

**John Woolman, Anthony Benezet and Diversity in Quaker Antislavery Views**  
**by Jon R. Kershner**  
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Thanks for inviting me to be part of the Woolman Memorial Association lecture series in this, its 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary.

Today I would like to talk about the diversity within eighteenth century Quaker antislavery views as represented in John Woolman and Anthony Benezet.

**[Slide: Slavery]**

Before we dig into antislavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, I can't help but mention that slavery isn't just a tragedy of history, it is a tragedy of the world today.

- There are approximately 60,000 slaves in the US, and 29.8 million slaves worldwide.
  - By slaves, I mean forced laborers, forced prostitutes, child soldiers, child brides in forced marriages, and chattel slaves in the servitude of absolute ownership.
  - Of the total slaves worldwide, about 78% are engaged in forced labor and 22% are trapped in forced prostitution.

There are more people in slavery today than at any other time in history.

**[Slide:Freetheslaves.net]**

If you are interested in learning more about this subject, you can check out [freetheslaves.net](http://freetheslaves.net).

When we look at 18<sup>th</sup> century antislavery, we can't do it with a purely passive, non-chelant approach. We must be willing to learn from these early voices of years gone by, to help us construct effective and powerful ways to respond to slavery today.

Let's keep the ongoing story of slavery in the back of our minds as we think about how one religious group struggled to end slavery in their midst.

**[slide:quakers and slavery]**

For much of the eighteenth century, slavery was about as prevalent among Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Quakers as it was in the population as a whole. At 1750, Philadelphia had a population of about 15,000, and about 10% of those people were either slaves or free blacks. At about that time, Philadelphia Quakers were 9.9% of the

city population while accounting for 10.4% of the city's slave-owners (Marietta 115-116). For many reform-minded Quakers, slavery was symbolic of Quaker degeneracies, of how Pennsylvania had not lived up to their vision for Penn's "Holy Experiment." When at the middle of the eighteenth century a group of young leaders joined with an existing antislavery minority, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting became fertile ground for the proliferation of antislavery thought.

[slide: Woolman and Benezet]

## Woolman and Benezet

Colonial New Jersey tailor and traveling minister John Woolman (1720-1772), and his contemporary from Philadelphia, Anthony Benezet (1713-1784), are perhaps the two Quakers most often associated with the Quaker antislavery efforts of the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> According to George S. Brookes, Woolman and Benezet were "intimate friends."<sup>2</sup> Even a brief survey of their influence upon each other is remarkable for illustrating the way antislavery arguments gained traction through repetition. The second edition of Benezet's antislavery essay, *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*, published in 1759, opened with Woolman's introduction to his 1754 essay, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Woolman's *Considerations on Keeping Negroes, Part Second*, published in 1762, imitates Benezet's essay by quoting material from traveler's accounts of Africa, including two quotations nearly identical to Benezet's essay.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the important 1754 *An Epistle of Caution and Advice concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves*, Woolman and Benezet worked so closely together that the actual authorship of the epistle remains a matter of scholarly debate. Philadelphia

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1 As evidence of their centrality to Quaker antislavery in the second half of the eighteenth century, see: Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Thomas Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008); Irv Brendlinger, *To Be Silent... Would Be Criminal: The Antislavery Influence and Writings of Anthony Benezet* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007); Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Jonathan Sassi, "Africans in the Quaker Image: Anthony Benezet, African Travel Narratives, and Revolutionary-Era Antislavery," *Journal of Early Modern History* 10, no. 1-2 (2006): 95-130; Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1751* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

2 George Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937), 236.

3 Brendlinger, *To Be Silent... Would Be Criminal*, 30; Carey, *From Peace to Freedom*, 211; Anthony Benezet, *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*, 2nd ed. (Germantown, PA: 1760).

4 Brendlinger, *To Be Silent... Would Be Criminal*, 30; John Woolman, "Considerations on Keeping Negroes; Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination; Part Second," in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton (Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 224, 228-229, 230-231; Benezet, *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*.

Yearly Meeting printed the *Epistle of Caution and Advice*. The epistle was the first official document to challenge slavery. Benezet originally brought the *Epistle of Caution and Advice* forward for review by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.<sup>5</sup> Though there seems to be no evidence to substantiate the claim, many scholars assert Woolman's authorship.<sup>6</sup> Benezet scholar, Irv Brendlinger, splits the difference by stating that the *Epistle of Caution and Advice* "is probably the work of Benezet; however, it reflects the spirit and cooperation of both."<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the only image thought to be of Woolman is most probably the image of Benezet. The image graces the inside cover of Amelia Mott Gummere's 1922 *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*. Gummere claims that this image is "almost certainly" that of Woolman. The original sepia drawing that the silhouette was made from depicts a dark haired man sitting in a wooden chair, his right hand stuffed into his coat, and pinched between his thumb and index finger in his left hand is a medal of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Association, which was founded in 1787 by Thomas Clarkson. Nowhere on the original image is mentioned the name of the depicted subject. Gummere speculated that the subject is John Woolman based on the conjecture of a late-19th and early-20th century owner of the image.<sup>8</sup>

