‘Tremble Britannia!’

‘Tremble, Britannia!’: Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1756-1807*

Professor John Coffey (University of Leicester)

Published in the *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), 844–81

Parliament’s abolition of the British Atlantic slave trade in 1807 was celebrated as a national triumph. In Joseph Collyer’s engraving, ‘Britannia Trampling the Emblems of Slavery’, the regal subject stands in glorious array flanked by Justice and Religion, who points to the Golden Rule. To her right stands a slave ship; to her left a bust of Wilberforce and a scroll containing the names of parliamentarians who spoke in favour of abolition.¹ A commemorative medal ‘designed and executed by eminent Artists’, also bears an image of Wilberforce, ‘the Friend of Africa’; on the reverse, Britannia sits enthroned, attended by Wisdom and Justice as she commands Commerce to stop the trade.² Both images suggest

* I am grateful to the *EHR* referees for their constructive criticism and to Nigel Aston, Cate Brett, David Killingray, Mark Smith, Jim Walvin, John Wolffe and Young Hwi Yoon for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

¹ Joseph Collyer, ‘Britannia Trampling the Emblems of Slavery, Holding a Banner Declaring the Abolition and Attending the Voices of Justice and Religion’, in S. Farrell, M. Unwin and J. Walvin, eds, *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and the People* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 322-23.

² <http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume8/feb10/primsources.cfm> (accessed 13 Feb. 2012).

The medal was advertised and described in *The Literary Panorama*, Dec. 1807, p. 527; *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, Apr. 1809, p. 348; *The Christian Observer*, May 1809, pp. 324-25; *The Monthly Repository*, Sep. 1809, p. 529. According to *The Literary Panorama*, the design was by Robert Smirke, R.A, while a Mr Rouw had executed the portrait of Wilberforce by ‘express permission’ of the MP. Subscribers paid 7s 6d for a bronze medal and £1 6d for the silver.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

that abolition was driven by what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls ‘the honor code’, and by the need to rebuild the nation’s ‘moral capital’.³

Yet the iconography reveals a higher concern. In Collyer’s broadside, Britannia is bathed in Heaven’s rays. In the medallion, an angel hovers over Britannia’s throne bearing a cross (signifying atonement) and a crown (‘an emblem of her virtuous conduct being approved by Heaven’); the plinth on which her throne rests carries the motto, ‘I HAVE HEARD THEIR CRY’. These are not (as might be supposed) the words of Britannia herself. They are taken from the book of Exodus, where God hears the cries of the Israelites in bondage, and comes down to deliver (Exodus 3:7).⁴ They hint at a dramatic back-story to British abolition. Britain has narrowly avoided the fate of Egypt, another empire guilty of oppressing slaves. Egypt was visited by terrible plagues, its armies destroyed in the Red Sea. But in Britain’s case, calamity has been providentially averted. Jehovah has come down, but he has rescued the oppressed by bringing their oppressors to repentance. The abolition of the slave trade has restored Britain to divine favour.

The intense providentialism of the early British abolitionists is barely registered in much recent scholarship. The latest monograph on the slave trade controversy explores the secular arguments in some depth, but offers just a few sentences on abolitionist warnings of divine punishment.⁵ Seymour Drescher’s magnum opus, *Abolition*, is breathtaking in its comparative scope and analytical power, but the emphasis on structural forces and mass

³ See K.A. Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York, 2010), ch. 3; C.L. Brown, *Moral Capital: The Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), *passim*.

⁴ See *Christian Observer*, May 1809, p. 325.

⁵ S. Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 57, 70, 184.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

movements drowns out antislavery voices. Religion functions as an organising rather than an intellectual force, and abolition is explained with scant reference to the moral or theological beliefs of abolitionists.⁶ Adam Hochschild, author of the finest popular account of British abolitionism, makes far more space for personal agency, but he is so intent on presenting the abolition movement as the prototype for modern secular human rights campaigns that he cannot accommodate its religiosity. He concludes his book with the dubious claim that ‘abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts, but in human empathy’.⁷

The outstanding recent monograph on early British abolitionism, Christopher Leslie Brown’s *Moral Capital*, restores Quakers and Evangelicals to centre stage and emphasises Granville Sharp’s obsession with ‘national punishments’.⁸ But Providence has a low profile in Brown’s long chapter on Evangelical Anglicans. The horizons of his Teston Set are mundane rather than transcendent; they aim to reform the British people rather than propitiate Heaven. Providentialism is not even mentioned in the substantial epilogue to *Moral Capital*. Its absence drains abolitionism of some of its sound and fury.

Indeed, none of these works quite prepares us for the unsettling encounter with abolitionist texts. For here one finds an insistent testimony to human fear of divine wrath. Some

⁶ S. Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 107-13, 252-54.

Ironically, the role of religious argument in the abolitionist movement is as thoroughly marginalised by Drescher as it was by the Marxist Robin Blackburn in *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (1988).

⁷ A. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (New York, 2005), p. 366.

⁸ Brown, *Moral Capital*, pp. 174-75, 180-82, 187-88, 192-93; C.L. Brown, ‘Christianity and the Campaign against Slavery and the Slave Trade’, in S.J. Brown and T. Tackett, eds, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*. Vol. VII: *Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660-1815* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 527.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

historians have recognised the prominence of this discourse which Nicholas Guyatt has labelled ‘judicial providentialism’.⁹ Forty years ago, David Brion Davis ended his Pulitzer-Prize winning study of *The Problem of Slavery in Western Thought* with a chapter entitled ‘John Woolman’s Prophecy’. The book’s final sentence recorded the Quaker’s warning that if Americans failed to do justice to their African brethren, ‘their descendants would face the awful retribution of God’s justice’.¹⁰ In his landmark work on British abolition, Roger Anstey argued that the Evangelical Anglicans at the heart of the abolition campaign in 1806-07 were moved by an ‘overwhelming conviction that Providence regulates the affairs of men and in so doing chastises errant nations’.¹¹ More recently, in *The Age of Atonement* and an essay on 1807, Boyd Hilton has asserted that ‘religion was the main impulse behind abolition’, and that the religion moving Wilberforce and other Parliamentarians was providentialist rather than humanitarian. Abolition was ‘a spiritual insurance policy’ for the British nation, designed to avert God’s punishment and secure divine favour.¹² Yet these

⁹ N. Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 6. Guyatt has little to say about early abolitionism, though he does consider the providentialist dimension of American antislavery after 1830.

¹⁰ D.B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Thought* (Ithaca, 1966), p. 493. See also D.B. Davis, ‘The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Anti-Slavery Thought’, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, xxxix (1962), pp. 209-30.

¹¹ R. Anstey, ‘A Re-interpretation of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade, 1806-07’, *ante*, lxxvii (1972), p. 313. See also R. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (Atlantic Highways, NJ, 1975), pp. 158-62, 193-98.

¹² B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford, 1988), p. 209; B. Hilton, ‘Why Britain Abolished her Slave Trade’, in D.R. Petersen, ed., *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH, 2010), pp. 75-79. Hilton’s account was developed in L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 350-60.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

scholars did not attempt a systematic account of the abolitionists’ discourse of fear, and as a consequence, it has a very marginal place in the wider literature. Even Davis, who is very sensitive to the religious factor, has written of ‘the relatively secular character of British antislavery arguments’, suggesting that despite their ‘religious motivation’, Quakers and Evangelicals ‘made little use of Scriptural argument’.¹³

This article suggests otherwise. It aims to put the fear of God back into British abolitionism, revealing for the first time the full extent of the movement’s judicial providentialism. It excavates one particularly rich seam of their vocabulary - the biblical language of iniquity, blood guilt, pollution, wrath, divine vengeance, scourging, fear and trembling, propitiation, cleansing and atonement. It demonstrates that the idea of ‘national punishments’ was far from being a marginal feature of abolitionist discourse: it preoccupied the movement’s leading activists; it was employed insistently from the 1750s to 1807, in times of crisis and prosperity; it was used across the denominational spectrum from Methodism to Unitarianism; it is present in almost every genre of abolitionist discourse, from parliamentary speeches to poetry; and it was often used as a closing argument. Abolition, I argue, was designed to restore Britain’s ruptured relationship with Heaven.

My treatment of the abolitionists has been influenced by different methodological approaches. Heeding the advice of Quentin Skinner, the article aims ‘to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to

¹³ D.B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY, 1975), p. 525. He refers to the lack of protracted debate over ‘biblical slavery’, yet as I will explain below, it was the very absence of such a debate that gave the British abolitionists a practical monopoly over the Bible during the long campaigns for abolition and emancipation.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way’.¹⁴ Inspired by the work of cultural historians, it explores the mentality of the abolitionists and the ways in which they constructed meaning.¹⁵ In emphasising the fearful intensity of their campaign, it reflects the current renaissance of interest in the emotions among social movement theorists and political historians.¹⁶

The first section argues that war and revolutionary crisis in America from the mid-1750s to the early-1780s prompted serious Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic to cast around for the causes of the Lord’s wrath. Once they had identified the slave trade as a provocation to God, pioneer abolitionists like Benezet and Sharp sought to foment moral panic and urgent protest by redeploying the traditional discourse of judicial providentialism. Section two demonstrates that warnings of divine retribution persisted during the heyday of popular abolitionism from 1788 to 1792, even as the movement flourished in a climate of national prosperity and optimism. The third section examines the fifteen years leading up to 1807, when the reverberations of the French Revolution dramatically curtailed abolitionist momentum. It finds that among a hardcore of activists, including Sharp, Wilberforce and James Stephen, the revolutionary crisis and public apathy served to sharpen fears of national punishment. Section four explores the reception of this line of argument in the monthly journals and in Parliament, noting that it often met with scepticism. I concede that

¹⁴ Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 2002), i. 3. See A. Chapman, J. Coffey and B. Gregory, eds, *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, 2009).

¹⁵ For an introduction to the history of mentalities, see P. Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1997), ch. 11.

¹⁶ See especially, J. Goodwin, J. M. Jaspar and F. Polletta, eds, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago, 2001); N. Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

the success of abolitionism among lawmakers and polite society owed much to fair weather conditions and to pragmatic arguments. However, the final section contends that judicial providentialism mattered. It galvanised the movement’s leading advocates, appealed to a wider religious public and enjoyed some purchase among parliamentarians. Any adequate account of British abolitionism must reckon with this factor.

The eighteenth century is not conventionally presented as a God-fearing age. Historians of medieval and Reformation Europe have depicted a providentialist culture consumed by the fear of God.¹⁷ Scholars of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by contrast, have talked of ‘the decline of hell’, suggesting that the Enlightenment liberated European elites from superstitious terrors. Providentialism was giving way to naturalism.¹⁸ Insofar as Providence survived at all, it ‘comes to be more often thought of as a benevolent than as a punitive force’.¹⁹

However, historians have been rediscovering the persistence of punitive providentialism in the age of Enlightenment. David Wootton has argued that the fear of God was one of the

¹⁷ See J. Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries* (New York, 1990). For English providentialism see K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), ch. 4; B. Worden, ‘Providence and Politics in Cromwellian England’, *Past and Present*, cix (1985), pp. 55-99; A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

¹⁸ D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago, 1964); R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000), p. 13. Porter’s book has no index entry for ‘hell’ but does have one for the libertine ‘Hellfire Club’.

¹⁹ Worden, ‘Providence and Politics’, 60n. But see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 128-29.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

underlying assumptions of early modern political thought, an assumption that explains John Locke’s exclusionary attitude to atheists who rejected belief in a future state of rewards and punishments.²⁰ Jonathan Clark has argued that ‘Providential discourse’ remained ‘the prevalent idiom in which the course of events was encountered and reflected upon’ in eighteenth-century England; natural disasters were seen ‘as not just chance events; they revealed divine intentions’.²¹ In his discussion of ‘the Great Enlightenment Earthquake Controversy’ of the 1750s, Jonathan Israel finds providentialist accounts of catastrophe being vigorously defended against radical Enlightenment naturalism.²² In an analysis of English penal policy, Laurie Throness argues that beliefs about divine punishment and human penitence provided the theological foundations for the Penitentiary Act of 1779.²³ Moreover, numerous studies have found the idea of national punishments thriving deep into the nineteenth century.²⁴

²⁰ D. Wootton, ‘The Fear of God in Early Modern Political Theory’, *Historical Papers/Communications Historiques*, xviii (1983), 56-80. See also J. Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (Philadelphia, 1972); J. Hutson, ‘“A Future State of Rewards and Punishments”: The Founders Formula for the Social and Political Utility of Religion’, in his *Forgotten Features of the Founding: The Recovery of Religious Themes in the Early American Republic* (Lanham, MD, 2003), ch. 1.

