

The Role of the Bible in the British Abolition of Slavery, 1671-1824

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One aspect of the story of the British abolition of slavery is the role the Bible played in the campaign against the slave system. The journey of this story begins in 1671 and travels right into the early part of the nineteenth century. This discussion, therefore, will pay attention to the fact that the exposition of the Bible provided the ideological basis of the anti-slavery movements in Britain for a century and a half. This is not to suggest that Enlightenment ideas were not used in the fight against slavery. On the contrary, the Enlightenment did influence the anti-slavery campaign; but that is only part of the story – a part that is generally acknowledged by historians. Another part is that the teaching of the Bible was important for the abolitionists. My focus will also be upon the historical development of this theology of emancipation. This campaign began among the Quakers, then found its most powerful expression among the Anglican evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of these Anglicans were known as the Clapham Sect.

By the early part of the nineteenth century, the biblical arguments submitted by the abolitionists against the practice of slavery developed into a recognizable theology of emancipation. The Christians who were involved in the struggle for the liberation of the slaves possessed a common body of biblical concepts that made them feel confident that the cause to which they were committed was endorsed by the will of God. It had taken at least 150 years for the theology to be fully developed – from the time of George Fox in 1671 to the publication of a series of periodicals,

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Negro Slavery around 1824.

While on a visit to Barbados in 1671, George Fox (1624-1691), the founder of the Quaker movement, preached to a group of followers a sermon calling for the application of the principles of Mosaic manumission towards all slaves held by Quakers. This sermon, together with a few other short addresses made on the same voyage, was published in 1676, as *The Gospel of Family Order*. Fox's publication was one of the discussions that opened the way for a clear theological development on the question of slavery. This work, published in London, was released in a second edition in Philadelphia in 1701.

With reference to Ebed-Melech in Jeremiah 38; an Ethiopian who was accepted into the community of Israel and to the other Ethiopian in Acts 8, who was accepted into the Christian community; Fox argued that blacks were equal to whites within God's economy. Substantiating this with an appeal to Acts 17:26, Fox stated, "And therefore you should preach Christ to your Ethiopians that are in your families, so that they may be free men indeed, and be tender of and to them, and walk in love, that ye may answer that of God in your hearts, being (as the Scripture affirms) all of one Blood & one Mold, to dwell upon the face of the Earth."¹ Fox was concerned that the Friends (the Quakers) recognize the need to preach the gospel of Christ to the slaves and to accept the converted ones as brothers and sisters in the faith.

But Fox went on to give a call for the eventual liberation of the slaves. Quoting from Deuteronomy 15:12-15, Fox reminded the Quakers of the Mosaic injunction requiring the manumission of bond servants after six years of service.² His sermon was not a rejection of slavery *per se*; rather it was a call for its limitation and for a benevolent sentiment in the administration of the institution. Furthermore, Fox's sermon laid the groundwork for a later development of anti-slavery theology in the British Empire. From this period onwards, the question of slavery was continually confronted by various groups and individuals of the Quaker community.

John Bell, a Quaker from Bromley near London, circulated a letter to all Quakers of the British domains. Bell's treatise, according to Roger Anstey (1927-1979), was very influential in causing the American Quakers to go into a period of deep soul-searching with regard to the keeping of slaves.³ In his dispatch, *An Epistle to Friends*, published in 1741, Bell cited the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12. His call was for the exercise of kindness and compassion in the treatment of one's slaves.⁴ In addition to this, citing

passages from James 5:1-5 and Isaiah 1:19, 20, Bell stressed the fact that in the Bible there were strong words of condemnation against those who oppressed others.⁵

Two figures who strongly influenced the capitulation of the American Quakers in favor of abolition were John Woolman (1720-1772) and Anthony Benezet (1713-1784).⁶ In 1754, Woolman published *Some Consideration on the keeping of Negroes recommended to the Professors of Christianity of every Denomination*. Woolman's distinctive contribution to the discussion was his new application of the Golden Rule. While Bell had used the words of Christ as a call for kindness to the slaves, Woolman used them to disqualify the validity of slavery. Woolman asked, "How should I approve of this conduct, were I in their circumstance and they in mine?"⁷ In addition, he argued that the command in Leviticus 19:33,34 was closely connected to the reciprocity of the Golden Rule. Woolman was contending that the European slave system was at war with the principles of biblical ethics.