Countering Gummere, Janet Whitney claimed that the elderly man in the picture was Benezet because he died at a more advanced age, while Woolman died in middle age; moreover, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Association was founded fifteen years after Woolman's death so it seemed unlikely that an artist would draw a picture of Woolman from memory some fifteen plus years after he had died, especially since Benezet was a known influence on Clarkson and so could rightly be associated with the Anti-Slavery Association. It is safe to say that in the eyes of many these two 18th century antislavery advocates are linked together.

Despite their friendship and common cause, Woolman and Benezet are strikingly different in their antislavery motivations and methods.<sup>9</sup> I contend that Woolman and Benezet emphasized differing perspectives on the best means of antislavery discourse, and that their work was motivated by complementary but distinct convictions of God's will.

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5 Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 27 fn. 28.

6 For a history of the contested attribution, see: Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, 256 en. 54; Brendlinger, *To Be Silent... Would Be Criminal*, 30 fn. 83.

7 Brendlinger, *To Be Silent... Would Be Criminal*, 30.

8 Robert Smith III, *Portrait of John Woolman*, water color, n.d., Haverford College Library, Special Collections; Amelia M. Gummere, ed., *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Macmillan company, 1922).

9 For example, Woolman never maintained the transatlantic antislavery correspondence that Benezet did. Brendlinger, *To Be Silent... Would Be Criminal*, chapter 4.

**[slide: Woolman's notes]**

Today I want to conduct a careful and close reading of a little studied, hand-written document in which Woolman took notes and wrote commentary on Benezet's 1766 pamphlet, *A Caution and a Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies*. Woolman's notes and commentary on Benezet's essay allow us to see what pieces of Benezet's antislavery rhetoric Woolman believed to be most important, and how Woolman appropriated Benezet's material to suit his own purposes, and, so, highlights the diversity of perspectives among 18th century antislavery proponents.<sup>10</sup>

In placing the focus of this talk on Woolman's notes and Benezet's essay, I narrow the focus of research to a particular intertextual conversation at a particular time. By "intertextual" I mean to describe the way Woolman's reading of Benezet's pamphlet was more than a mere reproduction. Rather, he added his own commentary to Benezet's material. His notes demonstrate the selective way material was synthesized so that multiple antislavery perspectives could form a dynamic thought environment.

**[slide: Overview of differences]**

By comparing the text of *A Caution and a Warning to Great Britain* with Woolman's notes and commentary on it,<sup>11</sup> this paper shows, firstly, that Benezet adapted antislavery discourse to a wider audience more readily than Woolman through both secular<sup>12</sup> and religious rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> And secondly, Benezet framed his antislavery arguments by appealing to sentimentalism,<sup>14</sup> and natural rights. Sentimentalism refers to the way feelings and emotion could show a person how to be moral. However, Woolman spiritualized and adjusted Benezet's antislavery arguments according to his understanding of God's universal will. As a result, Woolman's reading of Benezet indicates that his antislavery motivations were ultimately spiritually-centered, which represents an important distinction between the two men. Whereas Benezet presented a

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10 Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, 180–181.

11 Sandra Holton and Robert Holton, "From the Particular to the Global: Some Empirical, Epistemological and Methodological Aspects of Microhistory with Regard to a Women's Rights Network," in *Performing Global Networks*, eds. Karen Fricker and Ronit Lentin (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 10; Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 99; Edward Muir, "Observing Trifles," in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, eds. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, trans. by Even Branch (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), vii – xxvii.

12 By "secular" I mean antislavery arguments that do not necessitate religion but are established based on observations of human nature.

13 Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 32; Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 397.

14 By "sentimentalism" I mean to describe the way feelings and emotions could show one how to be moral and illumine truth.

multifaceted religious and philosophical argument, Woolman's private notes demonstrate a largely spiritual and theological antislavery rationale in which slavery was wrong because it violated the divine command. In Woolman's antislavery theology, what made slavery wrong was primarily that it disobeyed God's instructions for human affairs and it rejected his vision of Jesus Christ ruling society directly through the inward landscape.

I will first describe Benezet's argument in *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, paying particular attention to his use of sentimental language, Enlightenment arguments and religious arguments. Afterwards, I will examine Woolman's notes and commentaries on Benezet's pamphlet, particularly those places where Woolman ignored or adjusted Benezet's arguments.