²¹ J.C.D. Clark, ‘Providence, Predestination and Progress: Or, Did the Enlightenment Fail?’, *Albion*, xxxv (2003), pp. 559-89, quotations at pp. 561, 565.

²² J. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford, 2011), ch. 2, quotations at p. 43.

²³ L. Throness, *A Protestant Purgatory: Theological Origins of the Penitentiary Act, 1779* (Aldershot, 2008).

²⁴ J. Wolffe, ‘Judging the Nation: Early Nineteenth-Century British Evangelicals and Divine Retribution’, in K. Cooper and J. Gregory, eds., *Retribution, Repentance, and Reconciliation* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 291–300; R. Janet, ‘Providence, Prayer and Cholera: The English General Fast of 1832’, *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, li (1982), pp. 297–317; P. Gray, ‘National Humiliation and the Great Hunger:

‘Tremble Britannia!’

The most systematic analysis of eighteenth-century providentialism is provided by Nicholas Guyatt. He maintains that ‘Even the “enlightened” intellectual elites of Britain’s principal cities – London and Edinburgh – were willing to apply providential logic to contemporary history and politics’. He helpfully distinguishes between three varieties of national providentialism: *judicial* providentialism – the belief that God rewarded or punished nations according to their moral character and actions; *historical* providentialism – the belief that God had assigned certain nations a specific role or mission within history; and *apocalyptic* providentialism – the belief that God was bringing history to a climax and using nations to fulfil the prophecies of Isaiah, Daniel and Revelation.²⁵

Apocalyptic thinking is not prominent in abolitionist texts. Granville Sharp was unusual in his obsession with the Beast, the Whore and the horns of the Book of Revelation.²⁶ More commonly, abolitionists from Richard Price to James Montgomery embraced an optimistic postmillennial eschatology that anticipated the dawn of a new age of peace, prosperity, piety and liberty.²⁷ But most abolitionists, like the statesmen of the Puritan Revolution,

Fast and Famine in 1847’, *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxii (2000), pp. 193–216; O. Anderson, ‘The Reactions of Church and Dissent Towards the Crimean War’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xvi (1965), pp. 209–20; B. Stanley, ‘Christian Responses to the Indian Mutiny of 1857’, in W.J. Sheils, ed., *The Church and War* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 277–89; S. Matthews, ‘Explanations for the Outbreak of Cattle Plague in Cheshire in 1865-66: “Fear the Wrath of the Lord”’, *Northern History*, xliii (2006), pp. 117-35.

²⁵ Guyatt, *Providence*, pp. 57, 6.

²⁶ See for example Sharp’s 1789 letter to the Marquis of Bellegarde offering an apocalyptic interpretation of the French Revolution: Sharp Correspondence, Gloucester Record Office, D3549, Box 3810, 13/1/B18.

²⁷ Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* (1784), pp. 2-8; Joseph Priestley, *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade* (Birmingham, 1788), pp. 36-37; James Montgomery, ‘The West Indies’, *Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1809), pp. 35, 45-46.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

‘were more ready to interpret providence than to calculate the millennium’.²⁸ Historical providentialism was commonplace. The British (and Americans) often felt that God had reserved a special role - even an imperial mission - for their nations in the triumph of Christianity, progress and liberty. Many abolitionists were convinced that God acted within history to deliver the oppressed as he had liberated the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage.²⁹

Judicial providentialism loomed equally large in the minds of British abolitionists. It was encapsulated in two maxims: ‘righteousness exalteth a nation’ (Proverbs 14:34), and ‘national crimes bring national punishments’. Abolitionists were troubled by the fear that God would chastise an impenitent Britain for trading in African slaves; they were buoyed by the hope that repentance could restore divine favour. While this article focuses on the former more than the latter, belief in Providence could foster both. The prospect of national blessing vied with ‘the providentialism of wrath’.³⁰

Believing in the temporal judgments of God was one thing; applying the doctrine to the slave trade was another. Before the second half of the eighteenth century, Christian condemnation of the trade was the exception rather than the rule. While preachers of various denominations delivered countless fast sermons warning of national judgment, these sermons rarely (if ever) mentioned the slave trade.³¹ A few religious leaders did warn of God’s wrath against the trade. The Puritan divine Richard Baxter directed a fusillade of questions at Caribbean slavers in his *Christian Directory* (1673), suggesting that ‘God hath

²⁸ Worden, ‘Providence and Politics’, p. 90 n. 166.

²⁹ I explore the abolitionist use of Exodus in J. Coffey, *Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr* (forthcoming).

³⁰ I take the phrase from Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, p. 232.

³¹ See Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 195; Guyatt, *Providence*, pp. 116-21.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

followed you with plagues...Remember the late fire at the bridge in Barbadoes: remember the drowning of your governor and ships at sea...and at present the terrible mortality that is among you’.³² The Quaker George Keith warned ‘hard hearted pretended Christians’ who owned African slaves that ‘the Lord doth behold their Oppressions’ and would visit their masters with ‘just Judgments’ if they failed to repent.³³ But these were isolated voices.

Indeed, defenders of the slave trade had long turned providentialism to their own advantage. There is little reason to think that religious belief was a significant motivating force for slave traders. The slave trade was driven by the profit motive. But because the trade looked morally dubious, it was essential to legitimise it in ethical and religious terms. Thus the slave trade was associated with Christianity and civilisation, since it had providentially brought Africans within reach of both.³⁴ It was also linked to judicial providentialism via the theory that blacks were under ‘the curse of Ham’, whose descendants had been condemned to subjugation in the Book of Genesis. On this reckoning, white slave-traders and slave-owners were simply agents of divine judgement on a tragic race.³⁵ Wilberforce felt the need to denounce the theory as ‘impious blasphemy’.³⁶

³² Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (1673), Bk ii, ch. 14. This passage was later cited by Benezet and others. See R. Bruns, ed., *Am I not a Man and a Brother? The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788* (New York, 1977), pp. 124, 166, 377.

³³ George Keith, *An Exhortation and Caution to Friends concerning Buying or Keeping of Negroes* (1693), cited in Bruns, *Am I not a Man and a Brother?*, p. 8.

³⁴ See R. Strong, ‘A Vision of Anglican Imperialism: The Annual Sermons of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1701-1714’, *Journal of Religious History*, xxx (2006), pp. 192-95.

³⁵ See D. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); D.M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (Farnham, 2009); C. Kidd,

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Only from the 1750s did American Quakers begin to generate a concerted campaign against slavery. Although John Woolman had highlighted the issue in the first part of his *Considerations on Keeping Negroes*, written in 1746, he had nothing to say at that stage on national punishments. It was during the great French and Indian War between 1754 and 1763 that Quakers harnessed antislavery to judicial providentialism. This was a discourse for a crisis, and the war provoked much heart-searching among the pacifist Quakers of Pennsylvania, who reasserted their radical sectarian identity and rediscovered an aggressively prophetic posture. During this ‘Quaker Reformation’, the Friends found signs of God’s ‘chastisement’ in the war itself, but also in harvest failures, epidemics, and the earthquakes that shook both Pennsylvania and the distant slave-port of Lisbon in November 1755.³⁷

As they sought the causes of the Lord’s wrath, some Quakers came to see the officially-sanctioned trade in African slaves as the kind of grave collective sin that brought divine punishment upon nations. In 1758, Woolman arose at the Friends’ Yearly Meeting in

The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000 (Cambridge, 2006); S. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford, 2002).

³⁶ *Cobbett’s Parliamentary History of England* (36 vols, 1806-20) [hereafter *PH*], xxix. 259 (18 Apr. 1791). For some uses and refutations of the ‘curse of Ham’ argument see Bruns, ed., *Am I not a Man and a Brother?*, pp. 12-13, 28, 34-35, 42, 61-62, 143, 407; J. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven, CT, 2002), pp. 239, 416, 514, 587, 619; Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation of Slavery* (1776), pp. 47-48; Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), pp. 33-37.

³⁷ See J. D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-83* (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 86-89; *Memoirs of the Life and Gospel Labours of Samuel Fotheringill* (Liverpool, 1843), pp. 224-26; S. D. Smith and T. R. Wheeley, “‘Requisites of a Considerable Trade’: The Letters of Robert Plumstead, Atlantic Merchant, 1752-58”, *ante*, cxxiv (2009), p. 562.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Philadelphia and announced that ‘My mind is often led to consider the purity of the Divine Being and the justice of his judgements, and herein my soul is covered with awfulness...Many slaves on this continent are oppressed, and their cries have reached the ears of the Most High!’ The Meeting excluded slave-owners from the disciplinary business of the Society. Four years later, in part two of his *Considerations*, Woolman addressed a wider audience, ending his book with an ominous warning to white colonists about the danger of standing in opposition to the God of the oppressed.³⁸ By adopting the language of the Old Testament prophets, language addressed to a nation and premised on the concept of collective guilt, the early Quaker abolitionists were driven to move beyond their own circles and launch a wider campaign against slavery. Woolman’s vision was not purely sectarian, but national.³⁹

This was even truer in the case of Anthony Benezet, the founder of the trans-Atlantic movement for abolition. His very first tract, published in the middle of the war in 1759, highlighted the iniquity of the slave trade and asked some pointed questions:

Will not the just Judge of all the Earth visit for all this? Or dare we say, that this very Practice is not one Cause of the Calamities we at present suffer?...when a People offend as a Nation, or in a publick Capacity, the Justice of his moral Government

³⁸ *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. P. P. Moulton (Oxford, 1971), pp. 6, 92-93, 98-101, 236-37.

³⁹ See Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Thought*, pp. 483-93.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

requires that as a Nation they be punished, which is generally done by War, Famine or Pestilence.⁴⁰

The title page of his next tract in 1762 bore a verse by Richard Savage, warning that though Britain had gone ‘unpunish’d’ thus far for her oppression of Africans, she may yet fall: ‘Rome all subdued, yet the Vandals vanquish’d Rome’. Once again, Benezet urged readers to think of ‘a future reckoning’, ‘the Day of Wrath’. They should not be ‘more influenced by the Fear of Man, than the Fear of GOD’. The ‘Groans and Cries’ of African slaves would ‘reach Heaven’, and what would European oppressors say when God visited them? The pamphlet culminated with a stark reminder of Christ’s parable in which the Rich Man tormented in hell views poor Lazarus, the victim of his oppression, in paradise.⁴¹ In *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies* (1766), Benezet encapsulated the providentialist argument of the abolitionists in a single question: ‘must we not tremble to think what a load of guilt lies upon our Nation...?’⁴² In his influential *Historical Account of Guinea*, he hammered the point home, claiming that Queen Elizabeth had told the slave-trader Jack Hawkins that kidnapping the natives ‘would be detestable, and call down the vengeance of

⁴⁰ [Anthony Benezet], *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes* (second edn: Germantown, PA, 1760), p. 4. The tract ended with five-page appendix (pp. 12-16) on ‘The uncertainty of a death-bed repentance’.

⁴¹ [Anthony Benezet], *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1762), pp. 1, 52, 57, 61-62, 64, 68, 80.

⁴² Anthony Benezet, *A Caution and a Warning to Great Britain and her colonies* (Philadelphia, 1766), p. 33. See also p. 9.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Heaven upon the undertakers’.⁴³ Writing to the Countess of Huntingdon in 1774, Benezet suggested that the sufferings of the poor Negroes would probably end in this life, but ‘their Lordly oppressors’ might well feel the consequences of their ‘horrible abuse’ ‘even in the regions of Eternity’.⁴⁴

By warning of divine judgment, Quaker abolitionists could alarm their primary audience: the God-fearing. And they could do so in the knowledge that they were speaking a prestigious language, rooted in the Hebrew prophets, one that resonated in America’s ‘Bible culture’.⁴⁵ Scholars have emphasised Benezet’s debt to Enlightenment thought, and he certainly participated in the Enlightenment drive for betterment in this world.⁴⁶ But alongside his meliorist faith in human progress, the Quaker (like many later abolitionists) displayed an agonistic streak, arising from apprehensions of divine vengeance. While he spoke the Enlightenment language of liberty, benevolence and humanity, he was equally articulate when using the ancient biblical vocabulary of guilt, wrath, punishment and atonement.

⁴³ Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1772), p. 55. The story was recycled by later abolitionists: Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (2 vols, 1808), i. 40-41; *Diary or Woodfall’s Register*, 11 Jun. 1789.

