

**THE SINFULNESS OF COLONIAL
SLAVERY: A LECTURE, DELIVERED
AT THE MONTHLY MEETING OF
CONGREGATIONAL MINISTERS
AND CHURCHES**

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The Sinfulness of Colonial Slavery: A Lecture, Delivered at the Monthly Meeting of congregational ministers and churches by Robert Halley

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ROBERT HALLEY

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THE SINFULNESS OF COLONIAL SLAVERY.

A LECTURE,

DELIVERED AT THE

MONTHLY MEETING OF CONGREGATIONAL MINISTERS
AND CHURCHES,

IN THE

MEETING-HOUSE OF DR. PYE SMITH, HACKNEY,

On February 7th, 1833.

BY ROBERT HALLEY.

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A LECTURE, &c.

“If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?”
—Proverbs xxiv. 11, 12.

THE subject proposed for consideration is the sinfulness of neglecting to promote the immediate extinction of Colonial Slavery. If slavery be an unrighteous usurpation, it is evidently the duty of all Christians, as they shall answer at the bar of God, to employ every proper means in effecting its entire abolition. The guilt of neglecting this duty is proportionate to the evil of the system. It is my intention, this morning, to show that British Colonial Slavery is so enormously criminal as to justify the application of the awful considerations of this passage to all Christians, who are not strenuously engaged in removing this weight of national guilt. If, as we are told by those more immediately interested, it is the sin, not so much of themselves as of the whole nation, then these declarations become still more awful; and a louder emphasis is given to every word, as it is addressed, not only to the negligent, but to the participants in crime. “If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?”

“God created man upright, but he hath sought out many inventions.” One of his earliest was the oppression of the feeble by the strong. No section of his race, no era of his existence, no spot of the globe on which he dwells, has been free from the infliction and the endurance of injury. When the race was a family, its peace was disturbed by the discord

of its members, and the younger son was murdered by his brother. When families became grouped into tribes, the evil principle still worked in these children of disobedience, and the love of money, or the lust of power—the conflict of interests, or the sweets of revenge—impelled to rude military, or rather marauding, expeditions, which usually ended in the plunder of tents, or the spoiling of a town. Nimrod, and Chedorlaomer, and the nine kings fighting at once in the Vale of Siddim, furnish illustrations of the early period of human society. In this state of morals may be traced the origin of slavery. Nothing was spared to the hostile tribes. The mitigations of war were of after ages. Property was plundered, and the captives were reserved for bondage; the women, too often, for sensual gratification, and the men for servile employment, in order that the victors might cultivate the arts of war, rather than submit to the toils of husbandry. A commerce in such labourers seems early to have arisen; for we find a distinction between servants bought with money, and those born in the house. Such was the state of society in the patriarchal ages, when Abram had man-servants and maid-servants which he had gotten in Haran.

To this authority an appeal has been made by the advocates of Colonial Slavery. Here they have sought their apology. We ask, is Colonial Slavery the same in principle as the servitude of the patriarchal ages? And, further, is all that was permitted to the patriarchs lawful under the Christian dispensation?

Colonial Slavery is not only different in degree, for then I admit the appeal might be sustained, but essentially distinct in principle from the servitude of the patriarchal times. I am not prepared to justify either; but, still, the former would be manifestly unjust and wicked, even were the justice of the latter to be completely vindicated. Did I refer to difference of degree or mitigation, I might inquire, what planter could reckon upon the fidelity of his slaves, and trust arms in their hands, as did Abraham, to maintain his cause in the hour of battle? Or, in what island of the Antilles is it customary for the slave to be the heir of his master, in default of children, as, among the patriarchs, Abraham expected Eliezer, his bondsman, to become the possessor of his property, and chief of his tribe? “Behold, to me thou hast given no seed; and, lo, one born in my house is my heir.”

But the distinction of right and of principle is much more important. In those early times the claim of the master was founded in the acknowledged laws of war. These might have

been unjust and immoral, inhuman and cruel. It is neither my business nor my inclination to justify war; but, still, it is essentially distinct from the practice of man-stealing. In the patriarchal age war was unquestionably tolerated, and slavery was the unavoidable result. But then each party was exposed to the danger. Every man, in hope of the spoils, put his life in jeopardy. He ventured, if he survived the day, his limbs and liberty upon the fortune of war. The understood condition of every combat was, in the words of the champion of Gath, "If ye be able to fight with me, then will we be your servants; but, if I prevail against him, then shall ye be our servants, and serve us."