[slide: *A Caution and Warning*]

## ***A Caution and Warning to Great Britain***

Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies* was addressed to British politicians.<sup>15</sup> To make sure that members of Parliament were exposed to Benezet's essay Philadelphia and London Yearly Meetings printed thousands of this 35 page pamphlet and delivered a copy to each member of Parliament and over 100 London merchant houses.<sup>16</sup> Copies of the pamphlet were sent to Quaker meetings on both sides of the Atlantic, including Woolman's own Burlington Meeting.<sup>17</sup>

Benezet's aim in *A Caution and a Warning to Great Britain* was to expose the iniquity of the slave trade.<sup>18</sup> He noted that language of "rights and liberties" were popular in the British Atlantic culture, and yet thousands of Africans were enslaved<sup>19</sup> though they were both "free as ourselves by nature," and equally "under Christ's redeeming grace."<sup>20</sup> In other words, neither philosophy nor religion could justify slavery.<sup>21</sup> Both the philosophical argument and the religious argument were couched in sentimental language.

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15 Anthony Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies in a Short Representation of the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions: Collected from Various Authors, and Submitted to the Serious Consideration of All, More Especially of Those in Power* (Philadelphia, PA: Printed by Henry Miller, in Second-Street., 1766).

16 Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, 180; Brown, *Moral capital*, 401–402.

17 Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom*, 180.

18 Anthony Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies*, 3.

19 David Brion Davis has noted the "irony of slaveholders fighting for the natural rights of humans" in the revolutionary era and how antislavery rhetoric utilized a vision of America as a place of liberty. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–4.

20 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 3.

21 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 3.

Benezet wrapped his arguments in an appeal to human decency and sentimentality, a rhetorical strategy that would prove important to the antislavery cause and that Benezet used to great effect. I suggest that the language of sentimentalism humanized African suffering in ways the British could understand because it contextualized antislavery discourse within the existing "language of the moral marketplace."<sup>22</sup> To our contemporary ears, it might seem manipulative to use the emotionally evocative language of sentimentalism as a tool of persuasion. In the eighteenth century, though, emotional appeals and sentimentalism were important ways to identify moral action. For example, Benezet demonstrated how egregious the slave's suffering was, describing "the groans, the dying groans, which daily ascend to God, the common Father of mankind, from the broken hearts of those his deeply oppressed creatures."<sup>23</sup> The slave-trade, Benezet argued was incompatible with "every common sentiment of humanity."<sup>24</sup> Even many pro-slavery advocates acknowledged the humanity, if not the equality, of Africans.<sup>25</sup> Benezet's descriptions of torture, African families torn apart, and of Africans branded and treated as "beasts"<sup>26</sup> confronted British readers with acts of inhumanity that challenged the values Britons desired to claim for themselves. By describing in detail the hardship and suffering of the slaves, Benezet sought to arouse British emotions. He contrasted the hardened disregard of the slave-trader with the weeping of the Africans:

**[slide: weeping]**

"In this melancholy scene mothers are seen hanging over their daughters, bedewing their naked breasts with tears, and daughters clinging to their parents; not knowing what new stage of distress must follow their separation; or if ever they shall meet again..."<sup>27</sup>

Here Benezet pleads with his readers to act with compassion on behalf of the Africans, whose humanity had been disregarded and whose liberties were unjustly deprived them: "Can any human heart, that retains a fellow-feeling for the

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22 Philip Gould contends that sentimentalism was necessary, even if it derived from less than ideal motivations:

Many scholars have viewed sentimentalism in antislavery writing with suspicion, as though it either hid economic self-interests or drew attention to British and American capacities for enlightened feeling in and of itself. But sentiment played a crucial rhetorical role in configuring the enlightened commercial capitalism that the African slave trade endangered. Antislavery depended upon the syncretic language of the moral market.

Gould, *Barbaric Traffic*, 25.

23 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 4.

24 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 5.

25 Young Hwi Yoon, "The Spread of Antislavery Sentiment through Proslavery Tracts in the Transatlantic Evangelical Community, 1740s-1770s," *Church History* 81, no. 2 (June 2012): 364–365.

26 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 19–20.

27 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 22.

sufferings of mankind, be unconcerned at relations of such grievous affliction...?"<sup>28</sup> Historian David Brion Davis has argued that the rise of antislavery in the 18th century owed a great deal to the "cultivation of sensibility" as "human happiness [and the human] capacity for feeling lost its subjective, private character, and became a basis for social communication and consensus."<sup>29</sup>

The cultural trend toward valuing sensibility and sentimentalism as a corporate moral language explains why it was so effective as an antislavery rhetorical strategy. Slavery, unlike other forms of forced restraint, "was not occasioned by sin or necessity. It was wholly undeserved."<sup>30</sup> The horrific scenes Benezet described were poignant because they solicited emotions universal to the human condition. The care of a parent for a child, the distress of being torn apart from loved ones, and the prospect of having no legal recourse for protection from the will of hardened criminals. These images portrayed slavery as a nightmarish disintegration of the foundations of society.<sup>31</sup> The innocence of the Africans "corresponded psychologically, with the natural and spontaneous impulses of [the reader]."<sup>32</sup>