John Woolman possibly played his most important historical role in the influence he had on his fellow Quaker, Anthony Benezet. Anstey observes: "more fundamental was a Christ-like quality in both of them which enabled them to expound their cause without attacking – alienating – their opponents. Their underlying faith, too, was of a similar cast, as is particularly clear in a passage in a letter from Benezet in which he acknowledged his debt to Woolman."⁸ Roger Anstey, David Davis and Roger Bruns concur in their assessment of the significance of Benezet to the anti-slavery campaign. Bruns, though, is more detailed in his commendation. He states:

The work of the gentle Quaker would establish him as the most prolific and influential propagandist against slavery in the eighteenth century . . . Benezet zealously wrote letter after letter to heads of government, religious leaders, politicians, and others interested in reform. He lobbied during legislative sessions, preached to Quaker slave owners . . . Benezet strongly influenced others such as Thomas Clarkson, John Wesley, and Benjamin Rush to begin their work against slavery. In 1767, Granville Sharp, who later became one of the most influential figures in the international abolition movement, was browsing in a London bookstore when he noticed Benezet's *A Short Account*. The work so stirred Sharp that he had it reprinted.⁹

In addition to re-emphasizing the arguments already advanced against slavery, Benezet added to the list the stark evil of kidnapping. Benezet stated: “under Mosaic Law, Manstealing was the only theft punishable by death: it is thus expressed in Exodus Chap. 21,16. He that stealeth a Man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.”¹⁰

So then, the Quakers of America, largely through the writings and energies of Woolman and especially of Benezet, fanned the flames of anti-slavery sentiment and contributed to a further development of abolitionist biblical exegesis in Britain. In one century the concepts had made a complete return trip: starting with George Fox and John Bell of Britain, traversing the Atlantic to the American Colonies – experiencing there a further development; then returning in a more comprehensive form to Britain.

The Importance of Granville Sharp

Granville Sharp (1735-1813) was the first real anti-slavery activist in Britain and the most important pamphleteer of anti-slavery biblical thought. Sharp became personally involved in a number of court battles to set slaves in Britain free. He did his own research in law and debated against the legal opinions of the Solicitor-General, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield and Dr. William Blackstone, an oracle on English law. In 1787, Sharp became the first chairman of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.¹¹

It was in the year 1776 that Granville Sharp published four booklets which might well be the best historical examples of the exegesis hermeneutics of the Christian anti-slavery activists. The first of these works which we shall consider is *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God*. This monograph was, in the main, a response to an anonymously published pro-slavery work, *A Treatise on the Trade from Great Britain to Africa*.¹² *The Just Limitation* also carried an appendix which was a rebuttal of Thomas Thompson’s, *The African Trade for Negro Slaves shown to be consistent with the Principles of Humanity and with the Laws of Revealed Religion*, which was published at Canterbury in 1772. Roger Brunson observes that Thompson was “a pro-slavery Anglican missionary who had traveled extensively in Africa and the West Indies in the 1740s and 1750s . . . Thompson’s 31-page essay, infused with Biblical citations,

was a formidable challenge to the arguments of anti-slavery writers.”¹³

In his discussion of the servitude allowed by the enactments of the Mosaic code, Sharp first dealt with the contention that “by the Law of Moses, the Israelites might purchase slaves from the heathens, and even their own people might become slaves to their brethren.”¹⁴ Sharp responded to this, basing his arguments upon Leviticus 25:44-46; most likely the same scripture text Thompson had used.

