WESLEY'S 'THOUGHTS UPON SLAVERY':
A DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

LEON O. HYNSON

Introduction

The selection of "Thoughts Upon Slavery," a twenty-one page tract, as a paradigm for Wesley's ethical reflection may appear presumptuous and shallow. However, the "Thoughts" superbly expresses Wesley's ethical and theological as well as his writing and editorial style. As a contextual essay, written particularly to persons in the business of buying and selling slaves, the tract deliberately appeals to normal eighteenth century rationale such as the natural rights of justice, life, liberty, and happiness. Scripture, which dominates most of Wesley's writings, is intentionally muted, possibly because he was persuaded that they were "cultured despisers" of Christian faith for whom the scriptures were pearls to be trampled. ¹

The essay is a paradigm for most of the political and social essays written between 1768 and 1783. The commitment to human rights is central to everyone of the fifteen tracts written during those revolutionary years. Those who expect Wesley to function as a political and social reactionary during the era of the American Revolution will find no support in this essay.

For at least three decades prior to the writing of "Thoughts Upon Slavery" (1774), Wesley was virtually an Athanasius contra mundum (Athanasius against the world) in the struggle against slavery. It is not from an ivory tower that Wesley applies this appellation to Wilberforce in Wesley's last letter before his death in 1791.

This essay is an assessment of the tract, with two purposes in mind: Literary—Students of Wesley know that he borrowed much of the tract from Anthony Benezet, a Philadelphia Quaker, who wrote Some Historical Account of Guinea in 1771. I have traced from start to finish the thoughts borrowed from Benezet. The comparison shows the characteristic Wesleyan style which links reading, borrowing, editing, supplementing, and expanding. In the last third of Wesley's tract he departs from Benezet's affective and sympathetic arguments and begins to marshall his own highly logical, legal and natural right arguments. Examination of an earlier Benezet tract A Caution and Warning . . . written in 1767, evinces no dependence although there are some ideas which are similar to the last

¹There is another explanation: Wesley restricted his use of Scripture because a common appeal was made to Scripture in support of the slave practice. And further, his extensive dependence on Anthony Benezet, whose use of Scripture is minimal, may help explain Wesley's limited reference to the Bible.
part of Wesley's analysis. While study of the literary element is intended here, I do not propose to give detailed side-by-side comparisons of Benezet and Wesley.

Analytical and Evaluative—Having compared Wesley's work with Benezet's, we may assess the ethics of Wesley and the logical argumentation which he followed. Wesley's "ethics" is defined here as a teleological ethics. "Teleological" in this essay describes an ethics which focuses on a goal, describes the steps in the continuum leading to the goal, and wrestles with the human, social, or political obstacles which frustrate efforts to reach the telos.²

Does the end (telos) of slavery, e.g., colonial advancement, Christianization, enlightenment from "ignorance," economic considerations—all of which are used to legitimate slavery—justify the means (enslavement of persons in the service of others)? Does the natural law telos, i.e., human choice, freedom, human rights and dignity, justify the means (abolition)? Wesley develops an ethical approach—a teleological ethics which addresses a response to these questions. The answers for him, based on natural rights arguments, which inhere in a teleological view of the universe and of human persons,³ are a resounding "No" to the first question and a confident "Yes" to the second.

Toward Social Reform

John Wesley was a man of vast energies and of interests on which to expend them during his eighty-seven years. Born in an era of political transition in an unstable society beset by revolutionary fervor, Wesley was taught the necessities of change amidst stability, of revolution in the context of order. The Methodist Revolution (as Bernard Semmel describes it) placed its firm impress upon English society during Wesley's ministry which spanned six decades. The "Revolution" was a movement of spirit and vision which offered new motivation to thousands of men and women.