⁴⁴ Letter from Benezet to the Countess of Huntingdon, 1774, in the Cheshunt Collection, Westminster College, Cambridge, A3/1 no. 33.

⁴⁵ I take the phrase from R. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), pp. 77-78.

⁴⁶ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 472; M. Jackson, *Let this Voice be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism* (Philadelphia, 2009), pp. xi-xii, 57-61, passim. On the Enlightenment defined as ‘a new focus on betterment in this world’ through ‘understanding the means of progress in human society’, see J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 8.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

In building an abolitionist network, Benezet looked primarily to those who shared his religious seriousness.⁴⁷ They included the Presbyterian physician, Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia; the Methodist revivalist John Wesley; and the devout high Anglican, Granville Sharp. All three embraced the view that the slave trade was a crying sin that would bring God’s judgment crashing down on Britain and her colonies. Their jeremiads gained credibility from the crisis engulfing British America during the 1770s, which various historians have identified as a major stimulus to abolitionism.⁴⁸ If the Seven Years War had served to intensify Quaker unease over slavery, the American Revolution now had the same effect on a wider group of Protestants. Political crisis stimulated providentialist interpretations of world affairs.

In America, abolitionism gained significant traction among the revolutionaries. An important early voice was that of Benjamin Rush, a physician who navigated between Evangelicalism and Enlightenment. At the College of New Jersey, he had been mentored by revivalist Presbyterians; in London in 1755, he was a frequent visitor to George Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin; in Paris, he conversed with Denis Diderot; in Edinburgh, he met David Hume.⁴⁹ Rush’s 1773 pamphlet drew on Enlightenment thought, but it concluded by urging preachers to warn slaveholders: ‘Remember that national crimes require national punishments’. And Rush drew an explicit connection between the political crisis and the

⁴⁷ See Jackson, *Let this Voice be Heard*, chs 5-6.

⁴⁸ See especially R. Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, ch. 4; Brown, *Moral Capital*, passim.

⁴⁹ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, ed. G.W. Corner (Princeton, 1948), pp. 28-37, 55-56, 69.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

slave trade - British oppression, of a kind prefigured in ‘the Stamp and Revenue Acts’ could be the shape of the future if the colonies did not repent.⁵⁰

Numerous godly Patriots took up the refrain in the 1770s and 1780s, claiming that slavery and the slave trade were causes of God’s controversy with America; the loss of American liberties would be a fitting divine judgment on a people who enslaved Africans.⁵¹ ‘Above all,’ writes a leading authority on American antislavery, ‘it was the pervasive influence of warfare itself that led Americans to further the cause of abolition’. As thousands of the enslaved escaped to the British side, Americans feared that ‘a retributive God would visit black insurrection as well as British victories on sinful Americans unless they freed their slaves’.⁵²

This message made an impression beyond the ranks of Quakers and Evangelicals. When Massachusetts towns were burned to the ground by the British in 1775, Abigail Adams compared them to the biblical Sodom, telling her husband John that the calamity was because ‘We have done Evil...The Sin of Slavery as well as many others is not washed away’.⁵³ In his *Notes on Virginia*, written in 1781 while the outcome of the war was still uncertain, Thomas Jefferson declared that liberties were ‘the gift of God’ and ‘are not to be

⁵⁰ Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements on the Slavery of Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1773), pp. 26-28. Rush’s biblical providentialism is airbrushed out of Jonathan Israel’s account in *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 42-43.

⁵¹ See Bruns, ed., *Am I not a Man and a Brother?*, pp. 107-110, 190-91, 200, 212, 214-15, 260, 274, 316-17, 321, 325-27, 334-36, 349-50, 358-65, 374-76, 397, 412-13, 424-26, 432-39, 440-41, 451, 456-59, 460-65, 481-86, 508-09, 524.

⁵² J. B. Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1997), p. 20.

⁵³ Cited in J. Hutson, ed., *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), p. 206.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

violated but with his wrath’. ‘I tremble for my country’, he continued, ‘when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep for ever’.⁵⁴ This warning of ‘supernatural interference!’ became one of Jefferson’s most cited remarks, and it underlines the pervasiveness of judicial providentialism.⁵⁵ Even ‘Deists’ could share the forebodings of their orthodox contemporaries. ‘The longer I live’, Benjamin Franklin told the Constitutional Convention in 1787, ‘the more convincing proofs I see of this Truth, *that God governs the affairs of men*’.⁵⁶ As Jonathan Clark observes, the American Revolution was ‘the most providentially-charged of all the “classic” revolutions’.⁵⁷

John Wesley was fiercely opposed to American independence, and his attack on slavery was a critique of Patriot hypocrisy. But he agreed with Rush and Sharp that slave traders were dicing with divine wrath. In his 1774 tract, he urged the slaver to think of ‘a state of Retribution...Before you drop into eternity!’⁵⁸ In 1775, the Wesleyan missionary to America, Thomas Rankin, upbraided ‘many members’ of Congress in person for talking of liberty while enslaving Africans, and he told a congregation in Baltimore that ‘the sins of G[reat] Britain and her Colonies had long called aloud for vengeance’, especially ‘the dreadful sin of buying

⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* ([Paris], 1782), p. 300.

⁵⁵ For just a few examples see *Diary or Woodfall’s Register*, 14 May 1789; *The Influence of the Slave Power and Other Anti-Slavery Pamphlets* (Westport, CT, 1970), i.11, iii.143, ix.50-51, 78; *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. W. Merrill and L. Ruchames (6 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1971-81), ii. 231; iv. 140. An online search of Google Books reveals hundreds of further citations in the nineteenth century.

⁵⁶ W. Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York, 2003), p. 451. As in the case of Jefferson, this became one of Franklin’s most cited lines.

⁵⁷ Clark, ‘Providence, Predestination and Progress’, p. 582.

⁵⁸ John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), p. 24. On Wesley’s providentialism see H. D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (1989), pp. 431-33.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

and selling the souls and bodies of the poor Africans’.⁵⁹ A year later, another of Wesley’s lieutenants, John Fletcher, urged his British readers to ask themselves Richard Price’s question: ‘Which side then is Providence likely to favour?’ Fletcher feared that ‘the sighs of myriads of innocent negroes...call night and day for vengeance upon us’, though he scorned American slaveholders who ‘absurdly complain that *they* are enslaved’.⁶⁰

The most fervent convert to the providentialist critique of the slave trade was Granville Sharp. He used every opportunity to address public figures, arranging meetings or writing letters to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord North and Lord Dartmouth, warning that Britain must abolish the trade or face ‘heavy judgments’. He wrote to Lord North that ‘it were better for the nation that the American dominions never existed...than that the Kingdom of Great Britain should be loaded with the horrid guilt of tolerating such abominable wickedness’.⁶¹ In 1774, Sharp told Benjamin Rush that ‘the impending Evils which threaten the Colonies abroad...may, with great probability of Truth, be looked upon as a just punishment from God’ for the slave trade.⁶²

In 1776, soon after the outbreak of the American war, Sharp published a remarkable 360-page treatise entitled *The Law of Retribution: A Serious Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies, founded on unquestionable examples of God’s Temporal Vengeance against Tyrants, Slaveholders and Oppressors*. This was a warning to both sides, for they faced the

⁵⁹ Rankin’s manuscript journal is cited in J. Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 122-23.

⁶⁰ John Fletcher, *The Bible and the Sword* (1776), pp. 3, 8-9.

⁶¹ See Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (1820), pp. 44-45, 78-79, 109-11, 114

⁶² See J. A. Woods, ‘The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp, 1773-1809’, *Journal of American Studies*, i (1967), p. 10.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

prospect of ‘heavy Judgement from the Almighty...on account of the monstrous load of Guilt which the British subjects, on each side of the Atlantic, have incurred...’. ‘Our present civil Dissensions and horrid mutual Slaughters of National Brethren’, suggested to Sharp that ‘a severe National Retribution’ was ‘ready to burst upon us!’ Sharp assembled an exhaustive catalogue of biblical examples to demonstrate that God’s anger was ‘particularly levelled against *Oppressors, Tyrants, and Slave-holders!*’ And he warned Princes that ‘arbitrary modes of Government’ provoked divine wrath.⁶³ In another 1776 tract, Sharp concluded: ‘alas! the WHOLE BRITISH EMPIRE is involved!’⁶⁴ Judicial providentialism was a discourse conducted in capital letters and exclamation marks.

It is tempting but not quite accurate to describe Sharp in the mid-1770s as a prophet without honour in his own country. General James Oglethorpe, who had tried to outlaw slavery from Georgia when it was first settled, warmly thanked Sharp for *The Law of Retribution*, and declared that the Lisbon earthquake and the American war were divine punishments on slave-trading nations. When Sharp sent the book to the English bishops, none objected and most expressed their disapproval the slave trade, though it was hardly a burning issue for them.⁶⁵

Britain’s loss of America in 1783 gave Sharp more leverage, for it seemed to vindicate his premonitions. When Benezet wrote to Queen Charlotte in 1783, he explained that there was good reason to think the ‘African Slave-trade’ was ‘an Occasion of drawing down the Divine Displeasure on the Nation and its Dependencies’. By taking up the cause, Charlotte

⁶³ Granville Sharp, *The Law of Retribution* (1776), pp. 3-4, 127, 162.

⁶⁴ Granville Sharp, *The Law of Liberty, or Royal Law, by which all Mankind will Certainly be Judged!* (1776), p. 49.

⁶⁵ Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp*, pp. 155-56, 186-87.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

could be ‘a blessed Instrument’, in God’s hands, ‘to avert the awful Judgments by which the Empire has already been so remarkably shaken’.⁶⁶ In the same year, English Quakers launched a public campaign against the trade, printing 11,000 copies of *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures the Oppressed Africans* (1783), which was distributed to every MP. The pamphlet noted that both Scripture and history taught that ‘the Righteous Judge of the whole earth chastiseth nations for their sins’. Addressing ‘the legislature’, they suggested that only ‘a prohibition of this traffic in future’ would stop the nation from being ‘obnoxious to the righteous judgments of the Lord’, whose prophets had declared that ‘the land should tremble’ on account of oppression of the poor.⁶⁷

One key figure who popularised this view in the 1780s was the poet William Cowper, friend and collaborator of the Evangelical divine, John Newton. Cowper may have been inspired by Thomas Day’s ‘poetical epistle’, *The Dying Negro* (1773), ‘the first significant piece of propaganda directed explicitly against the English slave systems’, which culminated with ‘prophetic visions’ of divine vengeance, when the tables are turned on the oppressors: ‘I see the flames of heavenly anger hurl’d/I hear your thunders shake a guilty world’.⁶⁸ In their *Olney Hymns* (1779), Newton and Cowper presented a darkly providentialist interpretation of the American war, seeing it as God’s punishment for England’s sins. At this stage, however, there was no explicit mention of the slave trade, though the two men were clearly worrying about the causes of the Lord’s wrath against Britain.⁶⁹ In 1781, Newton delivered a

⁶⁶ Cited in Clarkson, *The History*, i. 172-75.

⁶⁷ *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures the Oppressed Africans* (1783), pp. 3-4, 10, 14-15.

⁶⁸ M. Wood, ed. *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764-1865* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 36, 46-48.

⁶⁹ *Olney Hymns, in Three Books* (1779), pp. 186-87, 258-64.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

searing jeremiad to his parish in the City, in which he confessed his ‘apprehension, that acts of oppression and violence, in some parts, (at least) of our widely extended settlements, have contributed to enhance and aggravate our national sin’. Because this ‘cruelty and avarice’ had not been publicly censured or punished, God might well ‘avenge the oppressed’ by punishing both the ‘actual oppressors’ of the victims and ‘the community that refused to hear their cries and redress their wrongs’.⁷⁰ Cowper’s 1782 poems ‘Expostulation’ and ‘Charity’, published after the defeat at Saratoga, went a step further, explicitly identifying the oppression of Africans as a source of Britain’s woes: ‘Remember, Heaven has an avenging rod,/To smite the poor is treason against God!’⁷¹

But it was in the *The Task*, written in the wake of Britain’s defeat in the American war during the winter, spring and summer of 1783-84, that Cowper presented his most powerful indictment of the slave trade. Anthologies of antislavery poetry lift his famous protest from its immediate context in Book II, and so obscure the way in which Cowper frames the issue within a larger providential (even apocalyptic) story. The slave trade is both a symptom and a cause of ‘a world that seems to toll the death-bell of its own decease’. Natural calamities – Jamaican hurricanes, meteors, the Sicilian earthquake of 1783 – are not mere accidents, but fraught with meaning, ‘frowning signals’ that ‘bespeak/Displeasure in his breast who smites the earth’. If God has not spared Sicily, reasons Cowper, ‘Tremble and be amaz’d at thine escape/Far guiltier England, lest he spare not thee’. ‘The spruce philosopher’ tells ‘Of homogeneal and discordant springs/And principles; of causes how they work/By necessary laws their sure effects’, and ‘bids the world take heart and banish fear’. But such

⁷⁰ John Newton, *The Guilt and Danger of Such a Nation as This!* (1781), p. 21.