Recent work on social–protest movements has suggested that “the emotions most directly related to moral sensibilities”, such as shame, guilt, moral outrage and the joy of imagining a better world, are powerful motivators of action.<sup>33</sup> This sentimentalism ran throughout Benezet's philosophical and religious arguments. Sentimentalism presented a motivation for antislavery action on British terms, in a way familiar to those involved with the publicly debated issues of British society such as the emerging public debates concerning the relationship of the American colonies to the British crown.<sup>34</sup>

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28 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 22.

29 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 363.

30 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 363.

31 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 22.

32 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 363.

33 John Coffee has recently noted that:

The historical literature has rarely accorded sufficient importance to the emotional texture of British abolitionist piety. Yet recent work on social–protest movements has suggested that ‘the emotions most directly related to moral sensibilities’, such as shame, guilt, moral outrage and the joy of imagining a better world, are ‘especially pervasive as motivators of action’.

John Coffey, “‘Tremble, Britania!’: Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” *English Historical Review* 77, no. 527 (August 2012): 877.

34 There were, of course, a variety of ways for citizens to make remonstrance to parliament. However, the year before Benezet's essay was published, 1765, American Founding Father and Quaker sympathizer John Dickinson utilized sentimental language in protest of the Stamp Act:

What man who wishes the welfare of *America*, can view without pity, without passion, her restricted and almost stagnated trade, with its numerous trains of evils -- taxes torn from her without her consent -- Her legislative assemblies, the principal pillars of her liberty, crushed into insignificance --- A formidable force established in the midst of peace, to bleed her into obedience -- The sacred right of trial by jury, violated by the erection of arbitrary and unconstitutional jurisdictions -- and general poverty, discontent and despondence stretching themselves over his unoffending country?

**[slide: “natural rights”]**

Additionally, Benezet utilized the philosophical arguments of "natural rights" and the consent of the governed, demonstrating the unsupportable foundation on which slavery stood. Benezet challenged the compatibility of enlightened civilization<sup>35</sup> and a slave-trading society.<sup>36</sup> Benezet engaged Enlightenment writers to show how inconsistent slavery was with British values. Benezet considered the slave-trade a practice "so opposite to the apprehensions Englishmen have always had of what natural justices requires." The slave-trade, then, was antithetical to what it meant to be British and contrary to Britain's own standards for herself. He implied that if Britons only acted in accord with their own ideals, the slave-trade would not be allowed to continue. Benezet quoted Scottish jurist, George Wallace and Scotch-Irish philosopher Francis Hutchinson, to much the same point: Liberty is inherent to a person by nature and therefore no authority can deprive a person of it.<sup>37</sup> It is an affront to the principles of civilization, Benezet implied, that a practice of methodically depriving a race of people what is theirs by nature had become so prevalent:

**[slide: true character?]**

Britons boast themselves to be a generous, humane people, who have a true sense of the importance of Liberty; but is this a true character, whilst that barbarous, savage Slave-Trade, with all its attendant horrors, receives countenance and protection from the Legislature, whereby so many

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I am not suggesting that Benezet was familiar with Dickinson's pamphlet, though it is possible, nor am I contending that Benezet's antislavery arose out-of-the-blue from nothing but the public discourse of his day. However, the rhetoric surrounding the Stamp Act was readily available to Benezet, all he needed to do was change the application. In particular, in *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, Benezet would apply to the case of the slave the rhetoric here applied to colonists. It would be the African that had not given consent to be enslaved, whose natural rights and liberty had been stolen, and who had suffered cruelly the greatest acts of inhumanity. Instead of Dickinson's appeal to British parliamentarians to make an unbiased, rational and objective judgment on behalf of the sufferings of colonial Americans, Benezet would make the same appeal on behalf of the enslaved. Benezet added to these lines of argumentation a spiritual theme most fully expressed in a judicial providentialism that warned Britons of future consequences for their national iniquity. The sentimentalism of Dickinson's appeal distinguishes his pamphlet from that of others, but none-the-less demonstrates that this method of sentimental political petitioning was circulating at the time of Benezet's pamphlet. Jane Calvert, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 210; John Dickinson, *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered, in a Letter from a Gentleman in Philadelphia to his Friend in London. [Two lines in Latin]*, Philadelphia, M.DCC.LXV. [1765].