During its first three decades the Wesleyan Movement centered on the spiritual vacuum that characterized British society, especially in the lives of the poor and deprived. In performing this ministry to the land, Wesley, to change the metaphor, was clearing the springs of the human

²As is recognized by Clarence Bence, "The Teleological Theology of John Wesley" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1981), Wesley held a teleological conception of salvation, i.e., the ordo salutis. He also sustained a teleological view of man based on a theology of creation, that is, in his concept of natural right. Gordon H. Clark, in "History of Ethics" defines teleological ethics as "those in which the value of an act [or an institution?] is determined by some purpose." Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 220–224.

³See Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 7–8, states: "Natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe." The "teleological view of man forms a part" of this view of the universe, Strauss insists.
spirit which had become blocked and stagnant from inadequate expression. Consistent with an anthropology which ran counter to prevailing Enlightenment assessments of humankind, the Wesleyan movement proclaimed the futility of self-realization and self-adequacy. For Wesley there must be the confluence of the divine with the human spirit in order for humankind to fill up the dream of life, liberty, and happiness. The rights of man, grounded in natural law, legitimized by divine creation, must be like "cut flowers" unless they are nourished by the continued flow of the life of God. This was Wesley's vision and priority.

If, however, he was zealous to deal with those spiritual forces which, ignored, leave politically free men and women in awesome slavery, he could not be blase toward political and social slaveries in his world. John Kent has written: "For Wesley, the ancien regime adequately contained, or was contained in, the divine order, and as long as men were politically free to become sanctified, further change hardly mattered. Hence the demand for the abolition of slavery." Inferred in Kent's comment is the instrumental nature of political liberty. Wesley is judged to be committed to political freedom purely as a means to the end of holy living. This misreading of Wesley's theology and politics misses the point of his lofty esteem for humanity created imago Dei and humanity under the law of nature. It is to confound Wesley's soteriology with its concern for wholeness, with his creational ontology and its stress upon the glory of humankind. Human liberty is presented by Wesley in the framework of creation. This means that all people must be free. Wesley did not argue for abolition in order that the slaves might be free to seek and follow God, but in order that they might be free to become all that imago Dei means and promises. Certainly he would see them spiritually whole but that is not the basis of his appeals in "Thoughts Upon Slavery."

Wesley's concern for political and social issues i.e., the rights of life, liberty (civil and religious, spatial and spiritual), property, and happiness, became the special focus of much of the last twenty-five years of his life. These interests are not new for Wesley since much of dedication to liberty is sharply elaborated in his reflections about toleration. Aware of the persecution of his Puritan forebears, Wesley's early and middle years demonstrate an antipathy toward forces which for religious ends manipulate and enslave those who diverge from established religious forms.

By the mid-sixties and through the mid-eighties, Wesley's political and social concerns fully flowered. In a series of tracts and several important sermons he amplified his long-held opinions about human liberty and particularly the liberties of the enslaved. James Cone's criticism of the

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Wesley's 'Thoughts Upon Slavery'

Wesley's warmheartedness notwithstanding,5 Wesley pioneered in the abolition movement in England. For nearly forty years before Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and Wilberforce, Wesley expressed his hatred of the slave trade and slave holding. His bases for that antipathy are contained in his tract “Thoughts Upon Slavery,” a tract written in 1774.

Wesley's Use of Benezet

It is known by every serious student of Wesley that he borrowed from the American Quaker, Anthony Benezet, in the preparation of this tract. In 1771, Benezet wrote a major appeal for the destruction of the slave traffic. Some Historical Account of Guinea was the primary source of Wesley's own effort. Earlier in 1767, Benezet wrote, A Caution and Warning to Great Britain . . . in a Short Representation of the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes.6 There is no internal evidence in “Thoughts” that Wesley read this second essay.7

Literary analysis demonstrates that three-fourths of Wesley's “Thoughts” is drawn squarely from Benezet's Historical Account. With some sixty pages from Benezet severely edited into eleven of Wesley's, the key thrust of the Quaker's views are set forth. With an occasional aside of his own,8 Wesley's tract repeats that appeal in the same literary genre as he follows Benezet's discussion.