Sharp exegeted the passage section by section. Concerning the rendering of the word, “heathen,” Sharp argued that *hagoyim* was more properly translated “the nations.” Moreover – and this, for Sharp, was very important – it was the nations “round about” whom the Israelites were permitted to employ as “bondmen” (those nations being the seven nations mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1). Sharp’s submission, then, was that this Levitical permission for the perpetual bondservice of strangers was a special case of Divine judgment that did not extend to other non-Canaanite nations. Rather, quite to the contrary, there were specific commands given to the Israelites regarding their treatment of other nations not falling under the sweep of this Divine Scourge. Sharp commented:

I have elsewhere particularly demonstrated; and which even the law of Moses expressly commanded: ‘But the stranger, that dwelleth with you, shall be unto you as one born among you, and THOU SHALT LOVE HIM AS THYSELF; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord you God.’ Lev. xix. 33 and 3.¹⁵

So far as strangers in general were concerned, the Hebrew people were commanded to love them and not to oppress them. This was a view that, as already noted, John Woolman had previously expressed in 1754. Here, however, Sharp elaborated upon it and took it further. Sharp did not merely see it as a call for kindness to the stranger in general, but rather as an injunction to forbid the Hebrews from thinking of a foreigner – apart from the Canaanite – as a candidate for enslavement. This explanation, in Sharp’s mind, was the only way the two different regulations regarding the treatment of strangers could be understood. For if the permission to hold a stranger in bondservice were to be extended to strangers at large, it would undermine the command to render benevolence to strangers as outlined not only in Leviticus but also in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Sharp argued:

If this permission were to be extended to strangers in general, It would subvert the express command concerning brotherly love due to strangers; because a man cannot be said to love the stranger as himself If he holds the stranger and his progeny in a perpetual involuntary servitude.¹⁶

Basically, the overriding principle in one's relationship to the stranger ought to be loved as one loved oneself. With regard to the second pro-slavery argument "that the Hebrews were permitted to enslave their own people," Sharp's response was that the argument did not take into consideration the stipulations regulating the practice. Sharp complained:

I must remark, that he does not deal fairly by the Jewish Law, to quote that circumstance, without mentioning, at the same time, 'the Just Limitation' to which it was subject, and the admirable provision, in the same Law, against the Involuntary servitude of brethren: because no Hebrew could be made a Slave without his consent.¹⁷

Sharp further stressed that when a Hebrew expressed a desire to be a bondservant, it had to be ratified by a formal proceeding before the judges of the land. Unless there was that public recognition of the "voluntary consent" no Hebrew had the authority to turn his brother Hebrew into a bond-servant: it was absolutely unlawful in any other circumstance. Indeed, Israelites who had become bankrupt could not be compelled to serve as bondservants, only as hired servants.¹⁸ With respect to this particular observation, Sharp made reference to Leviticus 25:39-43. But there was another observation that Sharp made. It was in connection with the passage found in Deuteronomy 23:15,16. Sharp claimed that this provision of the law indicated that "though the Jews were permitted by the Law of Moses . . . to keep slaves . . . yet there was no inherent right to service to be implied from this permission."¹⁹

Sharp's next step was to take the conclusions arrived at in his exegeting of the portions of the Scripture, and apply them to the British slave system. He contended that "the degree of servitude, which the Israelites were permitted to exact of their brethren, was mild and equitable, when compared with the servitude which (to our confusion be it said) is common among Christians."²⁰ He sought to demonstrate this by pointing out the Jews were not only restrained from oppressing their fellow

Hebrews, but that they were also enjoined at the end of the six years of service to set them free-and that not without a bountiful supply of gifts. Sharp was referring specifically to Deuteronomy 15:13,14. Sharp then remarked, "These are the very utmost limits of servitude that we might venture to exact of our brethren even if we were Jews . . . What then must we think of our selves if we compare these Jewish limitations with our Plantation laws?"²¹

