sess., 26 January 1820, p. 270.

⁴¹ *Richmond Enquirer*, 1 January 1820.

One writer used the biblical defense of slavery and then declared that “the Pentateuch [sic] must be abandoned as an absolute imposture, if the law authorizing slavery is not of divine original [sic].” Later he accused those who called slavery an “atrocious crime” of “blasphemy against the Most High.” They “reprove God and dis-annul his judgment;” they “condemn him that thou mayest appear righteous.”⁴² The *Southern Review* added its own theory in November 1829. If the Bible were read in “the original Greek or in a literal version,” it claimed, “we should, probably, be less troubled with the ravings of fanatics upon this subject.”⁴³ The South Carolinian, Edwin Holland, concluded one of his sections with the observation that if “Mr. Morrill” [The Senator] and “his friends of New-Hampshire have not turned aside after strange gods, it is hoped the *authority I have quoted* might satisfy them.”⁴⁴

Note that the predominant theme in all of these examples is the appeal to the literal truth of Scripture, the authority of the Bible. This was obviously meant as a counter to the broad appeals to the Christian spirit used by slavery’s opponents. This feeling against a general religious spirit could reach such extreme lengths that the South Carolina minister, Richard Furman, could insist that the “Christian Golden Rule” did not apply to slavery. “Surely this rule,” he wrote, was “never to be urged against the order of things, which the Divine government has established. . . .” Applied to slavery, the golden rule merely meant that the master should treat his slave as he would like to be treated if he were a slave. This same sentiment was echoed by Congressman Weems in January 1829.⁴⁵

Evidently, Southerners of the post-Revolutionary generation had little difficulty in justifying their own morality. Congressman Weems of Maryland was a good example. In January 1829, he boldly declared in Congress: “God forbid, sir, that I should be found practising that which I cannot fully justify to myself. . . .”⁴⁶ Even some ministers shared Weems’s position. Baptist minister Richard Furman claimed that moral evil was not inherent in slaveholding. He drew a distinction between “the holding of slaves and the exercising of cruelty

⁴² *National Intelligencer* as quoted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

⁴³ *Southern Review* (November 1829), p. 353n.

⁴⁴ [Holland], *Refutation of the Calumnies*, p. 42. Italics mine.

⁴⁵ Furman, *Exposition of the Views of the Baptists*, p. 8. *Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 2d sess., 7 January 1829, p. 185. In an unusual twist on the morality argument, Robert Wright, a Senator from Maryland, asserted that Southerners should not be reproached with “the immorality of slavery” because that was a “crime” for which they must answer “at the bar of God,” and it would be “unjust” for them to be “punished twice for the same offense.” Everett S. Brown, ed., “The Senate Debate on the Breckinridge Bill for the Government of Louisiana, 1804” from the *Journal of William Plumer in the American Historical Review* (January 1917) 22, p. 355.

⁴⁶ *Congressional Debates*, 20 Cong., 2d sess., 7 January 1829, p. 185. It is interesting that Weems, a Maryland planter from Anne Arundel County, was as vehement in his defense of slavery as nearly anyone from the Deep South.

toward them. The one appears to be lawful, the other cannot be so."⁴⁷ William Winans, a Mississippi Methodist minister who held slaves, could at least justify his own morality. Writing to his brother in 1820, he affirmed that he "would not favor enslaving Negroes were they already free, nor would he retain them if he could emancipate them." Emancipation, however, would "ruin" the slaves and "endanger the very existence of the Nation." Under these circumstances he believed that Christians could own slaves because they had not enslaved them, and also because they would treat them better than non-Christians would. Moreover, slaveholding unbelievers, he claimed, would accept the "exhortations" of slaveholding Christians far more readily than from nonslaveholders. In typical fashion Winans concluded that Holy Scripture never condemned slavery: "The Apostles never [said] 'Set your servants free.'"⁴⁸ At about this same time, another minister reported the not too surprising claim of one Methodist who insisted that "God Almighty gave [his slaves] to him, and he intended to keep them."⁴⁹ The churches' acceptance of slavery went so far that in the early eighteenth century, some Swedish Lutherans in North Carolina sold some church land and used the money to buy slaves. These slaves were then hired out, and the resulting money used to support the minister. At about the same time, another Lutheran church raised funds in Europe which were then used to purchase a farm and slaves to work it for their minister.⁵⁰