With the conclusion of his survey of Benezet, Wesley's tract ventures in an entirely new direction, attacking slavery with different weapons. In the last fourth of his tract Wesley's arguments are strongly ethical and legal, less focused on biblical, emotional, and psychological appeals. He

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5See James H. Cone, “Black Theology on Revolution, Violence, and Reconciliation,” Union Seminary Quarterly Review (Fall, 1975), 6, and his A Black Theology of Liberation, 72, note 12 where Cone suggests that Wesley was preoccupied with personal issues which distorted his view of the world. He cautioned against the Wesley's concern for the "warm heart and all that stuff," suggesting that blacks must seek political, social, and economic freedom.


7The internal evidence for Wesley's use of Some Historical Account of Guinea is unquestionable as any comparison with Thoughts makes clear. But Wesley does not specifically mention the titles of Benezet's tracts. In a letter to Samuel Hoare, dated August 18, 1787, Wesley lends strong support to Clarkson's "truly Christian design, to procure, if possible, an Act of Parliament for the abolition of slavery in our Plantations." This concern is heightened for Wesley, "Especially when I read Mr. Benezet's tracts [Emphasis on the plural "tracts" is the present author's]. Letters VIII, 275. William E. Phipps, in “John Wesley on Slavery,” Quarterly Review (Summer, 1981), 25 claims that the “Thoughts” is based on both of Benezet's tracts. He bases his opinion on a reading of Wesley's Journal, not analysis of the "Thoughts Upon Slavery."

8See Wesley's parenthetical insertion into Benezet's commentary in Works XI, 68. "For rebellion' (that is 'asserting their native liberty, which they have as much right to as to the air they breathe') 'they fasten them down . . . and . . . burn them gradually upward to the head.'"
argued for abolition on the bases of higher, natural law; the force of human law (appealing to Blackstone); a theonomous ethics, to counter the claim that slavery has utilitarian value for the Empire, and to show the brotherhood of man; and finally to what we call "salvation history" to set forth the biblical precedent for human liberty, illustrated in the release of the captives from Babylon in the sixth century, B.C.

No sophistication, yet some persistence, is required to recognize Wesley's use of Benezet's *Historical Account*. Before he began to offer an edited version of Benezet, Wesley defined slavery as "an obligation of perpetual service, an obligation which only the consent of the master can dissolve," or in certain countries the consent of Judges. The term of slavery is from parent to child, "to the last generations," i.e., without a terminus. Christianity gradually brought about the decline of slavery, but it experienced a resurgence from the eighth century in Spain, and more generally in Europe up to the fourteenth.⁹

As Wesley developed his essay, he generally followed Benezet section by section, sifting the bulk of the commentary and sharply reducing it (e.g., some twenty-nine pages of Benezet are condensed in Wesley's work, Section II, 3-11, covering four pages). At times he reached toward the end of his source and borrowed comments which he places in his preliminary analysis (e.g., Sec. III, 1-2). As was his editorial custom, Wesley frequently made interpolations which expressed his mind, feeling, and theology. Describing the tragic abuse of slaves by torture, flogging, burning, branding, hunger, weariness from long days of toil, Wesley asked: "Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world should live such a life as this? "Are these thy glorious work, Parent of Good?"" (See Benezet, chapter 8, and Wesley, III, 8). The evidence is overwhelming that Wesley copied, edited, and adapted *Historical Account* in sections I–III in "Thoughts Upon Slavery" (which comprise eleven pages).