35 Philip Morgan has shown that appeals to the enlightenment could cut both for and against antislavery positions. While Benezet employs the enlightenment in ways that were unambiguously favorable to his position - as anachronistic and contrary to the laws of nature - it was also used to support scientific theories that undermined biblical concepts of the unity of humanity, thus portending an inequality among races. Philip Morgan, "Slavery," ed. Alan Charles Kors, *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 1–2, The Open University, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t173.e667>.

36 Gould, *Barbaric Traffic*, 4.

37 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 23-24.

thousand lives are yearly sacrificed.<sup>38</sup>

Benezet sought to make antislavery views the "litmus test" of Enlightenment ideals. His pamphlet was delivered to the very legislators he criticized, at a time when colonists were challenging the authority of the empire and asserting their right of self-determination. Thus, he inserted his antislavery argument into the public forum. However, this was not an abstract and detached discussion of rights for Benezet. Indeed, by coupling the religious argument to the philosophical, Benezet imbued the discussion with the specter of divine vengeance in a way that made it plain no one could remain apathetic.

**[slide: religious argument]**

The religious argument in *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain* is best described in terms of judicial providentialism, "the belief that God rewarded or punished nations according to their moral character and actions."<sup>39</sup> Benezet's pamphlet demonstrates a strong desire to avert divine retribution. Through the language of "iniquity," "guilt," divine "judgments," and "trembling" before God, Benezet made central to his argument the idea of national punishments for corporate sins.<sup>40</sup> While due importance must be given to Benezet's use of philosophical rhetoric,<sup>41</sup> he never-the-less returned again and again to religious arguments of sin and divine justice: "when the cup of iniquity is full, must not the inevitable consequence be pouring forth of the judgments of God...?"<sup>42</sup> The "iniquity" of slavery was mounting, Benezet thought, and soon God's wrath would break forth. In fact, God's judgments had already begun to be felt. Rather than progressing as a civilization the colonies, he thought, experienced a "depravation of manners."<sup>43</sup> The whole nation was under the threat of divine wrath for allowing slavery to continue.<sup>44</sup>

**[slide: judgment]**

Do we indeed believe the truths declared in the gospel? Are we persuaded that the threatenings, as well as the promises therein contained, will have their accomplishment? If indeed we do, must we not tremble to think what a load of guilt lies upon our Nation generally and individually, so far as we in

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38 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 32–33.

39 Coffey, "Tremble, Britania!", 849.

40 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 9–10, 33. See also: Coffey, "Tremble, Britania!", 846.

41 Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard*, xiii.

42 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 9–10.

43 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 9–10.

44 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 9–10.

any degree abet or countenance this aggravated iniquity?<sup>45</sup>

This passage encapsulated the providentialist argument.<sup>46</sup> By "abet[ting]" slavery, the British were negatively influencing the way God would treat them.

The religious argument Benezet presented was just as focused on redeeming and saving the British, who were in a precarious position before God, as it was on saving Africans from British "iniquity".<sup>47</sup> Scholars have rightfully identified Benezet's humanitarianism and debt to Enlightenment sources and arguments,<sup>48</sup> however alongside this was a religious language of wrath, punishment, and national iniquity. The slave-trade not only hindered the progress of civilization and deprived human beings of liberty, it was an incontrovertible sin that was already bringing forth God's judgment. We would like to think that antislavery spread because people were awakened in love toward people of African descent, rather than that they were only wanting to save themselves from judgment. I think that Benezet was motivated by a sense of compassion for the enslaved and a strong conviction of the equality of all people and races, but he had an astute understanding of human nature and knew how to motivate people to make changes. What might start out as a concern to save the British from divine wrath, and save Africans from slavery even if for less than pure motives, could become a building block in which the sacred worth and dignity of all people would be recognized.

This was a summary of the main themes of Benezet's essay. Now I want to turn to look at Woolman's reflections on them.

[slide: Woolman's notes and commentaries]

### ***Woolman's Notes and Commentary on A Caution and Warning to Great Britain***

Woolman often scribbled notes on various subjects,<sup>49</sup> but his treatment of Benezet's *A Caution and Warning* was longer and more careful than most of the other unpublished notes that are found among his manuscripts.<sup>50</sup> In his notes on Benezet's

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45 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 33.

46 Coffey, "Tremble, Britania!", 852.

47 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 34.

48 Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard*, xii.

49 For example, see the aphorisms in his Ledger. John Woolman, "John Woolman's 1753 Ledger Book" (Woolman Collection, Case 20, Box 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, n.d.).

50 Woolman's handwritten notes and commentary on *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain* are found back-to-front in Manuscript A of Woolman's *Journal*, held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania but recently published in James Proud's collection of Woolman's lesser known works, *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth*. For ease of reference I use Proud's edition of Woolman's notes. However, Proud made several errors in transcription and those errors are corrected

pamphlet, Woolman copied paragraphs from a page or range of pages, and then would make several paragraphs of commentary based on the copied material he had just made. Then Woolman would move to another page and repeat the process of copying, and then making commentaries based on his own reflections. Woolman copied pages out of order, so perhaps he read the essay through first and then went back to make notes based on his recollection of important points.