From here, Granville Sharp proceeded to discuss the question of recompense for service. on this issue he called attention to James 5:3,4: Luke 10:7 and also to Jeremiah 22:13. In the Luke passage, it is stated that "the labourer is worthy of his hire"; and in James there is an outright pronouncement of Judgement, in the most fiery of terms, against landowners who oppressed their labourers and defrauded them of a proper wage.²² Sharp pointed to Colossians 4:1 to make the point that if Christians were to abide by the principle of giving to their workers what was "just and equal," they could do no less than what was required by law of Moses; yet, Christians ought to have been even more benevolent, loving and generous than the requirements of the Torah.²³

According to Sharp, then, the slavery permitted under the laws of God was essentially different from that practised legally by the British. To use Scripture texts which spoke of slavery within the context of the Mosaic code and to apply them indiscriminately to the eighteenth-century Atlantic slavemongering was to ignore "the Just limitation of slavery in the laws of God" as revealed by Scripture, even if one considered the Old Testament alone. The Mosaic legislation was, in contrast with the system at work in the British West Indies, a benevolent one. It did not deliver human beings, bound hand and foot, to the every whim and fancy of their fellowman.

The Slave and Passive Obedience

Next, I shall investigate Sharp's booklet, *The Law of Passive Obedience*. This was a discussion of the principle of "Christian submission to personal injuries." Here Sharp argued that the instructions in the New Testament which enjoined slaves to submit to their masters were principles given to regulate the conduct of the slaves and not that of the masters.²⁴ While *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God* dealt mainly with the Old Testament, *The Law of Passive Obedience* was especially focused upon responding to those who saw in the New Testament grounds for the

support of slavery. Sharp observed:

There are nevertheless some particular Texts in the New Testament, which, in the opinion even of several well meaning and disinterested persons, seem to afford some proof of slavery among the primitive Christians; and, from thence, they are induced to conceive, that Christianity doth not oblige its professors to renounce the practice of slaveholding.²⁵

Sharp's purpose in the writing of the monograph, then, was an attempt to prove "the absolute illegality of slavery among Christians."

Sharp contended that the claims of the British slaveholders over their slaves, went beyond those which the New Testament permitted. To demonstrate this, he proceeded to exegete 1 Timothy 6:2. Sharp contended that nowhere in the New Testament was an individual given the right to exact "involuntary labour from his brother without wages or reward. Rather, on the contrary, he was to give to his servants "that which was just and equal;" and what was "just and equal" could not be anything less than what was required by the laws of the Old Testament, which were already discussed.²⁶ Sharp was fully convinced that the teachings of the New Testament did not permit the kind of bondage that was practiced by the European nations of his time. In texts of the Bible where it appeared that the slavery advocates could find support, Sharp vigorously refuted their arguments. Added to this, Sharp argued that servitude for life.²⁷ Then citing Luke 6:28,29 in which the Jesus urged his disciples to return good for evil, Sharp argued that though "submission and placability" were required of sufferers, no one who was reasonable would adduce from that, that "tyrants and oppressors have thereby obtained a legal right, under the gospel to curse others and use them despitefully."²⁸ Applying this train of thought to the slave system, he concluded:

In the same light exactly must we view the Slaveholders claim of private property in the persons of men, whenever an attempt is made to support it on the foundation of any such texts . . . wherein servants or slaves are exhorted to submit with passive obedience.²⁹

Passive obedience was an instruction given to the slave; it was not a justification of the slave system.

This principle of passive obedience, then, was a command given to the sufferer, the oppressed and the slave, admonishing them to be gracious, Christ-like and patient in the face of brutality: it was not a recognition of the professed right of slave mongers to own the bodies and lives of their fellowmen.