⁷¹ William Cowper, ‘Charity’ (1782), in *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford (Oxford, 1913), pp. 79-81.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

mechanistic accounts of material causation fail to see that ever since Noah’s Flood God has used natural means to punish a sinful world. Cowper announces: ‘England, with all thy faults, I love thee still’. But he fears that England’s heroic age is gone. America, ‘the jewel out of England’s crown’, has been picked by ‘the perfidy of France’. Cowper’s only hope lies in ‘the pulpit’, and in the kind of preacher who ‘thunders’ on behalf of ‘violated law’ and ‘whispers peace’ to contrite sinners.⁷²

Cowper was to become the most quoted of all abolitionist poets. The Cambridge Vice-Chancellor, Peter Peckard, praised *The Task* as an ‘incomparable, I had almost said divine Poem’, and he himself raised the issue of the slave trade in a 1784 sermon before the University of Cambridge, calling it ‘a monstrous iniquity’ that ‘must sometime draw down upon us the heaviest judgment of Almighty God’.⁷³ There can be little doubt that Cowper was avidly read among the polite, godly abolitionists who conspired at Teston in the mid-1780s, though he is overlooked in Brown’s account of the rise of Evangelical abolitionism. Their leading light, the Reverend James Ramsay, was a master of empirical detail, but equally comfortable in prophetic mode. His West Indian critics claimed that when he was a clergyman on St Kitts, ‘The calamities that have befallen us, like fires, hurricanes &c. were pointed out as judgments from heaven, and were to him themes of pleasure and delight’. Ramsay denied the *schadenfreude*, but not his providentialist reading of Caribbean

⁷² William Cowper, *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. J. Sambrook (Harlow, 1994), pp. 83-100.

⁷³ See Cowper, *The Task*, ed. Sambrook, p. 225n; Clarkson, *The History*, i. 204-05; Peter Peckard, *Piety, Benevolence and Loyalty Recommended* (Cambridge, 1784), pp. 4-7, 10-13.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

calamities.⁷⁴ In his later *Address* on the abolition bill, he warned the public that since the iniquity of the slave trade now ‘stands exposed’, they must listen to ‘cries of our African brother’, or ‘divine vengeance will not be slow paced’. He finished by pointing MPs and bishops to Providence: ‘Every man who gives a vote in favour of the abolition of the Slave trade, helps to save his country from divine vengeance, and to draw down success and blessings on every publick understanding’.⁷⁵

Whilst Thomas Clarkson was more theologically liberal and politically radical than Ramsay, he too believed that the slave trade had kindled God’s wrath against Britain. The published version of his Cambridge dissertation on slavery ended with a dire warning about ‘divine vengeance’. Would not ‘the cries and groans of an hundred thousand men, annually murdered, ascend the celestial mansions, and bring down that punishment, which such enormities deserve’? ‘The violent and supernatural agitations of all the elements’ in the Caribbean plantations, he alleged, ‘are so many awful visitations of God for this inhuman violation of his laws’. Clarkson advised his readers not ‘to overlook the finger of God, because it is slightly covered under the veil of secondary laws’.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ James Ramsay, *A Reply to the Personal Invectives and Objections* (1785), p. 40. See also p. 95 for accusations that Ramsay used the pulpit to identify calamities as providential judgments against Sabbath-breakers.

⁷⁵ James Ramsay, *An Address on the Proposed Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1788), pp. 37, 39-41. See also Ramsay, *Examination of Rev Harris’s Scriptural Researches* (1788), pp. 27-29.

⁷⁶ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African* (1786), pp. 252-55. According to a letter in *St James’s Chronicle*, 15 Nov. 1788, this passage was quoted at length in Jamaica’s *Kingston Gazette*. It was also cited in Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, pp. 98-100.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

In the autumn of 1787, Clarkson visited Manchester, where he was pressed to deliver a Sunday afternoon discourse on the subject of the slave trade. He was not convinced that ‘the pulpit ought to be made an engine for political purposes’, but since his hosts insisted, he reluctantly agreed. With little time to prepare, he instinctively latched onto a text from the Book of Exodus: ‘Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 23:9). Exodus, with its narrative of deliverance from bondage and judgment on oppressors, was a natural choice. For Clarkson, it was the starting point for a moral-providential argument, an argument that proceeded in three steps to a fearful climax. First, he used his text to establish the basic ethical principle - taught by Moses and Christ - ‘that we should not do that to others, which we should be unwilling to have done unto ourselves’. Next, he used the facts of the slave trade to demonstrate that Britain had violated this moral law and incurred collective guilt; ‘by means of the Slave-trade, we oppressed the stranger’. Finally, Clarkson warned of the consequences if Britain failed to repent. By perpetuating the slave trade, the British were breaking the Golden Rule, ‘that fundamental principle of Christianity’, and ‘cutting ourselves off from all expectation of the Divine blessing’. God would not ‘have mercy upon us, who have had no mercy upon others!’ In the past, the sin of the slave trade had been a sin of ignorance – but now, it lay exposed, and the British were without excuse. The Hebrew prophet Joel had once pronounced judgment on Tyre and Sidon, and their inhabitants had been ‘either cut off, or carried into slavery’. But the British should note that Tyre and Sidon were ‘the Bristol and Liverpool of those times’, condemned for their slave trading. The crimes of Britain against the innocent Africans lay ‘recorded...in heaven’. If ‘we wish to avert

‘Tremble Britannia!’

the heavy national judgement which is hanging over us’, Clarkson concluded, we must assert their cause and so remove ‘the stain of the blood of Africa’.⁷⁷

The biblical and prophetic character of this speech sits awkwardly with the current tendency to depict Clarkson as the prototype of the secular human rights activist or as a pious humanitarian ‘instinctively unsympathetic’ to ‘Wilberforce’s Anglican Evangelical otherworldly emphasis on sin, salvation, judgement, heaven and hell’.⁷⁸ Like Wilberforce and Peckard, Rush and Jefferson, Clarkson believed that the Almighty was the moral governor of the world. Nations which contravened the moral order and refused to repent should expect divine retribution.

By 1787 then, the leading abolitionists had harnessed their cause to an ancient biblical discourse of national punishments. Yet abolitionism could not live by crisis alone. It required a sense of possibility, not merely a sense of urgency. Trailblazers like Sharp had worked hard to exploit troubled times, but their message only really took hold in the ‘fair weather’ conditions of the late 1780s.⁷⁹ According to Seymour Drescher, the period between 1787 and 1792 saw the movement soar on a wave of ‘revived national self-confidence’ and ‘bullish optimism’. ‘British abolitionism’, he insists, ‘did not emerge at a crisis moment of

⁷⁷ Clarkson, *The History*, i. 418-25, esp. 423-25.

⁷⁸ Hilton, ‘Why Britain outlawed her slave trade’, p. 75; Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, passim, a characterisation set in celluloid by Rufus Sewell’s entertaining performance in the film *Amazing Grace* (2007).

⁷⁹ The phrase comes from Drescher, ‘History’s Engines: British Mobilization in the Age of Revolution’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, lxvi (2009), p. 739.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

chastened anxiety or national humiliation arising from the loss of the North American colonies’.⁸⁰ This may be questioned in the case of pioneers like Benezet and Sharp, for whom political and military crisis had been a significant spur. Yet Drescher’s argument certainly holds true for abolitionism as a mass movement. It thrived in a booming urban environment that fostered commercial enterprise, dynamic print culture, religious dissent and mass politics.⁸¹ And it helped that 1788 was the centenary of the Glorious Revolution, a moment when the British were revelling in their freedom and benevolence. It was the perfect opportunity to call the nation to honour its highest ideals.

The abolitionist writings of this brief period often capitalised on the mood of national optimism, but patriotic millennial fervour was tempered by words of warning.⁸² In a 1788 petition presented to Parliament by Sir Adam Ferguson and signed by another Moderate clergyman, Robert Walker, the Edinburgh presbytery praised Britain’s ‘free constitution’ and commended ‘the universal love of mankind’. They rejoiced ‘to see the return of national prosperity exciting in a grateful people a generous commiseration for the unhappy’. Yet the same petition concluded on a rather different note: ‘They are anxious to avert the vengeance of that God who executeth judgment for the oppressed, and to see their country distinguished by the righteousness which exalteth a nation’.⁸³ Ferguson (the historian and social theorist) and Walker (the ‘skating minister’ in Sir Henry Raeburn’s famous painting)

⁸⁰ Drescher, *Abolition*, 206-07, 212-13. See also Drescher, ‘History’s Engines’, pp. 737-56; Hilton, ‘Why Britain abolished her slave trade’, p. 78.

⁸¹ See J. Quirk and D. Richardson, ‘Religion, Urbanisation and Anti-Slavery Mobilisation in Britain, 1787-1833’, *European Journal of English Studies*, xiv (2010), 263-79.

⁸² For a few examples of this juxtaposition, see William Dickson, *Letters on Slavery* (1789), p. 166; James Dore, *A Sermon on the African Slave Trade* (1788), pp. 31-32; Priestley, *A Sermon*, pp. 31-38.

⁸³ *Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, 20 Mar. 1788.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

are icons of the Scottish Enlightenment. But in contrast to David Hume, they remained concerned by the prospect of providential judgment.

Some abolitionists continued to point back to the American war (and environmental disasters) as God’s punishment for Britain’s slave trading. The former slave, Ottobah Cugano, reiterated his mentor Sharp’s interpretation of Britain’s imperial crisis: ‘Loss of territory and destructive wars, earthquakes and dreadful thunders, storms and hurricanes, blastings and destructive insects, inclement and unfruitful seasons, national debt and oppressions, poverty and distresses of individuals’, all these were ‘tokens of God’s judgements against the British empire’.⁸⁴ In a sermon preached before the Corporation of Oxford in 1788, the Anglican don, William Agutter, explicitly identified the recent loss of America and Caribbean storms as divine punishment on Britain’s slave trade:

The Western Empire is gone from us, never to return; it is given to another more righteous than we; who consecrated the sword of resistance by declaring for the universal abolition of slavery [in the Declaration of the Congress in 1774]. The West India islands have been visited with most tremendous hurricanes and earthquakes...by the right-aiming thunderbolts of the Almighty, prepared to execute vengeance on nations which deal in oppression...let us unite to avert the judgments of Heaven, by the abolition of the Slave Trade...⁸⁵

Agutter the high churchman and Cugano the Calvinistic Methodist came from very different parts of the religious world, and they remind us that the abolitionist movement was an ecumenical (and interracial) coalition. Warnings of national punishments resounded

⁸⁴ Cugano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, pp. 25, 56, 76-77, 98-111, 118, 129-30, 143-44, 148.

⁸⁵ William Agutter, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1788), p. 26.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

across the denominational spectrum. In a public letter to the Abolition Committee, the Dean of Middleham suggested that all ‘believers in a Divine Providence’ would fear ‘the scourge of Divine Justice’ and ‘see much to dread in the encouragement of the Slave-Trade’.⁸⁶

Among Rational Dissenters, this line of thought was perhaps less prominent. Richard Price has been described as ‘a passive abolitionist’, and his occasional attacks on slave trading do not warn of divine retribution.⁸⁷ Unitarians often played significant roles in the movement,⁸⁸ but William Smith’s parliamentary speeches on the issue are not punctuated by references to God’s vengeance. Yet while being sceptical about notions of ‘particular’ Providence, Rational Dissenters accepted that God governed nations through ‘general Providence’.⁸⁹ When Joseph Priestley published a sermon against the slave trade, he stressed that the doctrine of providential judgment was held by all serious Christians, Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans and Dissenters, Unitarians and Trinitarians. All believed in ‘the doctrines of a God, of a Providence, and of a future state’, and in divine punishment of guilty nations. Priestley’s prayer was that the British might avoid ‘a condemnation greater than that of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Tyre and Sidon, in the day of judgement’.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 25 Dec. 1787.