**[slide: subdued sentimentalism]**

In a less graphic, more subdued sentimentalism than Benezet's, Woolman described how "moving" and "sorrowful" the separation of families would be.<sup>51</sup> However, Woolman built on Benezet's material by adding analogies of his own. After describing the poor conditions on slave vessels, Woolman added:

"In sickness we have need of help from sympathizing friends, but how calamitous is the case of these people when sickness thus breaks out among them..."<sup>52</sup>

Without making specific reference to it, Woolman repeatedly implied the logic of the Golden Rule, thereby returning the sentimental descriptions presented in Benezet to more explicitly traditional Quaker rhetoric.<sup>53</sup>

"Did we labor in the heat till our weakly natures called for rest, and received not only a denial at the time of those calls, but chastisement for being dilatory, with what pain of mind should we reflect on this treatment..."<sup>54</sup>

Woolman believed that the Golden Rule was a means through which God's will for human affairs would be accomplished, including the creation of a society organized around social equality, subsistence farming and moderate labor.<sup>55</sup> Slavery was the opposite of this social vision because slavery was built on oppression and so demonstrated a rejection of God's intent. However, by placing one's self in the situation of the slave, that is, by imaginatively entering the Golden Rule in specific scenarios of suffering, Woolman did more than just present a sentimental image but related it to British circumstances in an applicable way. Woolman here implied it was the heart, not

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when used in this paper. John Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," in *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth: The Journalist's Essays, Epistles, and Ephemera*, ed. James Proud (San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2010), 93–101; John Woolman, "Journal Folio A", n.d., Woolman Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

51 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 95.

52 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 95.

53 For an analysis of the use of the Golden Rule in Quaker antislavery, see: Carey, *From Peace to Freedom*.

54 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 97-98

55 Jon Kershner, "'The Government of Christ': John Woolman's (1720-1772) Apocalyptic Theology," (Ph. D. Thesis, University of Birmingham), Forthcoming.

the mind, which would respond to the antislavery cause. The sentimental language Benezet had used to evoke a morally enlightened response to slavery, Woolman used to enhance the meaning of the Golden Rule.

**[slide: inward transformation]**

For Woolman, the solution to the problem of slavery was not to petition parliament for a better application of laws as it was for Benezet.<sup>56</sup> Rather, he called people to the inward landscape: what he described as "an inward experience of the sanctifying power of Christ, of that faith which works by love to the purifying of the heart."<sup>57</sup> It was in a spiritual experience of transformation that slavery would be eradicated and the perfect world God intended would be established on earth.<sup>58</sup>

It is on the religious front, particularly seen in judicial providentialism, that Woolman most concurred with Benezet. Noting that slavery stood on "a foundation laid in violence," Woolman said that Britons must be strengthened by God to endure "self-denial" if they were to return "as a nation from a revolt so grievous."<sup>59</sup> Because the British had become dependent as a society on slave labor, Woolman said, there was no easy way out. Yet, it was urgent and incumbent upon them to eliminate the practice, because in Woolman's estimation, the British people already stood in a state of rebellion before God.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, repeating a phrase from Benezet's pamphlet, Woolman warns that the "dying groans" of the slaves were ascending to God who cared for all of his creatures equally.<sup>61</sup> Like Benezet, Woolman believed that continuing in the practice of slavery was heaping up iniquity on the British national soul, and God's justice would eventually visit them.<sup>62</sup>

**[slide: JW's appropriation of AB]**

In one of his later and lesser known essays, Woolman described the spiritual degeneracy he saw in the world around him and, especially, in the imperial British economy. He called the machinations of the economy, "Babylon," a reference to the way

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56 Henry Cadbury, *John Woolman in England a Documentary Supplement* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1971), 116.

57 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 97.

58 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 96.

59 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 100.

60 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 100.

61 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 96; cf. Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 4.

62 John Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind", 1770, Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library; John Woolman, "Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How it is to be Maintained," in *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Amelia M. Gummere (New York: Macmillan Company, 1922), 458; Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 31.

the Apostle John used the term “Babylon” to describe the apostasy of Rome in the biblical book of Revelation. Woolman claimed that the violence and evil committed by Britons in the slave trade was a stain on British society. Next to this passage, Woolman made a key that referenced a note at the bottom of the page: "See 'A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies' page 31." There Benezet mentions that nearly 30,000 Africans die each year in the slave trade. Benezet's description of the trade and the passage to America stood out in Woolman's mind and led him to similar conclusions as it did Benezet: there was blood on British hands, and it was an affront to God. As in Benezet's case, the sense here is one of impending doom for the British if they do not repent. While the reference to Benezet's pamphlet did not make it into the printed essay, it is clear that Woolman and Benezet were both convinced that the British had placed themselves in a precarious spot before God, and that only by acting to purify the nation from slavery was there any hope of staying divine wrath. Moreover, this little note in the margins of Woolman's essay shows that antislavery writers influenced each other in ways that might not be apparent from the published texts.