Biblical Justice and the Law of Liberty

Another publication released by Granville Sharp was *The Law of Liberty or, Royal Law by which all Mankind will certainly be Judged*. Basically, Granville Sharp's article was an exposition based upon James 2:8-13, with his text as verse 12. Sharp argued that the law of liberty was really "the moral duties of the Gospel briefly comprehended in two single principles of the Law of Moses, viz. The Love of God, and The Love of our Neighbours." It was Sharp's view that the practice of slavery was not compatible with these principles – principles which were enunciated in Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5, and re-emphasized in the New Testament.³⁰

Calling attention to Matthew 22:40, Sharp observed that the Jesus had declared that upon these two commandments hung all the law and the prophets. Sharp pointed towards Matthew 7:12, the Golden Rule, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8. This Sharp affirmed, was "the royal law or the law of liberty by which all mankind will be judged."³¹ So upon the grounds of these complementary texts, Sharp asserted:

Slavery is absolutely inconsistent with Christianity, because it cannot say of any Slaveholder, that he doth not to another what he would not have done to himself! For he is continually exacting involuntary Labour from others without wages, which he would think Monstrously unjust, were he himself the Sufferer.³²

For Sharp, the reciprocal rule would have been an embarrassing precept for the theological advocates of slavery.

Biblical Justice and the Law of Retribution

Though Sharp's work, *The Law of Retribution*, was the lengthiest of his four theological, anti-slavery publications, the arguments contained in

it are the simplest: the practice of slavery, tyranny and oppression have always been among the major causes of God's judgement upon nations of biblical times – particularly the Jewish nation. As an obvious conclusion, Sharp drew from his observation the deduction that by committing these very crimes against the people of Africa, Britain was placing herself in direct danger of being judged by God. Sharp warned: "National Wickedness from the beginning of the World, has generally been visited with National punishments: and surely no National Wickedness can be more heinous in the sight of God than a public toleration of Slavery and Oppression!"³³

It was his view that this was clearly shown in Scripture. As the first example of his claim, Sharp used the case of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. God's liberating of Israel from Egyptian bondage, according to Sharp, was His first act of mercy to the Hebrew people after they had become a nation.³⁴ Moreover, the outpouring of "the Plagues of Egypt," were "so many single examples of God's severe Vengeance against Slaveholders."³⁵ Sharp noted that the deliverance of Israel from Egypt was repeatedly mentioned in Scripture as deliverance "out of the House of Bondage." Commenting on the term "the House of Bondage," Sharp observed that the Hebrew was to be rendered more literally "from the House of Slaves." God wanted the Israelites always to remember their history of slavery in Egypt.³⁶ The moral purpose of this consistent reminder, Sharp argued, was to stir up in the Israelites "a sympathetic concern for the Sufferings of the Oppressed Strangers."³⁷ Sharp quoted and remarked: "'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye KNOW THE HEART (properly THE SOUL) OF A STRANGER seeing ye were Strangers in the land of Egypt.' Exod. xxiii. 9."³⁸

Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt was to be a reminder of the important role social Justice and benevolence ought to play in their national life. God also gave warning to the Israelites about the dangers oppressors faced. The Hebrew – for he knew what it was like to bear the yoke – ought not at all to tyrannize anyone. Sharp was seeking to make it abundantly clear that the slavery experienced by Israel in Egypt – a slavery which was, in many respects, milder than that endured by the Africans at the hand of Europeans – was roundly condemned by the God of Scripture. Sharp added:

"Thou shalt neither vex a Stranger, nor oppress him; for ye were Strangers

in the Land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any Widow or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will SURELY hear their cry” (mark this, ye African Traders of this Island, and ye West-India and British American Slaveholders! For ye are all guilty of the like abominable oppressions, and God will SURELY avenge the Cause of the Oppressed.³⁹

These were the fundamental themes of *The Law of Retribution*. These four works of Sharp marked a breakthrough in the field of Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics with regard to the anti-slavery question.

Granville Sharp felt absolutely no restraint in crying for an outright liberation of the slaves. Bell and Woolman had called for an amelioration of the condition of the slaves. Benezet favoured abolition but was not as qualified an exegete as was Sharp. These works of Sharp, give us a fairly comprehensive understanding of the role of Scripture in the cause of the British abolition of slavery. Sharp’s exegesis provided the evangelicals especially, with a biblical base from which they could have felt confident to launch their assault upon the system of slavery.