⁸⁷ A. Page, ‘“A Species of Slavery”: Richard Price’s Rational Dissent and Antislavery’, *Slavery and Abolition*, xxxii (2011), pp. 53-73.

⁸⁸ A. Page, ‘Rational Dissent, Enlightenment, and Abolition of the British Slave Trade’, *Historical Journal*, liv (2011), pp. 741-772.

⁸⁹ See M. Fitzpatrick, ‘The Enlightenment, Politics and Providence: Some Scottish and English Comparisons’, in K. Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2006), ch. 4; Clark, ‘Providence, Predestination and Progress’, pp. 576-77.

⁹⁰ Priestley, *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade*, pp. viii, 9ff, 39.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

In parliamentary debates, supporters of abolition deployed the same language. This is particularly clear in the case of Wilberforce, who returned to the point year after year. In his celebrated 1789 speech, he began with a statement of collective guilt (‘we are all guilty’). He proceeded to claim that the Irish had abolished their trade in barbarian slaves in the late Middle Ages, because they suspected ‘(I am sure very properly)’ that a recent plague was ‘a punishment sent from heaven’. ‘Policy’, Wilberforce frankly confessed, ‘is not my principle’. Instead, he thought of ‘eternity, and of the future consequences of all human conduct’.⁹¹ In April 1791, he climaxed his three hour speech by warning Parliament not to forget ‘the bounty of Providence’ or the ‘day of retribution’, and vowing ‘Never, never will we desist till we have...released ourselves from the load of guilt’.⁹² A year later, he once again urged MPs to abolish the trade if they ‘valued the favour of Heaven’.⁹³ Wilberforce’s friend, the Prime Minister William Pitt, adopted the same language, waxing eloquent in the April 1792 Commons’ debate about ‘the guilt of Great Britain’, ‘forgiveness from Heaven’, ‘the mercy of Providence’, and ‘an atonement for our long and cruel injustice towards Africa’.⁹⁴

Besides being an insistent refrain, abolitionist providentialism retained its intensity.

Individual slave traders were warned of sudden judgments in this life, though it was more common to point them to the last judgment. Clarkson looked forward to ‘that awful day,

⁹¹ *PH*, xxviii. 42, 60-63 (12 May 1789).

⁹² *PH*, xxix. 277-78 (18 Apr. 1791). This portion of the speech was reproduced in *A Short Sketch of the Evidence...for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade* (1792), p. 17.

⁹³ *PH*, xxix. 1072 (2 Apr. 1792).

⁹⁴ *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons*, ed. W. S. Hathaway (4 vols, 1806), ii. 72, 83.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

which shall surely come, when the master shall behold his murdered negroe face to face’.⁹⁵

Another abolitionist reminded a wavering MP that ‘the British Senator’ would receive the same measure of justice as ‘the poor African’, whose ‘sufferings will be made to recoil upon the heads of his oppressors, with all that vengeance which strict equity requires’.⁹⁶ While abolitionists expressed ‘astonishment’ at the absence of the fear of God among slave traders,⁹⁷ Robert Southey’s ballad, ‘The Sailor’, told of one found groaning in a cow-shed in Bristol, begging for divine mercy.⁹⁸

But the threat of punishment was primarily corporate, and depended on the notion of collective guilt. Repeatedly, abolitionists cited Ezekiel and Joel’s woeful imprecations against the slave trading cities of Tyre and Sidon, warning that these were ‘the Liverpool and Bristol of ancient times!’⁹⁹ They also maintained that the entire nation was at fault for the slave trade. In 1776, Granville Sharp had turned to ‘the Case of Achan’ in the book of Joshua, whose sin had brought military defeat on ‘the whole Community’ - if ‘the hidden Crime of a single Individual...could involve a whole Nation in Trouble’, how much more an officially

⁹⁵ Clarkson, *An Essay*, pp. 252-53. His words were echoed by ‘An Enemy to Oppression’ in *Morning Chronicle*, 10 Nov. 1787.

⁹⁶ *London Chronicle*, 23 Oct. 1788. See also *Public Advertiser*, 26 May 1789 and *Whitehall Evening Post*, 3 Feb. 1791.

⁹⁷ *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 25 Sep. 1795. See also *Public Advertiser*, 28 Mar. 1788; Thomas Bradshaw, *The Slave Trade Inconsistent with Reason and Religion* (1788), p. 7.

⁹⁸ See Basker, *Amazing Grace*, pp. 432-34.

⁹⁹ Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species* (1792), pp. 25-26. See also Dore, *A Sermon on the African Slave Trade*, pp. 3-19; Peter Peckard, *National Crimes the Cause of National Punishments* (Peterborough, 1795), p. 17.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

sanctioned public crime like the slave trade.¹⁰⁰ A decade later, Joseph Priestley argued that since that the eyes of the nation had been opened to the horrors of the trade, everyone was implicated in ‘national guilt’. The British could no longer ‘pretend innocence’ - the people consumed West Indian sugar and their legislature sanctioned the slave trade. If Britain did not abolish the trade, all its evils would be ‘laid to the account of the people of this country in general’.¹⁰¹ As an abolitionist from Kettering explained in the *Whitehall Evening Post*, ‘it is most impolitic to make God our enemy. Who ever hardened themselves against him and prospered?’ Obedience to God was ‘our true interest’.¹⁰²

When it came to explaining how God punished collective crimes, abolitionists could be remarkably specific. Even in the golden years after 1788, extreme weather patterns in the Caribbean colonies continued to be read as literal acts of God against oppression. Hurricanes displayed the wrath of Heaven. Clarkson’s Scottish counterpart, William Dickson, asked the slaveholders of Barbados to consider ‘the unparalleled visitations’ they had experienced, including pest, famine and ‘the utterably dreadful HURRICANE!!’. Sceptics ‘fond of attributing every event merely to second causes’, needed to ‘account for the quick succession of those calamities’.¹⁰³ A few years later, Peter Peckard explained that ‘The raging Elements oftimes shake a guilty Land’. Earthquakes, pestilence and dearth could be ‘God’s ministers of wrath’, for ‘Secondary Causes are all under the control of the First Great

¹⁰⁰ Sharp, *The Law of Liberty*, pp. 46-48. This was the text to which Oliver Cromwell had turned after the failure of his Western Design in the 1650s. See B. Worden, ‘Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan’, in D. Beales and G. Best, eds, *History, Politics and the Churches* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 125-45.

¹⁰¹ Priestley, *A Sermon*, pp. 9-13. See also ‘The Petition of the People called Quakers’, *Morning Chronicle*, 9 Feb. 1788.

¹⁰² *Whitehall Evening Post*, 29 Jan. 1788.

¹⁰³ Dickson, *Letters on Slavery*, pp. 170-71. See also p. 165.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Cause, and...Natural Evils are frequently the punishment of Moral Iniquity’.¹⁰⁴ The Sheffield poet James Montgomery identified the means that God had used to punish European nations for their part in the slave trade: the capture of white slaves by North African pirates, colonial slave rebellions, Caribbean hurricanes, and the yellow fever. These afflictions announced that ‘The God of vengeance reigns’, and Montgomery drew the appropriate lesson: ‘Tremble, Britannia!’¹⁰⁵ As the climatologist Mike Hulme observes, this particular discourse of fear (‘climate as judgement’) was the ‘dominant way of framing climactic disaster’ in the early modern period, and remained strong in the eighteenth century, though it would be undermined by the growing vogue for naturalistic explanations and the professionalization of meteorology in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁶

This providentialist reading of catastrophes shows that abolitionists were alarmists. They sought to shake the nation from its slumber as a hellfire preacher would awaken complacent sinners. By defining the national interest in fiercely prophetic and biblical terms, they aimed to induce a moral panic. The Baptist James Dore, whose Southwark congregation became a key centre of abolitionist activism and publication, explained that because nations did not have immortal souls, ‘national sins are punished, in this world, by national judgments’. If the slaves ‘cry to Heaven for vengeance upon this nation: and if their

¹⁰⁴ Peckard, *National Crimes*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ Montgomery, ‘The West Indies’, pp. 21, 31-33.

¹⁰⁶ M. Hulme, ‘The Conquering of Climate: Discourses of Fear and their Dissolution’, *The Geographical Journal*, clxxiv (2008), pp. 7-8.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

blood by required of us - O ENGLAND! ENGLAND! Words are wanting to describe the horrors of thy doom!’¹⁰⁷

The theme of God’s wrath was particularly compelling for the black Calvinists who as former slaves became the leading Afro-British writers of the late eighteenth century.¹⁰⁸ Olaudah Equiano was convinced that West Indian slave markets, in which people were traded like cattle, were a ‘crying sin, enough to bring down God’s judgment on the islands’. The torture inflicted by the ‘barbarous overseer’ would be ‘tenderness’ compared to the hell torments experienced by oppressors who provoked the ‘wrath of an angry but righteous God!’¹⁰⁹ Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787) were just as dark. He urged slave traders to give up their ‘evil traffic’, or ‘meet with the full stroke of the long suspended vengeance of heaven, when death will cut them down to a state as mean as that of the most abjected slave’. He depicted oppressed Africans crying out to the Lord to ‘execute judgment’, foreseeing the day when their enemies were ‘trodden down as the mire of the streets’. All the ‘infamous profits’ of the trade would mean nothing, he warned, ‘if it brings down the avenging hand of God on you’. Parliament should appoint ‘days of mourning and fasting’ and proclaim ‘a total abolition of slavery’ itself. The empire could be redeemed, but only if it brought Africans the gospel instead of oppression. ‘The voice of our complaint implies a vengeance’, Cugoano concluded ominously. If it was ‘not hearkened unto’, a voice of

¹⁰⁷ Dore, *A Sermon*, pp. 31-32. On the activism of his congregation see T. Whelan, ‘Martha Gurney and the Anti-Slave Trade Movement, 1788-1794’, in E.J. Clapp and J.R. Jeffrey, eds, *Women, Dissent and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Oxford, 2011), ch. 2.

¹⁰⁸ On their religious identity see V. Carretta, ed, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18th Century* (Lexington, KT, 1996), pp. 7ff.

¹⁰⁹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. V. Carretta (2003), pp. 108, 331.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

thunder would arise and ‘rend the mountains’.¹¹⁰ While this apocalyptic rhetoric of black rage was disturbing, it was acknowledged in abolitionist verse which often depicted Africans praying for vengeance or taking revenge on their oppressors.¹¹¹ In the 1790s, some would depict the Haitian Revolution as an act of God, who used slave rebellion to inflict punishment on oppressors.¹¹²

The visceral nature of this discourse is epitomised in its fixation on blood guilt. Wesley had warned slave traders: ‘Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy house, thy lands are at present stained with blood’, and the blood of the slave ‘*crieth against thee from the earth, from the ship, and from the waters*’.¹¹³ Abolitionists often made such allusions to the story of Cain and Abel. ‘Like the crime of Cain’, wrote one, ‘the Slave Trade “hath the primal eldest curse upon it”’.¹¹⁴ John Newton, who had once shed African blood himself as a slave ship captain, was later disturbed by the ‘annual accumulation of blood...crying against the nations of Europe concerned in this trade, and particularly against our own!’¹¹⁵ Wilberforce reminded Parliament of Lady Macbeth’s nightmare: ‘Here’s the smell of the blood still, and all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand’.¹¹⁶ In a later speech, he confessed that

¹¹⁰ Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, pp. 25, 56, 76-77, 98-111, 118, 129-30, 143-44, 148.

¹¹¹ See Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace*, pp. 199, 209, 211, 305-06, 308, 316, 352, 370, 438-39, 629; Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery*, pp. 73, 94, 96, 114, 154-55, 175-80, 208, 218, 239-41, 260-61

¹¹² See for example, ‘Slavery’, *World*, 25 Nov. 1791.

¹¹³ Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁴ *Diary or Woodfall’s Register*, 28 May 1789.

¹¹⁵ John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1788), p. 30. See *The Journal of a Slave Trader: John Newton, 1750-54*, ed. B. Martin and M. Spurrell (1962).