However, whereas Benezet described the negative effects the slave-trade had on society in terms of social degeneracies and insensitivity to God and one's own feelings,<sup>63</sup> Woolman described a "revolt" in which God's laws were trespassed.<sup>64</sup> Woolman's objection to slavery was not that it brought about a disintegration of civilization, as it was for Benezet, but that it was apostasy. God's will was right because it was God's will, regardless of all other factors, and to contradict it was open rebellion and would bring about divine wrath. This nuance is important, because it shows what, exactly, it was about slavery that Woolman and Benezet believed caused judgment.

**[slide: ignores philosophical rationale]**

Woolman ignored Benezet's references to philosophical arguments, which suggests a differing perspective from Benezet's on the nature of appropriate antislavery discourse as well as a disagreement about the underlying motivations for antislavery concerns. Woolman spiritualized Benezet's antislavery argument not only by emphasizing the religious aspects of his pamphlet, but by suggesting that human desires and social structures could be transformed by God in a way that recreated society according to God's will:

"through the tender mercies of my heavenly Father I have learned this, that the more we are redeemed from selfishness, and brought into that love in which there is no respecter of persons, the more we are prepared to desire

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63 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 9–10.

64 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 100.

and labor for universal harmony among our fellow-creatures."<sup>65</sup>

Here Woolman's vision transcended the limits of the British empire and sought a perfected society, a new world, one "redeemed from selfishness, and brought into that love in which there is no respecter of persons."<sup>66</sup> The idea of a transformed society is typical of Woolman,<sup>67</sup> but this idea is not found in this form in Benezet's pamphlet. Woolman did not read Benezet's pamphlet passively. While the material Woolman encountered led him to new antislavery sources, he also brought his own ideas to Benezet's material. Thus, his notes demonstrate the way divergent views were melded together and appropriated in original ways.

Moreover, Woolman adjusted Benezet's secular and philosophical arguments to suit his own understanding of the grounds of antislavery. Whereas Benezet quoted Enlightenment thinkers to demonstrate on secular grounds that the African had, by nature, the right of self-determination and must freely offer consent to be governed,<sup>68</sup> Woolman adjusted the secular argument to make it a religious one. Woolman reflected that "the nature of slave-keeping [was] like that of an absolute government where one man not perfect in wisdom and goodness gives laws to others."<sup>69</sup> However, for Woolman the problem with "absolute government" did not originate in republican ideals. Instead, human "absolute government" was a "snare" that usurped the role that belonged to God, "to whom all men are equally accountable."<sup>70</sup> In other words, God alone had authority to rule over the person and all people were subject to God's governance. What Benezet had used as a philosophical argument of natural rights, Woolman changed to reflect a spiritual state, what he elsewhere called "the government of Christ."<sup>71</sup>

[slide: conclusion]

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in his use of sentimental rhetoric, Benezet identified the antislavery cause with the upward sweep of history, progress, and the advancement of human happiness and civilization. Woolman resonated with the sentimental language and

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65 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 96; Woolman, "Journal Folio A." Bracketed portions were transcribed incorrectly in Proud and here returned to Woolman's original.

66 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 96; Woolman, "Journal Folio A." Bracketed portions were transcribed incorrectly in Proud and here returned to Woolman's original.

67 See: Kershner, "The Government of Christ," Forthcoming.

68 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 23–24.

69 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 99.

70 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 100.

71 Phillips P. Moulton, ed., *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, 1st ed. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 174.

descriptions of suffering Benezet presented, but his reading of them was different from Benezet's intention. Where Benezet's sentimentalism, at times, appealed to both secular and religious concerns, depicting the suffering of Africans as a crime against humanity itself, Woolman's notes reflect a sentimentalism based wholly on religious grounds. When Woolman read Benezet, he did so in a way that supported his own theology in which slavery was wrong because it violated God's will. Slavery, Woolman argued, was opposite "the pure undefiled religion of Jesus Christ in which oppression has no [place]." <sup>72</sup> The suffering of Africans was a clear indication that the Golden Rule had been violated, and thus God's universal dictates for social harmony had been rejected.

However, Woolman neglected Benezet's philosophical aims. Woolman appropriated Benezet's material in a piece-meal fashion according to his perceptions of the degeneracies of slavery and his understanding of why slavery was wrong. Woolman read Benezet's essay in a way that reinforced his theological concerns for the transformation of society and the divine creation of a new social ethic beyond what was possible through political petitioning alone. This point represents a significant difference between Benezet's and Woolman's antislavery motivations.

