

Humanitarian Causes



Benjamin Rush

Alongside the discussions of breaking ties with England, the debate regarding slavery was intense during the late Eighteenth Century.

Abolitionists such as Benjamin Rush published frequent essays on the subject, debating the existence of the slave market and the need for slave labor in the southern plantain colonies.

- One of Rush's popular anti-slavery essays appeared in a public document; Wheatley would have been aware of the publication.
- One of the major points in this essay, contrary to pro-slavery allegations, was the necessity of educating the "negro race."
- Rush is quick to defend the notions of the African intellect within the opening paragraphs of the document.

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“An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America,
Upon Slave-Keeping”

- the opening of the essay starts by jumping into the current debate; Rush states he will not detail the histories of the industry, rather he will be countering the material used in defense of the selling of Africans for labor. He also depicts the slaves in a strong *humanistic* manner—he is promoting the Africans as a group of people with a conscious social attitude, with families and functioning societies.

And here I need hardly say anything in favor of the intellects of the Negroes, or of their capacities for virtue and happiness, although these have been supposed by some to be inferior to those inhabitants of Europe (2).

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- Rush briefly mentions Wheatley here as a strong example of a civilized, moralistic being. She is presented as an example of the ideal African: intelligent and honorable to her sex.

There is now in the town of Boston a Negro Girl, about eighteen years of age, who has been but nine years in the country, whose singular genius and accomplishments are such as not only do honor to her sex, but to human nature. Several of her poems have been printed and read with pleasure by the public (3).

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- Using a technique similar to typology, he discusses the notion of the mark of Cain which is presented in Genesis 4: 9-16 (Geneva Bible).

9 Then the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? Who answered, I cannot tell.
Am I my brother's keeper?

10 Again he said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

11 Now therefore thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand.

12 When thou shalt till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a vagabond and a renegade shalt thou be in the earth.

13 Then Cain said to the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

14 Behold, thou hast cast me out this day from the earth, and from thy face shall I be hid, and shall be a vagabond, and a renegade in the earth, and whosoever findeth me shall slay me.

15 Then the LORD said unto him, Doubtless whosoever slayeth Cain, he shall be punished sevenfold.
And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any man finding him should kill him.

16 Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod toward the Eastside of Eden.

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Rush will cite further biblical passages and classical authors which run counter to the Genesis concept. First, he opens:

The vulgar notion of their being descended from Cain, who is supposed to be marked with this colour, is to absurd to need a refutation— Without enquiring into the cause of this blackness, I shall only say on this subject, that so far from being a curse, it subjects the Negroes to no inconveniences; but on the contrary, qualifies them for that part of the globe in which Providence has placed them. The ravages of heat, diseases, and time, appear less in their faces than in a white one; and when we exclude variety of colour from our ideas of beauty they may be said to possess every thing necessary to constitute it in common with the white people (4).

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- page 5-6 enters into the debate regarding sugar production; the French and English production resulted in different quantities—Rush uses the arguments that a freeman would produce better results
- page 7 discusses life expectancies of white versus black on the islands
- page 8-9 takes on the arguments that since slavery is in the Bible God must sanction it. The argument he presents on this page states that the design of Providence in permitting this evil was probably to prevent the Jews from marrying among strangers; this act resulted in a pure race which would from Abraham later produce the Messiah.
- page 10: he continues with scriptural defenses of his concept, here using the New Testament to view all people as brethren and not enemies.

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- At this stage, Rush begins his most passionate arguments: the mistreatments of slaves by their owners. Without directly stating it, he goes into the concept of the Masters sleeping with their slaves:

Would to heaven I could here conceal the shocking violations of chastity, which some of them are obliged to undergo without daring to complain! Husbands have been forced to prostitute their wives and mothers their daughters, to gratify the brutal lust of a master! This— all this is practiced— blush— ye impure and hardened monsters, while I repeat it— by men who call themselves Christians! (14).

- page 15-16 introduces a proposal of ideas for the slave population in America.
- page 16 begins with first having the King and Parliament dissolve the Royal African Company.

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- Rush will propose a slow assimilation of Negroes into the free American public.

Those individuals too old or too locked in pagan ways would remain as property; but the younger generation would be educated and baptized into Christianity.

But let the young Negroes be educated in the principles of virtue and religion— let them read and write— and afterwards instructed in some business, where by they may be able to maintain themselves. Let laws be made to limit the time of their servitude, and to entitle them to all the privileges of free-born British subjects (17).

- Interesting to note, even this close to the Revolution in America, some of the Forefathers of the Declaration are still considering themselves as British subjects.

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- page 17-18 carries a footnote of relevance: it mentions the Spanish colonies.
- page 18 indicates the general notion that the slave trade incites civil wars in Africa itself; it causes the various coast land countries to seek prisoners in the central African countries.
- page 19 mentions the atrocities of branding slaves with the master's name like livestock:

<http://www.davidglensmith.com/wcjc/2327/Rush/page18.html>

<http://www.davidglensmith.com/wcjc/2327/Rush/page19.html>

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- He begins to use an orators’s strategy as well, by increasing his emotive voice, phrase by phrase, as seen on pages 19-20— here he increases his emphatic tones in passionate pathos rhetoric; Rush wants the reader to react in kind.
- Notice his tone mirrors Bartolome de las Casas, instilling emotional reaction from his reading audience in regards to the descriptions of violence of human against human. Interestingly, he closes off this section with a simple, short declaration:

“This is no exaggerated picture. It is taken from real life” (20).

In this manner, he shifts to a more rational tone as a personal witness, as a true account he experienced first hand.

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- Rush will use data of a census of the slaves within the Colonies in 1775.

By late calculation, it appears that there are 850,000 Negro slaves in the British colonies and islands. From the number and burden of ships, which are sent from England to Africa for slaves, we can, with a great deal of certainty, conclude that there are not less than 100,000 of them imported into America every year. By particular enquiry it was found, that 104,000 were imported in the year 1768 (21).

- Furthermore he mentions that the legal system needs to change:

Extend the privileges we enjoy to every *human* creature born among us, and let not the Journals of our Assemblies be disgraced with the records of laws, which allow exclusive privileges to men of one colour, in preference to another (21).

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- He takes an important stance, placing an emphasis on acknowledgment of slaves as humans, rather than animals, as some slave-owners would claim.
- As he closes up his arguments, he predicts the growing sense of *American* sensibilities (*sans* England) as well, mirroring the “City on a Hill” sermon:

Ye men of Sense and Virtue—Ye Advocates for American Liberty, rouse up and espouse the cause of Humanity and general Liberty. Bear a testimony against a vice which degrades human nature, and dissolves that universal tie of benevolence which should connect all the children of men together in one great Family.—The plant of liberty is of so tender a Nature, that it cannot thrive long in the neighbourhood of slavery. Remember the eyes of all Europe are fixed upon you, to preserve an asylum for freedom in this country, after the last pillars of it are fallen in every other quarter of the Globe (22).

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- Rush closes out his address with a simple, direct warning:

Remember that *national crimes* require *national punishments*, and without declaring what punishment awaits this evil, you may venture to assure them, that it cannot pass with impunity, unless God shall cease to be just or merciful (instructor's emphasis, 24).

- In this manner he echoes Las Casas: if America wants to have God's favor the country needs to make changes. Otherwise, Divine intervention could be at hand.