The last half of Wesley's analysis cannot be traced to Benezet. It is arguable, but not demonstrable, that several points briefly addressed by the Quaker are present in Wesley's analysis. However, literary criticism demonstrates a sharp distinction in Wesley's use of Benezet. While sections I–III in Wesley are obviously Benezet's, the rest of Wesley's work is clearly his own development. Benezet gives passing attention to three points developed by Wesley: the argument that slavery is supportive of colonial advancement; that slaves in their own land are equal or superior in intelligence to slave owners; and, the point that slaves are needed to work in tropical climates. These ideas, however, were not used by Wesley

⁹Wesley does not credit historical sources in support of his claim. Edward McNall Burns, in *Western Civilizations*, II, 8th edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), 453, indicates that European slavery "Practically disappeared" by the tenth century, to be revived in the sixteenth. In *Historical Account*, 54–57, Benezet offers an analysis Wesley may have adapted to his essay.
in any sequence comparable to his first three sections, where Wesley frequently copied directly from Benezet.

In Wesley's second half, the mood shifts from Benezet's emotional appeal to a more rigorous logical and ethical commentary. A lengthy reference to the jurist Blackstone belongs to this context. Wesley appealed to the ascendancy of natural law over legislated (positive) law, denying that positive law is legitimate when, as in slavery, it denies the natural rights belonging to everyone.

What is the source of the latter half of Wesley's work? Only remotely may it be associated with Historical Account. Did Wesley, then, find this material in Benezet's A Caution and Warning? No! A careful reading again shows an even more remote dependence on Benezet's earlier essay. A few ideas are worthy of comparison, but Benezet does not develop them:

Benezet, A Caution and Warning

“There cannot be a more dangerous MAXIM, than that necessity is a Plea for Injustice. For who shall fix the Degree of this Necessity? What Villain so atrocious. . . .” p. 33

“That our Colonies want People is a very weak Argument for so inhuman a Violation of Justice_____.”

Wesley, Thoughts

“I deny that villainy is ever necessary. It is impossible that it should ever be necessary for any reasonable creature to violate all the laws of justice, mercy, and truth. No circumstances can make it necessary for a man to burst in sunder all the ties of humanity.” pp. 72–73

To the argument that slaves are needed for the cultivation of the islands, Wesley writes:

“First, it were better that all those islands should remain uncultivated forever; yea, it were more desirable that they were altogether and, in the depth of the sea, than, that they should be cultivated at so high a price as the violation of justice, mercy and truth.”

Against the argument that slavery is necessary to the trade, wealth and glory of the nation, Wesley stated:

“Better no trade than trade procured by villainy. . . . Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat and blood, of our fellow-creatures.” pp. 73–74
The conclusion is that Wesley developed his ethical analysis from other sources, including Blackstone, and, while echoing Benezet, did not follow Benezet's discussion. Wesley's ethical attack on slavery rests upon grounds developed by Wesley, not Benezet.

**Appeal to Natural Law**

The *Thoughts* deliberately restricts the attack to grounds largely outside Christian Revelation. While alluding to the Bible in several places, Wesley appealed more to justice, mercy, and truth, virtue, or even "heathen honesty." Three times he offered a disclaimer on use of the Bible: "setting the Bible out of the question" (p. 70); "even setting Revelation aside" (p. 79); and "to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God" (p. 79).

In the tract he argued that the enslaved cannot be expected to be good and upright when they know nothing about God. But, this is not an argument for pacification or justification for slavery. Rather it is part of the argument that the ignorance and wickedness of the slaves was due to the institution of slavery. "Are not stubbornness, cunning, pilfering, and divers other vices, the natural necessary fruits of slavery" (p. 75). Wesley's question: "Have you carefully taught them, that there is a God?" presents Wesley as the slave's counselor, pressing his case against slavery. The arguments are marshalled to demonstrate that should the slave holder teach the slaves about God, they could hardly keep them in slavery. "You first acted the villain in making them slaves. . . . And now you assign them their want of wisdom and goodness as the reason for using them worse than brute beasts" (p. 75). The logic here is: If you want them to be decent human beings, you must make them free. Enslaved persons are thereby deprived of the proper human context for goodness. That Wesley was acting as the slave's barrister is concluded from his citation of William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England,* and from the direction of Wesley's appeals. Wesley did not suggest: "Teach them about God, and everything, including your safety and their well-being, will be provided." Or, "Teach them about God; sanctify them so that they will be good, quiet slaves." Wesley's logic rather suggests: "You hold them under as beasts because you judge them to lack wisdom and goodness." But any enslaved person, lacking both hope and goodness must be expected to revolt. Liberty to be free creatures under God will change their whole approach. But if you do not grant them liberty, civil, and religious, i.e., the right to freedom of movement or space, and worship, then don't be surprised if they "cut your throat" (p. 75), a statement of what is to be expected, not what is advised.