Benezet's coupling of philosophical and religious arguments was an important contribution to antislavery rhetoric. <sup>73</sup> Likewise, Benezet brought new sources into the antislavery discourse by quoting from travelers and missionaries, whose descriptions of Africa repudiated self-serving claims that Africans were better off under white slave-masters. <sup>74</sup> However, Woolman read Benezet selectively: not once did he quote or reflect on Benezet's philosophical arguments and sources, even though they evidenced one of Benezet's chief aims in writing the essay. Woolman focused on one of Benezet's main aims in this essay, the spiritual equality of Africans before God, but he neglected the reasoned tone of natural religion. <sup>75</sup> Benezet's religious argument was based on the benefits or consequences that would befall society based on their treatment of Africans. <sup>76</sup> In contrast, Woolman emphasized how the disregard of African equality was to ignore God's character, "who in his own time will be a refuge for the oppressed." <sup>77</sup>

Woolman's approach to anti-slavery literature borrowed from Benezet in the 1760s, especially Woolman's *Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes, Part Second*, shows considerable influence from Benezet. However, Woolman was mostly focused on

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72 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 101.

73 Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard*, 32; Brendlinger, *To be Silent... Would be Criminal*, 17.

74 Brendlinger, *To be Silent... Would be Criminal*, 17.

75 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 26.

76 Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, 17, 22, 34.

77 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*," 97.

religious arguments.<sup>78</sup> As Woolman's careful reading of *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain* demonstrates, it is clear that he was aware of more enlightenment language and insight than he let on in his own writings.<sup>79</sup> That he did not use it more thoroughly suggests that for whatever reason - whether religious or intellectual - enlightenment philosophy and natural religion were not an essential part of Woolman's antislavery rationale.

Woolman's reading of Benezet illustrates the considerable latitude in motivation and method that existed within that Quaker antislavery tradition and the way the tradition itself was appropriated and emphasized in a variety of ways according to one's own inclinations. The diversity of antislavery motivations between Woolman and Benezet show how complex and dynamic antislavery rationale was in the mid-eighteenth century. It also shows how key Quaker leaders, who partnered together on the same issues, nonetheless maintained theological and philosophical individuality. Woolman and Benezet supported antislavery in different ways, and they had their own reasons for their involvement. Benezet's pamphlet wove together philosophical and religious arguments that would have broad appeal. Woolman's selective attention to the religious arguments in the pamphlet suggests that Benezet was successful in appealing to a wide readership. Woolman's reading also illumines a significant difference between these two important antislavery advocates, in that the broadness of Benezet's approach was matched by the specific theological focus of Woolman's reading of Benezet. Woolman's notes and commentaries on *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*, then, are a window into the diversity of late-eighteenth century antislavery opinions and into the way the circulation of ideas led to the expansion of antislavery rhetoric into religious and philosophical spheres.

I want to close this look at Benezet and Woolman with some thoughts about slavery today. Slavery is invisible. Many people have no idea that slavery is prevalent and that just about every one of us is implicated in it. Because slavery is invisible, the sparse stories from survivors can be easily ignored and their validity questioned. The power of sentimentalism as seen in Woolman and Benezet suggests that it is important to publish the stories of modern day slaves, to get their stories and to describe the turmoil

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78 Woolman used Enlightenment ideas inconsistently throughout his writings, and appears to have used it against slavery mostly for strategic purposes. For example, Woolman wrote that it was hypocritical "to suppose it right that an innocent man shall at this day be excluded from the common rules of justice, be deprived of that liberty which is the natural right of human creatures..." However, little such language makes it into his *Journal* or other issue-specific essays. J. William Frost has identified Woolman's inconsistent use of Enlightenment language, which suggests Woolman used it selectively and for a purpose. John Woolman, "Considerations on Keeping Negroes; Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination; Part Second," in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 214; J. William Frost, "John Woolman and the Enlightenment," in *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman*, ed. Mike Heller. (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2003), 185.

79 Woolman, "Notes and commentaries on A. Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain*."

and anguish they experience.

The multiple rationales seen in Benezet and Woolman suggest that using a diversity of approaches to attack modern day slavery is the best way to create fertile ground for the development of antislavery thought. Moreover, people of different theological convictions, like Woolman and Benezet, can learn from each other and should consider themselves as part of the same cause despite their differences. I might call this an Open Source Antislavery, in which ideas, sources of information, spiritual convictions and rhetoric flow freely among authors and activists for the purpose of a continual refinement of effective arguments and their development.

With Benezet and Woolman, I think we all can look forward to the day when humanity is employed in the business of liberation and care for those whose rights have been unjustly deprived them.