¹¹⁶ *PH*, xxix. 277 (18 Apr. 1791).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

he was ‘anxious to wash his hands’ of blood.¹¹⁷ Abolitionists also turned to the Book of Numbers which taught that bloodshed ‘defileth the land’ and could only be purged by the death of the guilty party (Numbers 35:33-34). This had been a key text of the Puritan regicides and their apologists in 1648-49, and it was more widely used to defend the practice of capital punishment.¹¹⁸ One writer told the ‘Men of Liverpool’ that ‘your country ought to institute a commission to try you for murder, and cleanse the land of blood which cries for vengeance’.¹¹⁹ The citizens of Rotherham petitioned Parliament ‘to clear the Land from the Guilt of Blood’, while another petition from the clergy of Leicester warned that failure to do so would ‘bring down upon this country the severest judgement of Heaven’.¹²⁰

Defenders of the slave trade were understandably perturbed by this militant moral absolutism. They sought to rebut Clarkson’s suggestion that God was scourging the Caribbean colonies for their iniquity. Gilbert Francklyn indignantly denounced the abolitionist as a ‘Rash and arrogant young man’ who ‘presumed to declare the councils of the most High’.¹²¹ The Corporation of Liverpool sponsored Raymund Harris’s *Scriptural Researches* (1788), devoted to showing that the slave trade could not possibly be the object

¹¹⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 2 Mar. 1799.

¹¹⁸ P. Crawford, ‘Charles Stuart: that Man of Blood’, *Journal of British Studies*, 16 (1977), pp. 41-61. For an example of its broader use see *The Golden Remains of the Ever Memorable Mr John Hales of Eton College* (1659), pp. 74-96.

¹¹⁹ *Public Advertiser*, 10 Jul. 1788.

¹²⁰ Cited in J. Oldfield, *Popular politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 110, 115.

¹²¹ Gilbert Francklyn, *An Answer to the Rev Mr Clarkson’s Essay* (London, 1789), pp. 89, 234. See also ‘To the Editor’, *Morning Chronicle*, 12 Mar. 1792.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

of God’s wrath, because it had been practised by Abraham and other biblical saints without the slightest ‘intimation of God’s displeasure’.¹²²

The publication of Harris’ tract marked a critical moment in the history of British abolitionism.¹²³ This was a battle for legitimization that neither side could afford to lose.

Harris mounted a powerful case for the claim that slavery in the abstract was countenanced by both the Old and the New Testaments. In antebellum America, this argument would gain significant traction in the Protestant churches, causing many abolitionists to abandon faith in the infallibility of the Bible.¹²⁴ In Britain, however, Harris’s seed fell on barren ground.

Published in the centenary year of the Glorious Revolution, when the British were glorying in their liberty and benevolence, his mean-spirited message was out of step with the public mood. Within a year of the publication of *Scriptural Researches*, half-a-dozen replies had been rushed into print. The obscure ex-Jesuit Spanish priest from Liverpool was rapidly drowned out by a host of respectable English voices, among them the Anglican clergymen Ramsay, Peckard, Thomas Burgess and William Hughes.

The proslavery lobby never recovered from this initial assault. The asymmetrical nature of the contest did not augur well for its cause. In stark contrast to the slavery controversy in antebellum America, the balance of British religious publications and authorities was heavily weighted in favour of abolitionism. By silencing Harris, not least with *ad hominem* attacks, British abolitionists seized the biblical high ground. Unlike their later American counterparts,

¹²² Raymund Harris, ‘Scriptural Researches’, in J. Pinfold, ed., *The Slave Trade Debate* (Oxford, 2007), p. 184. See also pp. 29, 201, 211, 216.

¹²³ The fullest survey of the debate is in Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, pp. 541-51.

¹²⁴ See M. Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York, 2012).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

they avoided a theological crisis in which anti-slavery was pitted against the Bible.¹²⁵

Concentrating on the evils of the slave trade and racial slavery, they side-stepped a protracted battle over ‘biblical slavery’; in the decades to come, they would not be forced to wage exegetical trench warfare, verse by difficult verse. As a consequence, they were free to use it as a source of rhetoric and inspiration without fear of clerical contradiction. The proslavery lobby, like the American segregationists in the 1950s and 1960s, lost the battle for the clergy and the churches, while their rivals co-opted a biblical tradition of prophetic religion with wide cultural resonance.¹²⁶

Despite capturing the imagination of the clergy and the religious public, events were to bring abolitionist momentum to a juddering halt. After 1792, backlash against the French and Haitian Revolutions damaged the prospects of Parliamentary abolition. The problem of the slave trade suddenly seemed less pressing than the threat of war and revolution.

The crisis of the 1790s meant that abolitionist preaching was conducted in more anguished tones, unleavened by the buoyant optimism that one finds between 1788 and 1792. In a Fast Sermon in 1794, John Newton declared that the atrocities of the slave trade were even greater in scale than those of revolutionary France.¹²⁷ A year later, the radical Scottish Relief

¹²⁵ See M. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006).

¹²⁶ On the imbalance of religious forces in the 1950s and 1960s see D. L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

¹²⁷ John Newton, *The Imminent Danger and the Only Sure Resource of this Nation* (London, 1794), pp. 14-15.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Church minister, Niel Douglass, warned of national doom,¹²⁸ and Peter Peckard delivered what John Walsh calls ‘a magnificently sulphurous Jeremiad’ about the slave trade.¹²⁹

Another preacher, Samuel Lowell, denounced the slave trade as an ‘infernal traffic’, a ‘diabolical commerce’, an ‘execrable business’, ‘our capital national crime’, the ‘abomination of desolation’; to even mention it was to ‘feel an unutterable combination of all the passions known to the human heart, painfully overwhelming the mind’.¹³⁰

Activists now warned that Britain’s guilt was aggravated by Parliament’s failure to enact abolition. As early as 1791, when the abolition bill failed in Parliament, the Dissenting poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld wrote ‘An Epistle to William Wilberforce’, in which she praised those ‘Whose efforts yet arrest Heaven’s lifted hand’. Yet she dared to suggest that they should ‘seek no more to break a nation’s fall’, but simply allow God’s wrath to take its course. The more they pleaded, the more they swelled the ‘account of vengeance yet to come’.¹³¹ In an article on ‘The Slave Trade’ in 1796, Samuel Taylor Coleridge urged opponents of abolition to ask themselves ‘this fearful question – “if the God of Justice inflict on us that mass only of anguish which we have wantonly heaped on our brethren, what must a state of retribution

¹²⁸ Niel Douglass, *Britain’s Guilt, Danger, and Duty* (Dundee, 1795), pp. 136-38. But see his earlier tracts, *The African Slave Trade* (Edinburgh, 1792) and *Thoughts on Modern Politics* (1792).

¹²⁹ Peckard, *National Crimes the Cause of National Punishments*. The sermon was warmly praised in *The Critical Review*, xv (1796), pp. 113-15. For Walsh’s comment see R. Hyam, ‘Peter Peckard, “Universal Benevolence”, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade’, in his *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2010), ch. 5, quotation at p. 167.

¹³⁰ Samuel Lowell, *The Mystery of Providence and the Grace and the Sins of Britain* (1794), pp. 47-50.

¹³¹ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, ‘An epistle of William Wilberforce’ (1791), in Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery*, pp. 182-84.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

be?’’.¹³² In his *Ode on the Departing Year* (1796), Coleridge had an angel summon divine wrath to avenge ‘Afric’s wrongs’: ‘Rise, God of Nature, rise! Why sleep thy Bolts unhurl’d?’¹³³

Among the associates of Coleridge was the Baptist-Unitarian radical, Benjamin Flower. Between 1793 and 1803, Flower was the editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, the most widely read provincial newspaper of the day.¹³⁴ During its decade of publication, he wrote over thirty major editorials on the slave trade, doing as much as anyone to keep the issue before the public. As John Oldfield explains, these editorials returned ‘time and again to...Old Testament images of sin and retribution’. Rebuking the House of Lords for its indifference to abolition, he told them to listen to ‘the Almighty Avenger of the oppressed [Genesis 4:10] - What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground! Though ye make many prayers, I will not hear you - Your hands are full of blood’. The slave rebellion on Saint Domingue was evidence of impending doom. Parliament had ‘defied heaven, and insulted the Almighty to his face!’ If Britain failed to repent, it would face ‘MIGHTY RUIN!’¹³⁵

Flower’s sense of foreboding was exacerbating by his disappointment with the nation’s religious leaders. In a work entitled *National Sins Considered* (1796), he complained that

¹³² Coleridge’s *Poetry and Prose*, ed. N. Halmi et al (New York, 2004), p. 296.

¹³³ Coleridge’s *Poetry*, pp. 40-41.

¹³⁴ See T. Whelan, ‘Radical Politics and Unitarian Piety: The Life and Career of Benjamin Flower, 1755-1829’, *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, xxiv (2010), pp. 235-53. I am grateful to Professor Whelan for sharing a copy of this article and his expertise on Flower.

¹³⁵ J. Oldfield, ‘(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse during the 1790s’, in C. Kaplan and J. Oldfield, eds, *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* (2010), ch. 2, quotations at pp. 36-38.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

‘the evangelical clergy’ of the established church, men like Charles Simeon and Thomas Robinson, were now consumed by fear of the French Revolution, radicalism and Dissent. Fast Sermons were being used to preach reactionary politics rather than abolition.¹³⁶ In Flower’s eyes, even Wilberforce was tarnished, a warmonger abroad and an advocate of repression at home.¹³⁷ By 1804, the journalist was attacking Evangelical Baptists like his former pastor Robert Hall for abandoning radical politics.¹³⁸ Hall and Newton continued to condemn the slave trade, but with less urgency than before, reasoning that since the British public had disowned the trade, it was no longer a ‘national sin’.¹³⁹ The crisis that followed the French Revolution had distracted, divided and demoralised the forces of abolition. Abolitionists were also dismayed by the decline of popular enthusiasm for the cause. Repeated warnings of national punishments failed to induce moral panic. Hall explained that public indifference was so great that even the most vehement jeremiads were met with yawns.¹⁴⁰ Wilberforce contrasted his own enduring commitment with the shallowness of the public. In 1796, he told Parliament that if his campaign had been based on ‘temporary feelings of sensibility, it might be expected he would abandon it, but having taken it up upon a deep and solid basis, with a view to every obligation divine and human’, he was

¹³⁶ Benjamin Flower, *National Sins Considered* (Cambridge, 1796), pp. 23-27, passim.

¹³⁷ Oldfield, ‘(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse’, pp. 39-41.

¹³⁸ See his preface to Robert Aspland, *Divine Judgments on Guilty Nations* (Cambridge, 1804).

¹³⁹ See Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, p. 14; Robert Hall, *The Sentiments Proper to this Present Crisis: A Sermon Preached at Bridge Street, Bristol, October 19, 1803*, reprinted in *The Works of Robert Hall*, ed. O. Gregory (1845), i. 177-78.

¹⁴⁰ Preface to second edition of *The Sentiments Proper to this Present Crisis*, in *The Works of Robert Hall*, i. 132.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

determined to press on.¹⁴¹ Eight years later, he wrote to Hannah More: ‘Alas! the tales of horror, which once caused so many tears to flow, are all forgotten! I am grown to think that sensibility is one of the most cruel of all qualities’.¹⁴²

When in 1796, Parliament failed to follow through on its pledge to abolish the slave trade within four years, Wilberforce became increasingly shrill. In 1796 and 1798, he denounced British condemnation of godless France as sheer hypocrisy. Britain boasted of its regard for religion and divine justice, but it ‘acted the reverse of its doctrines’. The British may not have worshipped the goddess of Reason like the French, but they were guilty of ‘setting up the God Mammon’, ‘attempting to dethrone the Supreme Being’, ‘establishing a system of atheism’ and ‘denying the PROVIDENCE of Heaven, and its interference with things here’. God’s justice might be slow, but it was inexorable, and Britain needed ‘to appease the indignation and avert the vengeance of a GOD, who being just, must be incensed at such a violation of all justice!’¹⁴³ In 1797, Wilberforce told the House that ‘If any man believed in a moral Providence, he must perceive, from present events, that our perseverance in this horrid trade, which was consistent with no principles except those of practical Atheism, had provoked the divine vengeance’. He knew ‘many thinking men, in and out of the house’, whose minds were ‘saddened by this consciousness, which seemed to them to be justified by some particular events’.¹⁴⁴ In November 1800, he wrote: ‘when I consider what

¹⁴¹ *Whitehall Evening Post*, 18 Feb. 1797.

¹⁴² *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, ed. R. and I. Wilberforce (2 vols, 1840), i. 299.

¹⁴³ *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Feb. 1796; *The Star*, 4 Apr. 1798. See also *PH*, xxxiii. 1384-85 (3 Apr. 1798).