The appeal, then, was to justice, mercy, and truth. These standards of conduct are more than enough to convince anyone that slavery is wrong.

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10 Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 94–96, states: "Wesley who was so ready to produce scriptural arguments on all other occasions had none to offer in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery* in 1774." "On the matter of slavery, Wesley had become a complete advocate of natural rights," writes Semmel.
But why did Wesley virtually restrict his polemic to these Enlightenment appeals? ("Virtually" is used as a qualifier since Wesley closed the tract with a powerful prayer and biblical allusion to crown the whole discussion.)

The apparent explanation for this restriction was that his audience was a propertied class, persons with the means to purchase property. Additionally they are men whose religious convictions and conscience at best must be surface values, if they are not totally absent. Slave traders knew in their consciences, "if they have conscience left" (p. 72), that slavery is wrong. Wesley was too hopeful that appeals to justice, mercy, truth, and virtue would change the slavers' attitudes but he evidently considered these the proper instruments of persuasion.

Justice! Here Wesley addresses the question of human law versus divine (or, "the nature of things," "natural right"). In calling natural law into the discussion Wesley showed that he was a man of his era. In natural law theory, two major questions are asked: What is justice? and, How do we discover what justice demands? Natural law theory focuses upon the legitimacy of positive (enacted) laws when they do not conform to the criteria of justice which reason discovers in the "nature of things." Such laws are not "laws" at all, natural right theorists argue.

What is justice? It is conformity to the nature of things, or natural right. Any contravention of this is wrong, possessing no legal integrity, even if it possesses legal force.

Wesley insisted that ten thousand (positive) laws cannot turn darkness into light; they cannot make slavery right. Natural justice insists upon universal human liberty, unless by crime a person forfeits that liberty. "Liberty is the right of every human creature as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature" (p. 79).

Referring to "that great ornament of his profession, Judge Blackstone," Wesley asserted that slavery cannot be justified either on grounds of captivity in war, contractual agreement between one person


12 The concept that natural law must prevail over positive law is contained in a letter from Benezet, March 30, 1774, to an unidentified person, probably to a "Beloved Friend" in which he sends a copy of Granville Sharp's argument, based on English common law, "that the inferior law must give place to the superior." Robert Vaux, *Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1817 [1969]), 30-31, note.

13 This emphasis on liberty as natural right is found in "Thoughts Upon Liberty," and "Observation on Liberty" 37-38, 92, and suggested elsewhere.

14 See Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. William D. Lewis, ed. (Philadelphia: Rees Welsh Co., 1902. Cf. Book I, Chapter 14, Section 423-425. Wesley and Blackstone stand opposed to John Locke, who claimed that the persons captured in war were in a wrongful state of conflict (on the wrong side?) and thus gave up the freedom which was theirs under normal relationships. Wesley agreed with Locke that no one may forfeit what he does not possess, i.e., the power over his own life, *Works* XI, 52.
and another, or by being born in the family of a slave. None of these can be reconciled with justice.

That Wesley drew upon Blackstone particularly is evident. Blackstone argued that positive laws derive their strength from a higher authority and that they are valid only when they conform to that power. 15 This appeal to higher authority, i.e., natural law, is common to the eighteenth century. For Blackstone and Wesley, natural law is regarded as another way of identifying the divine precept, but for others natural law could be separated from its divine basis. Wesley erroneously criticized Francis Hutcheson for his view of the "moral sense," suggesting that the Scotsman was atheistic. 16 The larger stream of Deism nourished the understanding of a natural order functioning in isolation from its original theistic source.