Biblical Arguments Advanced

These anti-slavery theological arguments – though of course they were reflected with varying degrees of emphasis from person to person – can be summarized under seven general headings. They included the concepts of Sharp and went beyond them. Firstly, it was argued that the slavery permitted by the law of Moses was fundamentally different from the kind practiced by Europeans. The Mosaic legislation was characterized by the following principles: (1) Under the law of Moses, slavery among Hebrews was not normally perpetual: Its duration was limited to six years. (2) There were specified legal reasons that permitted such bondage: it could not have been arbitrarily inflicted. (3) Masters had no right of dominion in the person of the slave: the slave who fled from a tyrannical master was not to be returned; rather he was to be treated hospitably and graciously. (4) Life-long servitude could have only been on a voluntary basis; and the contract had to be entered into in the presence of the judges of the land.⁴⁰ (5) If the principle of volition was violated, then the crime of man stealing was committed. Man stealing was clearly condemned by Scripture.⁴¹ (6) Canaanite bond service under the Hebrews, was subject to

all the regulations of the Mosaic code. The distinctive feature about their condition was that servitude was the only employment which was allowed them within Israelite economy.⁴²

Secondly, although slaves were enjoined by Scripture to be patient in suffering and to give passive obedience, this obedience was not a *carte blanche* given to all and sundry legalizing the holding of people in coercive bondage. There is evidence in Scripture that while Christians may at times submit to personal injury, as in the case of Paul (Acts 16:22,23), this does not excuse the injustice which is directly rebuked (Acts 16:36-40; 22:24-29).⁴³ Paul's instruction to Philemon that Onesimus, the converted runaway slave, be received back "as a brother" (see Philemon v. 16) has to be interpreted against the Old Testament code of servitude, especially as it related to the type of bond service allowed among Hebrews towards their brethren.⁴⁴

Thirdly, slavery was incompatible with the principles of the gospel. The law of love with its reciprocal rule: loving another as oneself, and doing to others, as we would have them do to us, could not be reconciled with the practice of slavery. Thomas Scott (1747-1821) who may not have been fully convinced that the Old Testament Mosaic laws were opposed to the system of slavery practiced by the Europeans, was thoroughly persuaded that the witness of the law of love and that of the reciprocal rule were contrary to the contemporary institution of slavery.⁴⁵

Fourthly, the prophetic witness against tyranny and injustice was clear. Injustice and oppression were, one the one hand, continually cited in Scripture as causes for national Judgment upon the peoples of antiquity. On the other hand, justice, mercy and fair play were graced with Divine blessings and commendation. With all its horror and debauchery, the slave system could only be a cause for national retribution.

Fifthly, Noah's curse referred not to the people of Africa, but rather to the Canaanites: the Amorites, the Hivites, the Hittites, the Girgashites – those Canaanite nations against whom Israel had to battle in their conquest of the promised land. This prophecy of Noah was fulfilled before the time of Christ. It could not be used to justify the enslavement of Africans.⁴⁶

Sixthly, universal human equality was plainly taught in Scripture. The Bible spoke of God's viewing all mankind "without respect of persons" (James 2:1,9), and "of one blood" (Acts 17:26), meant that no person was given a natural right of dominion over another person. This

issue has already been encountered in the discussion on the Mosaic code.⁴⁷

Seventhly, Israel's emancipation was a prominent historical incident that constituted a Biblical illustration of Divine concern over the physical oppression under which nation groaned. That God had brought them "out of the house of slaves" was a constant refrain in the Old Testament. Israel's emancipation was a clear biblical witness against a type of slavery which was similar to (though still milder than) the slavery endured by the Africans.