¹⁴⁴ *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 15-17 May 1797; *General Evening Post*, 13-16 May 1797. See also *PH*, xxxiii. 570 (15 May 1797).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

chastisement we deserve at God’s hands on the one side, and contemplate the storms I see brewing on the other, I begin to tremble’.¹⁴⁵

The Napoleonic threat reinforced Wilberforce’s concern about national punishments. In 1803 and 1804, he shared with various correspondents his fear that God would use the French dictator as ‘our scourge’ to settle Heaven’s controversy with Britain. The slave trade, he told John Newton, was ‘a millstone, sufficient of itself, to sink such an enlightened and highly favoured nation as ours to the bottom of the sea’.¹⁴⁶ The *Christian Observer*, edited by Zachary Macaulay, agreed that the war with France was ‘a clear indication of the divine displeasure on account of our national sins’. There were ‘multitudes of true Christians’, among them German Lutherans, ‘who day and night are interceding with God to avert from us his heavy judgments’.¹⁴⁷ Another Claphamite, James Stephen, highlighted the providentialist case at the close of his 1804 tract recommending an alliance with Haiti. ‘We plunge deeper every day’, he wrote, ‘into that gulph of African blood’. Britain’s ‘foul relapse’ after its promises in 1792, demonstrated ‘the low state of our public morals’. Britain now maintained the slave trade in full knowledge of its monstrosity. Since 1792, the nation had suffered ‘a strange train of public evils’, and she was now faced with the ‘Satanic mind’ of Napoleon. Such, Stephen concluded, were the instruments which the Almighty was sometimes ‘pleased to employ in purposes of national vengeance’.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, *Life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols, 1838), ii. 382-83.

¹⁴⁶ *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, i. 264, 274, 299, 302.

¹⁴⁷ *Christian Observer*, ii (1803), pp. 764-769.

¹⁴⁸ James Stephen, *The Opportunity, Or Reasons for an Immediate Alliance with St Domingo* (London, 1804), pp. 139-40, 144-48.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

After Trafalgar, the threat of military defeat and revolution receded. Yet despite the naval triumph, the godly still felt that Britain’s status was fragile. The Parliamentary Fast Sermons of 1806 and 1807 did not mention the slave trade, but they suggested that God was using the French tyrant as ‘a scourge’ against sinful Britain.¹⁴⁹ In 1806, Wilberforce’s abolition speech reiterated the basic message that ‘Providence had never connected the happiness and prosperity of any country with injustice’.¹⁵⁰ Granville Sharp was characteristically less restrained in a published letter ‘on the extreme wickedness, and total illegality of tolerating slavery in any part of the British dominions’. The letter, published in 1807 as part of the last push for abolition, revisited the grim prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and warned that if Parliament did not abolish slavery itself, its public fasts ‘must necessarily be deemed...a mockery and contempt of Divine Justice, by the NATIONAL RULERS’.¹⁵¹

Unlike Sharp, the two main architects of abolition in Parliament were careful not to attack slavery per se. But the appeal to providential judgments loomed large in their most important publications of 1807: Stephen’s *The Dangers of the Country*, and Wilberforce’s *Letter on the Slave Trade*. Stephen published his book in January, on the eve of the Parliamentary debate on abolition that took place on 20 February. In Part I, he set out the dangers the country faced, including the prospect of Napoleonic invasion. In Part II, he outlined the means by which these dangers could be avoided. At one level, this was the

¹⁴⁹ Richard Allott, *A Sermon preached before the Honourable House of Commons* (1806), p. 14; Michael Marlow, *A Sermon preached before the Honourable House of Commons* (1807), pp. 5-6.

¹⁵⁰ *Cobbett’s Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time* (41 vols, 1803-20) [hereafter *PD*], viii. 595 (10 Jun. 1806).

¹⁵¹ Granville Sharp, *The System of ‘Colonial Law’ Compared with the Eternal Laws of God* (1807), pp. 13-20, quotation at 15.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

work of a hard-headed practical politician, packed with facts and figures, and offering a seven-point plan for strengthening Britain’s military. But the book culminated with a passionate, sixty-page call for national ‘reformation’, which was also published separately with an advertisement explaining that ‘the most important’ means of improving Britain’s national defence was through ‘the propitiation of Heaven, by an immediate Abolition of the Slave Trade’.¹⁵² Here Stephen argued that the crisis confronting Britain was a sign of God’s anger against the nation. God had already punished the French for their part in the trade by sending them a bloody revolution and a dictator, and the British too were in imminent danger of divine vengeance. Scripture and History showed that in ‘the course of Providence towards nations’, ‘perseverance in guilt’ precedes ‘the scourge’. By persisting in this ‘system of gigantic guilt’ for fourteen long years after 1792, Britain was toying with disaster, and offering a ‘grand provocation’ to the Almighty.¹⁵³

Wilberforce concurred. Whilst his *Letter on the Slave Trade* marshalled a variety of secular arguments (economic, political and humanitarian), his case was topped and tailed by an appeal to the fear of God. Indeed, he frankly declared that ‘of all the motives’ that impelled him, the concern for the prospects of his country carried ‘the greatest force’. God governed the world, and ‘the sufferings of nations are to be regarded as the punishment of national crimes; their decline and fall, as the execution of His sentence’. Since Britain had persisted in ‘fraud, oppression and cruelty’, despite being clearly convicted of the evil of the trade, ‘have we not abundant cause for serious apprehension?’ To continue any longer in such crimes, after ‘the fullest knowledge and the loudest warnings, must infallibly bring down upon us

¹⁵² [James Stephen], *New Reasons for Abolishing the Slave Trade* (1807), p. 3, signed ‘London, 26th January, 1807’.

¹⁵³ [James Stephen], *The Dangers of the Country* (1st edn, 1807), pp. 164-227.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

the heaviest judgements of the Almighty’. ‘We have been eminently blessed’, Wilberforce concluded in his final sentence; ‘we have been long spared; let us not presume too far on the forbearance of the Almighty’.¹⁵⁴

As the evidence above indicates, judicial providentialism was a prominent and persistent feature of abolitionist discourse. But how was this line of argument received in polite society and among political elites? A survey of the monthly journals suggests the limits to its appeal. Predictably, the Evangelical *Eclectic Review* embraced the language of propitiation, scourging and chastisement used by Stephen and Wilberforce, and warned MPs voting on the slave trade bill not to ‘defy the thunder of Heaven’.¹⁵⁵ *The Cabinet*, a monthly journal of polite literature, avoided such an endorsement, but made respectful mention of the providentialist argument, praising Stephen’s ‘earnestness’.¹⁵⁶

Other journals, however, were far more sceptical about invocations of divine thunder. William Cobbett’s *Political Register* took exception to an abolitionist author who was ‘pleased to menace me’ with ‘the infliction of that eternal wrath’, which ‘I am happy to reflect is lodged in other hands than his’.¹⁵⁷ Another journalist believed that if the slave trade had been an abomination in God’s eyes, ‘the hand of Heaven would have chastised

¹⁵⁴ W. Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1807), pp. 4-5, 348-50.

¹⁵⁵ *Eclectic Review*, iii (1807), pp. 272-74, 431-33. See also *The Christian Observer*, vi (1807), pp. 109-24; 250-66, 315-28; *The Evangelical Review*, xv (1807), pp. 332-333.

¹⁵⁶ *The Cabinet, Or Monthly Review of Polite Literature*, i (1807), pp. 192-95.

¹⁵⁷ *Cobbett’s Political Register*, vii (1805), p. 370.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

us’; yet during the height of its slave trading, Britain had enjoyed unparalleled ‘prosperity and happiness’.¹⁵⁸

While the tracts by Stephen and Wilberforce were widely noticed in 1807, reviewers were largely unconvinced by their providentialist argument for abolition. *The Edinburgh Review* did print the closing passage of Wilberforce’s *Letter* (after abolition had passed), but in order to illustrate his ‘eloquence’ not any ‘correctness of reasoning’.¹⁵⁹ In a largely sympathetic twenty-seven page review of Stephen’s *Dangers*, the journal dismissed the providentialist interpretation of Bonaparte in two sentences. The author had devoted almost seventy pages to ‘pious declamations’ and ‘citations from the Revelations’; while this may be well meant, ‘the reasoning...would scarcely go down in a sermon’.¹⁶⁰ In considering the same book, *The Anti-Jacobin Review* praised Parts I and II, but wished that Part III had never been published. In it, Stephen displayed ‘an enthusiastic mind’ and ‘superstition’, treating his readers ‘as nurses do children, by frightening them into good behaviour with dreadful stories of raw heads and bloody bones’.¹⁶¹ Smollett’s *Critical Review* agreed. Part III of Stephen’s book was ‘written on many of the false principles of ancient puritanism, which are at this time propagated under the name of Methodism’. This was ‘to be ‘lamented’, for ‘the whole work’ could be ‘exposed to the scorn of scepticism’ and ‘induce fanatics to ascribe wrong events to wrong causes’. Stephen’s idea of ‘the Deity “*dropping into Europe the French Revolution*”’ was ‘a sentiment of fanatic impiety, that has not been exceeded

¹⁵⁸ *The Weekly Political Review of Mr Redhead Yorke*, ii (1807), p. 143.

¹⁵⁹ *Edinburgh Review*, x (1807), pp. 199-206, quotation at p. 203.

¹⁶⁰ *Edinburgh Review*, x (1807), pp. 1-27, quotation at p. 4.

¹⁶¹ *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, xxvii (1807), pp. 367-83, quotations at pp. 382-83. See an earlier comment on abolitionist providentialism in *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, x (1801), p. 367.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

since the days of Cromwell’. The slave trade was not a national sin, for the people as a whole had made clear their abhorrence of it.¹⁶²

These reviews clearly expressed a widespread perception. The abolitionist obsession with blood guilt and national punishments, Cain and Abel, Tyre and Sidon, and the sin of Achan, seemed like a throwback to Cromwellian Puritanism, and uncongenial to polite, as well as sceptical, opinion. James Boswell knew he would touch a chord when he wrote: ‘Go, W[ilberforce], with narrow scull,/Go home, and preach away at Hull,/No longer to the Senate cackle,/In strains which suit the Tabernacle’.¹⁶³ In Parliament too, abolitionists were dismissed as sectaries, fanatics, enthusiasts, Methodists, Behmenists, even Fifth Monarchy Men. In the 1792 debates Lord Carhampton mocked an abolitionist MP ‘who lifted up his hands to the skies, and then pointed them to the floor, his eyes rolling all the time in a phrenzy, seemed as if he were grasping both Heaven and Earth at once’.¹⁶⁴ In May 1797, the West Indian MP, Bryan Edwards, took exception to Wilberforce’s claim that divine vengeance was being visited on the colonies through natural calamities; the abolitionist, said Edwards, had ‘taken the sceptre from the hands of the Almighty’ and ‘dealt his damnation somewhat roundly’. He cited a verse from Alexander Pope to caution against such presumption.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² *Critical Review*, x (1807), pp. 359-69, quotations at pp. 367-68.

¹⁶³ Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery*, pp. 186-87.

¹⁶⁴ *PH*, xxix. 1091-92, 1250, 1283-84, 1286. See also *World*, 31 Jul. 1789. On Methodist as a term of abuse see the *British Review* article cited in *Letters of Hannah More to Zachary Macaulay*, ed. A. Roberts (New York, 1860), pp. 39-44.

¹⁶⁵ *PH*, xxxiii. 574 (15 May 1797). See other reports in *British Chronicle*, 15-17 May 1797; *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 16 May 1797; *General Evening Post*, 13 May 1797.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Abolitionists had long known that to raise the spectre of God’s wrath in the context of political debate was to risk mockery from some quarters. ‘I am well aware’, wrote Granville Sharp at the start of his 1776 treatise on biblical retribution, ‘how very unfashionable it is, now-a-days, to quote Scripture, when matters of Law, Politics, or Trade are called in question’.¹⁶⁶ James Ramsay agreed that it was now ‘too fashionable to disallow God’s interposition in his own creation’.¹⁶⁷ Another writer acknowledged that ‘To threaten the country which gives a sanction to such a trade, with divine vengeance, may be sneered at, as the vain reveries of an enthusiast’.¹⁶⁸ For his part, James Stephen acknowledged that his providentialist argument would ‘revolt the prejudices of many who regard the raising of our eyes beyond secondary causes, no part of political wisdom’.¹⁶⁹ The *Christian Observer* worried about the influence of ‘practical infidelity’, and wondered if the Lords and Commons recognised ‘the agency of a superintending Providence’, or still treated such scriptural talk with ‘levity’. The same journal noted that even when religious speeches were made in parliament, they were not properly reported in the press, due to ‘the moral apathy of our newspaper reporters’.¹⁷⁰ All of which suggests that godly abolitionists favoured this rhetoric not because everyone *would* believe it, but because everyone *should* believe it. Insofar as abolitionism was a means of injecting spiritual seriousness into British public life, providentialism was a non-negotiable component of the message, even if alienated sections of the audience.