Philip Selznick has discussed positive law as the "produce of legal problem solving," as "society's best effort to regulate conduct and settle disputes." However imperfect, positive law, determined by proper authority, should be obeyed. The process of eliminating arbitrary elements which are "repugnant to the ideal of legality" must be carried on. Appropriate criticism must lead to more just positive law. 17 It is arguable that Wesley's natural law critique contains the gradualism which Selznick considers essential to the natural law critique of positive law. However, Wesley's language and appeal are characterized by intense passion and urgency which leads to the conclusion that the divine command must be heeded quickly. There is then an urgency in Wesley's criticism, a driving movement toward an immediate solution.

Theonomous Ethics

Wesley carried the natural law, natural right, argument farther in his development of an ethics of divine command or divine expectation. If the earlier Wesleyan mood is reasonable, the pace of his ethical argument is now quickened. Here he addressed not only mind, but conscience and will. To express it differently, his approach is no longer legal theory but direct confrontation.

Slavery cannot be justified on utilitarian or humanitarian grounds as some maintain. It is brutalizing (IV, 4-5) and dehumanizing since its weight bears the slave below the level of rationality. Wesley's concept of the "natural image" of God which includes rationality as essential to our humanity must be recognized behind this appeal. Wesley combined here the natural right argument and the theological conception of man created imago Dei. In other words, his is a theonomous ethics which supersedes the relative ethics of value in its appeal to the economic values of slavery.

15 See the article on Blackstone by Vernon X. Miller in Encyclopedia Britannica 3 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1969), 748-750.
Next Wesley rejected the principle of colonization at the expense of human values. "I answer, . . . it were better that all those islands should remain uncultivated forever; yea, . . . sunk in the depth of the sea, than . . . cultivated at so high a price as the violation of justice, mercy and truth." (IV, 6) This argument echoed a point made by Benezet in *Historical Account*. In connection with this argument Wesley resisted the appeal to necessity, insisting that no circumstance can make it necessary for one to become inhuman, "degrading himself to a wolf." What is the glory of a nation? "Wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity. . . . Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat, and blood of our fellow-creature." (IV, 7)

The argument for the value of the slaves as human beings continued. Some contended that the slaves were wicked and stupid. Wesley's answer was that slavery de-humanizes both slave and slave holder and that the latter must bear the burden of guilt for this. (IV, 8–9) The appeal to slave owners to be human, to be "a man, not a wolf" (V, 3–5) occupied much of the concluding section of "Thoughts." Apart from that expression of humane concern for the blacks, the owners should expect nothing from them but the spirit of violence and revenge.

Wesley's ethical analysis moves to its telos by insisting that all are brothers, that in God's sight there is no justification for slavery.

It cannot be, that either war [here Wesley opposes Locke], or contract can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep. . . . Much less is it possible, that any child of man should ever be born a slave. Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature." (V, 5–6)

**Salvation History**

In his concluding peroration and prayer to the God of the oppressed, Wesley employed an argument which rests upon the redemptive and liberating work of Christ. The return of the exiles from the Babylon captivity is the prototype in Wesley's appeal for the end of slavery. The bondage of the people of God two millennia before was linked to the slavery of God's servants in Wesley's time. In the history of salvation, time and