Proslavery advocates could even see the hand of God involved in slave insurrections. Writing on the Vesey insurrection, Edwin Holland implied that slaveholders could not really be that wicked because "the protecting interposition of a beneficent Providence" had saved Charleston.⁵¹

In 1790, during the debate over the slave trade, William Loughton Smith of South Carolina maintained that if slavery was a "moral evil" then it was "like many others which exist in all civilized countries, and which the world quietly submits to."⁵² Senator James Barbour, thirty years later, carried Smith's viewpoint even further. Barbour first asked "However dark and inscrutable [sic] may be the ways of heaven, who is he that arrogantly presumes to arraign them?" He went on to propose, then, that however "incomprehensible" slavery might be to us, it was "a link in that great concatenation which is permitted by omnipotent power and goodness and must issue in universal good."⁵³ A

⁴⁷ Loveland, "Richard Furman," p. 178.

⁴⁸ Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ W. D. Weatherford, *American Churches and the Negro* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1957), pp. 142-43.

⁵¹ [Holland], *A Refutation of the Calumnies*, p. 13.

⁵² *Annals of Congress*, 1 Cong., 2d sess., 17 March 1790, p. 1560.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16 Cong., 1st sess., 1 February 1820, p. 335.

Georgian Lutheran minister admitted that slavery was wrong “in the abstract,” but then went on to justify it because it removed “the African from the heathenism of his native land to a country where his mind would be enlightened by the gospel, and provision made for the salvation of his soul. . . .” In other words, “the evils of slavery might be endured in the consideration of the moral and spiritual advantages which it bestows upon its unfortunate victims.”⁵⁴

As Senator Barbour’s comments reflect, slavery advocates could use the Bible offensively as well as defensively. One Southerner claimed, for example, that God had permitted some of the Africans to be “dragged into bondage” so that they might learn from the experience and then return to Africa taking with them “the light of civilization, and the blessings of Christianity, to their benighted and unhappy countrymen.” Thus from this “apparent evil” God could bring about “the utmost possible good.”⁵⁵

As the above quotation indicates there was some use made of the concept that slavery was justified because it brought Christianity to the blacks. In the early nineteenth century, however, such usage was slight; it was not a very important part of the proslavery argument. More emphasis was placed upon using the Bible itself as an authority to justify the institution of black slavery.

The substance of the individual biblical sanctions was not as important as the use made of them. Attacked for the immorality of holding slaves, Southerners carefully explored the Bible for passages relating to slavery in any manner, and then used these passages to justify their own slaveholding. Slavery defenders explicitly argued that since God recognized slavery in Holy Scripture, then by definition, slavery could not possibly be immoral. The appeal was always to the literal wording of Scripture, the authority of the Bible; the purpose was always to discover sanctions for slavery and thus justify their own practice and institution of black slavery. Such arguments were not an aberration; they were consistent with the views of a society that was convinced by personal experience and psychic need of the legitimacy of black slavery. The biblical defense of slavery was thus a natural outgrowth of the values of that society.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Weatherford, *American Churches and Negro*, p. 140. Also see Leland J. Bellot, “Evangelicals and the Defense of Slavery in Britain’s Old Colonial Empire,” *Journal of Southern History* (February 1971) 37, especially pp. 29–30.

⁵⁵ Letter from the *Delaware Watchman* to Hezekiah Niles, *Niles’ Weekly Register*, 8 November 1817. This idea of Christianizing the Africans was often used to garner support for the American Colonization Society in its early years. See: P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), and John R. Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues 1812–1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).



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