Importance of Biblical Arguments

It is quite evident that the biblical witness against slavery was of major importance in the minds of the abolitionists. Lowell Joseph Ragatz (1897-1978), though he feels that the abolitionists were worsted in the debate, still judges that it was a point of intense controversy. Ragatz says: "No phase of the controversy occasioned greater dispute than did the question of Whether the slave trade and slavery were supported or condemned by Scripture."⁴⁸ The intensity of the controversy was obviously occasioned by the prominence the subject in the thought of the anti-slavery activists. This remained an obvious priority, even after the period of 1838 when the British slave system was totally abolished. This was demonstrated when the opponents of slavery sought to take their struggle beyond the confines of the British Empire. In 1840 the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society held a General Anti-Slavery Convention in London, at which the role of the Bible in the anti-slavery campaign was evident. On the second day of convention, the very first paper presented to the delegates was entitled, "On the Essential Sinfulness of Slavery and its Direct Opposition to the Precepts and Spirit of Christianity." In the second paragraph of his presentation, Godwin of Oxford was careful to observe that "there are many views which may be taken of the evils of slavery by the philanthropist and the politician; but there is one aspect under which it presents itself to the mind of the Christian, which is especially adapted to awaken his feelings and stimulate his efforts, that is its sinfulness."⁴⁹

Godwin then proceeded to recapitulate many of the major biblical arguments advanced against slavery over the previous decades. Indeed, this emphasis on the Bible was even illustrated in Canada when abolitionists sought to assist fugitive slaves from the United States. In the Constitution and bye-laws of the anti-slavery society of Canada it is stated: "Slavery,

that is the wanton and forcible bringing into bondage, and retaining indefinitely in that state, of rational beings, is an outrage on the laws of humanity, and of the Bible.” Article 7 of the rules of the association required “that a course of lectures be delivered annually by ministers of the gospel and others, on the subject of slavery, so as to meet prevalent fallacies on the question, opposed to Scripture as well as humanity.”⁵⁰

From the time of George Fox in 1671 to the early 1770s, it was among the Quakers that a biblical theology on slavery developed; but it was Granville Sharp’s publications of 1776 that made a clear breakthrough in the field of anti-slavery exegesis. This gave the abolitionists a more formal biblical conceptual framework that enabled them to feel more assured that their project was endorsed by the will of God.

From the period of 1780s, the Anglican evangelicals took the lead in the further development and propagation of anti-slavery theology. Granville Sharp, himself an evangelical, had laid the foundation for this. Other Christians of the wider evangelical community also participated in contributing towards an abolitionist perspective of the biblical witness about the subject. All of this led towards a distinctive theology of emancipation that was clearly recognizable by the early part of the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

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2. Fox, “Gospel,” in *Quaker Origins*, 48.
3. Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1975), 204-205.
4. John Bell, “An Epistle to Friends,” 1741, in *Quaker Origins*, 134-135.
5. Bell, “Epistle,” 136.
6. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1966), 330-331.
7. John Woolman, “Some Consideration on the Keeping of Negroes,” 1754, in *Quaker Origins*, 151.

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12. Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God* (London: E. White & E. & C. Dilly, 1776), 3.
13. Bruns, *Am I not a Man and a Brother?* 216-217.
14. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 3.
15. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 9.
16. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 10.
17. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 14.
18. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 15.
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20. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 56.
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23. Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 62-64.
24. Granville Sharp, *The Law of Passive Obedience* (London: By the author, 1776), 26-27.
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27. Sharp, *Passive Obedience*, 34-38.
28. Sharp, *Passive Obedience*, 39.
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30. Granville Sharp, *The Law of Liberty* (London: B. White & E. & C. Dilly, 1776), 7-8.
31. Sharp, *Law of Liberty*, 6, 32.
32. Sharp, *Law of Liberty*, 33.
33. Granville Sharp, *The Law of Retribution* (London: B. White & E. & C. Dilly, 1776), 10-11.
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35. Sharp, *Retribution*, 13.
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37. Sharp, *Retribution*, 15.
38. Sharp, *Retribution*, 15.
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40. Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species, and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons, Inimical to the Laws of Moses and Gospel of Christ* (London: Wayland, 1792), 5-7.
41. *Negro Slavery, No. 13* (1824), 129.
42. Booth, 9.
43. Sharp, *Passive Obedience*, 46-47.
44. *Negro Slavery, No. 13*, 130.
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