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18 In salvation history there is a "tendency to universalize points of time. The theological interpretation is not applied just to one event . . . but is generalized. . . ." There is a "tendency to universalize in terms of space and persons. Notions of divine causality in the sequence of events are not applied simply to Israel and Palestine. All the nations are envisaged, at least as the ultimate horizon." There is a "tendency to revive the past ('actualize') in the service of paraenetic [general exhortation whether ethical or practical] instruction." There is the "tendency to typological presentation. . . ." See Klaus Berger, "History of Salvation" ('Salvation History') in *Sacramentum Mundi V*, ed. by Karl Rahner, et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 411–412. "Saving History," in *Theological Dictionary*, eds. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 424–425, means that God has "embraced the whole of human history and in it has offered all men his salvation . . . Saving history also means the history of these experiences . . . of salvation throughout the human race." It is a "genuine history coextensive with profane history".
space are telescoped to unite the oppressed in the care and providence of God. In salvation history, events like the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea "are constantly taken as images for new experiences of salvation." 19 In this same conceptual framework, using the Babylonian captivity as the image of salvation, Wesley prayed:

Arise, and help these that have no helper, whose blood is spilt upon the ground like water! Are not these also the work of thine own hands, 20 the purchase of thy Son's blood? Stir them up to cry unto thee in the land of their captivity; and let their complaint come up before thee; let it enter into thy ears! Make even those that lead them away captive to pity them, and turn their captivity as the rivers in the South [Psalm 126:4]. O burst all their chains in sunder; more especially the chains of their sins! Thou Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed. 21

In fairness to the critics of Wesley's approach to slavery, another point is stressed. In the last pages of his tract, Wesley does appear to seek melioration of the slavery institution. I argue that this represents a movement in Wesley from idealism to realism. Having argued the case for abolition strenuously, Wesley recognized the staying power of economic and social evils, evils that will not disappear simply by the reformer's will. He in no sense suspended the teleology of abolition but argued for melioration during the penultimate processes leading to final victory. Here Wesley said in effect: Slavery must vanish from the earth. While it persists you must stop the brutalizing treatment of slavery. Wesley may have weakened his case, but from the perspective of the person who is enslaved, subject to unremitting anguish and horror, more humane treatment gives reason for hope. Where hope lives, men and women have the opportunity to dream—and survive. As unsatisfactory as that kind of gradualism is, it still possesses a measure of realism. Wesley could never accept anything less than the full goal of liberty; while slavery prevails (against his will) he would press for as much improvement as could possibly be achieved. 22

19 Berger, 411-412.
20 Works, XI, 78. Wesley says that the slaves are brothers of those who enslave them. "'The blood of thy brother' (for, whether thou wilt believe it or no, such he is in the sight of Him that made him) 'crieth against thee from the earth...'."
21 Works, XI, 79.
22 This argument for melioration is not unique. In Vaux, Memoirs of Benezet, 30, Benezet's letter of April 28, 1773 to Doctor John Fotherg, makes the case precisely:

I am likeminded with thee, with respect to the danger and difficulty which would attend a sudden manumission of those negroes now in the southern colonies, as well to themselves, as to the whites; wherefore except in particular cases the obtaining their freedom, and indeed the freedom of many even amongst us, is by no means the present object of my concern. But the best endeavours in our power to draw the notice of governments, upon the grievous iniquity and great danger attendant on a further prosecution of the slave trade, is what every truly sympathizing mind cannot but earnestly desire, and under divine direction promote to the utmost of their power. If this could be obtained, I trust the sufferings of those already amongst us, by the interposition
Conclusion

By my evaluation, Wesley's arguments press urgently toward abolition, while at the same time he employs a penultimate appeal for melioration. His teleology expresses the sense of immediacy, followed (and somewhat weakened?) by appeals for generosity and compassion. His sharp rejection of the common contemporary justification of slavery in terms of empire, economics, or enlightenment, makes him a man born out of his time. His insistence on natural rights—life, liberty, property—are familiar themes from John Locke in Wesley's century. Wesley, against Locke and most of his own contemporaries, included slave persons as fully privileged under God with every human being.

Critics of Wesley's approach to abolition of slavery and the slave trade should consider the significant moral climate which Wesley established. Beyond Benezet's affective appeals, Wesley drove to moral and religious sanctions against slavery. If he did not achieve our eminence in the struggle against contemporary slaveries, may we not acknowledge that he was in the vanguard of a striving for liberty for all people in his own time?