When a property in man was thus established, the practice of seizing and selling the harmless and peaceable very soon commenced. The one facilitated the introduction of the other; but who cannot distinguish between the two? Is there no difference between the claim to a prisoner of war, who had attempted your life, and the title of the Midianite merchants, when they purchased Joseph, an inoffensive youth, from his brethren? Retaliation is the principle of the former; the latter is the unprovoked infliction of injury. The pure light of the gospel was necessary to discover the evil of the former, which, in the times of ignorance, God winked at, in those who had no conscience of the guilt; the iniquity of the latter, condemned even by heathen moralists, must have been detected by the feeble and obscure glimmering of the light of nature. For the former might have been pleaded the reason of self-defence, the right of reprisals, and even the humanity of sparing the life of a captive; for the latter nothing whatever could have been offered in extenuation. The mighty man of valour in that age might lead home his captives with the conqueror's song, "Blessed be the Lord, my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight;" but the reflections of the man-stealer, unless his heart were iron, must have been like those of the patriarchs, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear." There is as essential a difference between the two acts of enslaving, though the slavery were the same, as there is between the slaughter of a soldier on the field of battle, and the murder of a traveller for the sake of gold. Joshua was a man of war from his youth; but you can all distinguish him from the murderous assassin.

Colonial Slavery is the bondage, not of the warrior, but of the kidnapper and man-stealer. Were we to go back to the

infancy and earliest rudiments of the world, we could not vindicate it, even by the license of that imperfect state of morals and religion. It is not retaliation, which was then permitted, but the original and unprovoked infliction of wrong. Were we Jews, it is forbidden by Moses; were we heathens, it is condemned by the light of nature. When did the negro race attempt to enslave us or our ancestors? When did their vessels visit our shores, and their armed men burn our villages, break up our families, carry away our children, and doom them to cruel, hopeless, exhausting, interminable bondage? Do you resign your Christianity to justify slavery, by an appeal to the law of Moses, or the license of the patriarchs? Where is even that un-Christian pretext? Had we seized an Algerine corsair, and sold his crew to work the plantations, we might have appealed for our precedent to patriarchal times. But that one race—the most inoffensive, and, from its situation and character, altogether indisposed, and utterly unable even if disposed, ever to interfere with the politics of Europe,—should have become the common prey of every plunderer,—should, for ages, have its several tribes bribed and stimulated to mutual wars by a traffic with professed Christians, in order to supply the slave-markets of the world; should, though it had never lifted an arm against its oppressor, have seen its villages in ruins, its rivers and creeks infested with slave-boats, its fields stained with the blood of the wounded and defenceless, its shores watered with the salt tears of its children, torn for ever from the land of their birth and the love of their friends, and transported across the Atlantic to become an oppressed and degraded population, from Virginia to La Plata: this is the burden of Britain, the scarlet and crimson stain of Christendom, the opprobrium of our religion, the blaspheming of our God among the Gentiles. It is pure, gratuitous, unprovoked injury. What to be compared with this was ever conceded to the hardness of Jewish hearts? What equal injustice was ever tolerated in the ignorance and rudeness of the patriarchal ages? Go out of your place from Jerusalem above, the mother of us all, to Mount Sinai in Arabia, in bondage with her children; as sons of the bondwoman more than the free, consult the school-master of the infant world, in preference to Christ, the teacher of its maturer age; and, from its weak and beggarly elements learn, if you choose, your lessons of morality. Ask Moses, or even the fathers, why the negro may be excommunicated from the family of man?—why his unprovoked wrongs should remain unredressed?—why his wife and children are not his

own?—why you may claim, what the conscience and laws of a Christian people dare claim in no other child of Adam, a property and freehold in his flesh and sinews, his life and his limbs?

I have alluded to the Mosaic in connexion with the patriarchal dispensation; but, as the servitude among the Israelites is often adduced in defence of Colonial Slavery, it may require a distinct examination. Slavery was, as we have already seen, not of Moses, but of the fathers. It was a more ancient institute, which we acknowledge he permitted, but did not establish. It had become, at that time, prevalent among many nations; but, as their languages show, the general idea was, still, the service of prisoners of war rendered to the conquerors to whose clemency, or cupidity, they owed the preservation of life. As Moses permitted war, I see not how he could consistently have prohibited slavery, in an age when the exchange of prisoners was utterly unknown. The Israelites, indeed, were warriors by a divine commission. The result of their battles must have been either bondage or death. Moses tolerated the smaller evil, slavery, to prevent the greater, indiscriminate massacre. He legislated for a people intrusted to execute the commination of Noah upon the posterity of Canaan, in which some would now unwarrantably involve all the tribes of Africa.

As Judaism was in advance of the patriarchal religion, and a nearer approach to the gospel, it may assist us to inquire, whether it confirmed or mitigated, extended or restricted, the slavery of the earlier and more imperfect dispensation. It points to a purer morality; what does the indication teach us? We shall learn that the older slavery was so mitigated and limited as to ensure its speedy extinction in any particular family. I need scarcely advert to the bond-service at that time prevalent among the Israelites, in common with other Eastern nations, when the debtor was sold to meet the claims of his creditors; still less to that enacted by the criminal code as the punishment of offences; for these have but little connexion with our present inquiry. It is sufficient to observe, that the law so jealously guarded personal liberty, and reckoned its loss so severe a penalty, that, even in these cases of debt and of crime, slavery was abolished every seventh year. And if a servant, allured by the kindness of a wealthy and generous master, refused to go free, he was obliged to submit to a painful and degrading operation, and bear the reproach of his class—the stigma of a man, who, servile in spirit more than in condition, had pusillanimously surrendered the dignity of his