¹⁶⁶ Sharp, *The Law of Retribution*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Ramsay, *A Reply*, p. 95.

¹⁶⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 7 July 1788.

¹⁶⁹ Stephen, *The Opportunity*, p. 146.

¹⁷⁰ *Christian Observer*, ii (1803), p. 765; vi (1807), p. 144.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Moreover, abolitionists knew the value of discursive pluralism. Judicial providentialism was only one strand in their case for abolition, just as the case for abolition was only one factor behind the movement’s success. They appealed on grounds of policy, humanity, and justice, directed respectively to the statesman, ‘the man of feeling’, and the moralist.¹⁷¹ Imbued with the values of their age and shaped by the culture of sensibility, they spoke the language of liberty, equality, brotherhood, natural rights, happiness, benevolence and humanity (language learned from the moral philosophers of the British Enlightenment).¹⁷² Wilberforce had mastered various political vocabularies. For all his piety, he was a practical politician. He set his sights on the immediate abolition of the slave trade, not on the end of slavery, and stuck to that position when one MP rashly attempted to add a gradual emancipation scheme to the parliamentary measures of 1807.¹⁷³ He was well aware that his fellow members did not want to listen to a three-hour sermon, and proved quite capable of rationing and modulating his biblical language. His great set piece speeches on abolition from 1789 onwards appealed insistently to ‘fact’ and ‘evidence’, drawing on the slave trade investigations, which as David Davis reminds us, ‘embodied the spirit of the scientific Enlightenment’.¹⁷⁴ At times, Wilberforce stepped back from the more outlandish claims about providential vengeance - it may not come ‘in tempests, in earthquakes, or in hurricanes’, but it would come in the natural ‘course of human affairs’, which were

¹⁷¹ See Clarkson, *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (2nd edn, 1788), p. 138.

¹⁷² See Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*; B. Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Houndmills, 2005).

¹⁷³ See S. Farrell, ‘“Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy”: Parliamentary Politics and the Abolition Act, 1807’, in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin, eds, *The British Slave Trade*, p. 168.

¹⁷⁴ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 422.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

governed by inexorable moral laws.¹⁷⁵ In his relatively brief 1807 speeches, he seems not to have reiterated the closing argument of his *Letter*. There is reason to think that the appeal to judicial providentialism had limited impact among Westminster’s hard-headed statesmen, whose God talk rarely extended beyond the perfunctory (God forbid, thank God, God knows, Great God!). In the abolition speeches of Charles James Fox, it is conspicuous by its absence.

Among the God-fearing, however, who played a central role in the abolitionist movement, things were different. Judicial providentialism was compelling to the abolitionist leadership; it resonated with the religious public; and it had some purchase among parliamentarians.

First and most importantly, notions of collective guilt and divine judgment preoccupied the movement’s leading figures. We find them powerfully and repeatedly articulated by Benezet, Sharp, Clarkson, Dickson, Wilberforce and Stephen. If, to borrow Coleridge’s famous description of Clarkson, these men were the ‘moral steam engines’ of the movement, they were fuelled in part by the fear of national punishments. In the case of Sharp, Wilberforce and Stephen, one could describe that fear as obsessive. Moreover, such providentialist concerns were shared by many of the campaign’s most influential opinion formers, including Cowper, Equiano and Flower, and numerous Anglican and Dissenting divines.

¹⁷⁵ *PH*, xxxiii. 1385 (3 Apr. 1798). See also *PH*, xxxiii. 278 (6 Apr. 1797).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Although abolitionist leaders were well versed in the language of the Enlightenment, they were equally fluent in a more primal discourse – of iniquity, wrath, punishment and atonement – rooted in ancient Scripture. The dramatic interplay between biblical and Enlightenment motifs was one of the most striking features of the writing of abolitionists like Benezet, Sharp and Wilberforce.¹⁷⁶ Nowhere is it more clearly displayed than in William Dickson’s *Letters on Slavery*. The Abolition Society’s Scottish agent cited the thinkers of the French and British Enlightenments: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Raynal; Gibbon, Ferguson and Robertson. He set out to prove his case by ‘arguments, founded on *facts*’, and his letters were packed with evidence and statistics. But when it came to his Conclusion, he changed registers, reminding his readers ‘that “The Most High ruleth over the kingdoms of the earth”, and that nations can only be punished as nations, that is, in this world’. God had sent ‘terrible plagues’ on Egypt for exercising a tyranny that was ‘*comparatively* mild’ when set next to Britain’s slave trade. The Scriptures contained ‘tremendous denunciations’ of injustice and oppression, and Britain should not ‘provoke indulgent Heaven’ to wrath.¹⁷⁷

In the minds of godly abolitionists, the Enlightenment was not enough. Only the highly charged language of the biblical prophets could do justice to the moral gravity of the slave trade. Hopes of a dawning age of humanity and liberty had to be supplemented by warnings of God’s approaching wrath. This duality, whatever we may make of its intellectual

¹⁷⁶ The most balanced treatment of these different strains in abolitionist thought remains Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Thought*, chs. 11 and 12. On abolitionism as an attempt to redeem ‘Christianity’s reputation’ in the face of radical Enlightenment attacks, see D.B. Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), Part Two, esp. pp. 116-53.

¹⁷⁷ Dickson, *Letters on Slavery*, pp. iii, 164-66. The same accent on divine action and divine judgment recurs in his address ‘To the White Inhabitants...of Barbados’ (pp. 170-71) and ‘To the Free Negroes...of Barbados’ (pp. 176-78).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

coherence, was rhetorically potent. It made the movement appear at once excitingly modern and viscerally biblical, and allowed it to appeal to different audiences. It enabled activists to play on contemporary anxieties even as they exploited the post-war optimism of the late 1780s. They depicted Britain’s future hanging in the balance. Its present condition, however prosperous, was precarious. The slave trade was the pivotal issue on which the nation’s fortunes would turn. She was either on the verge of ‘terrible visitations’, or of another glorious revolution, a new age of jubilee.¹⁷⁸

While the Teston set and the Clapham Sect appealed to humane feeling, they believed that warm feelings of benevolence were insufficient. James Ramsay had been contemptuous of ‘the moonshine glow of sentiment’, and thought that something tougher was needed to move the passions and ‘invigorate the conduct’.¹⁷⁹ Wilberforce feared that due to ‘our corrupted nature’, prosperity tended ‘to harden the heart’ against religious seriousness.¹⁸⁰ His anthropology was more Augustinian than Augustan (though his faith in humanity’s moral progress marked him out as a man of the eighteenth century). Doubting the power of sheer altruism, he and other leading abolitionists brandished the threat of national punishments alongside the prospect of national honour.

The fear of God was more than a useful trope. Indeed, for a number of activists, it was an alarming element of their life experience. This was true in American abolitionism, where numerous participants had passed through the fires of religious revivalism.¹⁸¹ In Britain, key

¹⁷⁸ See Dickson, *Letters on Slavery*, pp. 165-66.

¹⁷⁹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 348.

¹⁸⁰ Wilberforce, *A Letter*, p. 346.

¹⁸¹ See Robert A. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, 1994).

‘Tremble Britannia!’

figures were troubled by the fear of eternal punishment. According to Christopher Brown, ‘Granville Sharp lived with an acute fear of eternal damnation’ and filled his commonplace books with comments on ‘Retribution’, ‘Demons and Devils’ and ‘Hell’.¹⁸² William Cowper’s torment over the thought of damnation was graphically articulated in his ‘Lines written during a period of insanity’ (1763) and ‘A song of mercy and judgment’ (1764).¹⁸³ James Ramsay deplored the practice of cursing among sailors, because the constant use of ‘hell’ and ‘damn’ undermined the virtue-inducing fear of ‘hell torments’ and ‘never-ending punishment’.¹⁸⁴ Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* was drenched in providentialism, and he explained that before his conversion ‘the fear of eternity daily harassed my mind and I knew not where to seek shelter from the wrath to come’.¹⁸⁵ Benjamin Flower had been raised among Calvinist Dissenters, and had ‘deep impressions’ of ‘the terror of judgment day, and the horror of future punishment’. In *National Sins Considered*, he ‘trembles’ at the thought that two million ‘immortal souls’ killed in recent wars have ‘rushed into eternity’, many into ‘everlasting ____’.¹⁸⁶ James Stephen’s confessional memoirs were designed to record ‘particular Providence’, and they chronicled his youthful sins and dread of ‘Divine Indignation’.¹⁸⁷ During his own conversion, Wilberforce confessed in his diary that he

¹⁸² Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 174.

¹⁸³ *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper*, pp. 289-91.

¹⁸⁴ James Ramsay, *Sea Sermons: A Series of Discourses for the Use of the Royal Navy* (1781), pp. 87, 111, 154-55, 163, 186.

¹⁸⁵ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, p. 179.

¹⁸⁶ Whelan, ‘Radical Politics and Unitarian Piety’, p. 235; Oldfield, ‘(Re)mapping Abolitionist Discourse’, pp. 34-35; Flower, *National Sins Considered*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁸⁷ *The Memoirs of James Stephen Written by Himself for the Use of his Children*, ed. M. Bevington (1954), pp. 26-36, 403, passim.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

thought of ‘God’s wrath against sinners’ with ‘no great emotions’; yet he lamented his ‘callous’ heart, urged himself to ‘awake to my dangerous state’, and remained in ‘a state of the deepest depression’ for months.¹⁸⁸ He judged William Paley’s theology ‘most dangerous’ because it underplayed divine holiness and wrath, ‘the intensity of the guilt of moral evil’, and the need for atonement and emancipation by the Spirit.¹⁸⁹ As he well knew, the campaign against the slave trade derived considerable force from a burning sense of guilt and a thirst for atonement. Abolitionism required ‘intensity’.

Historians have rarely done justice 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’.¹⁹⁰ This fits well with the evidence we have surveyed. The spectre of ‘national punishments’ injected anxiety into abolitionist minds and instilled a sense of urgency. The outbreak of divine wrath was imminent; there was no time for delay. The ‘times of ignorance’ were over, abolitionists frequently declared. Because the iniquity of the slave trade had now been exposed, Britons were without excuse, and God’s patience was wearing thin. A *Morning Chronicle* extract from ‘a late Address to the Public’ concluded that ‘if we attend not to the Cries of our African Brother’s Sufferings, then Divine Vengeance will not be slow paced’.¹⁹¹ ‘National GUILT’, warned Sharp, ‘must inevitably draw down from GOD some tremendous National

¹⁸⁸ Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *Life of William Wilberforce*, i. 42-44.

¹⁸⁹ *Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, i. 250-53.

¹⁹⁰ Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, eds, *Passionate Politics*, pp. 10, 13.

¹⁹¹ *Morning Chronicle*, 28 Apr. 1791.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Punishment...if we do not speedily “*take away the accursed Thing from among us*”.¹⁹² This belief that time was running out, that Britain had to repent or face God’s anger, was (as Anstey suggests) ‘a spur to incessant activity’.¹⁹³

It is this mentality which explains the abolitionist compulsion to preach. Although they devoted countless hours and hundreds of pages to crafting secular arguments, they were repeatedly drawn back to sermonic mode. It is striking how many abolitionist appeals climax with a prophetic peroration. Woolman’s 1762 *Considerations*, Benezet’s *Observations* and his *Short Account*, Benjamin Rush’s *Address*, Thomas Day’s *The Dying Negro*, Sharp’s *Law of Liberty*, the Quakers’ 1784 *Case*, Clarkson’s 1786 *Essay* and his 1787 Manchester address, Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments*, the Edinburgh presbytery’s petition to Parliament, Ramsay’s *Address* and his *Examination*, Dickson’s *Letters on Slavery*, Wilberforce’s speeches before Parliament in 1791, 1795 and 1796, Stephen’s *The Opportunity* (1804), and the trio of 1807 tracts by Sharp, Stephen and Wilberforce - every one of these texts ended with a warning of national punishments. Yet none (with the partial exception of Clarkson’s address) was a sermon. Most were written by lay authors. They indicate how powerfully the language of the pulpit had shaped abolitionist rhetoric.

As preachers, abolitionists evoked a response. Their warnings were taken to heart by a broad swath of the religious public. This should not surprise us. The assumptions of judicial providentialism were underwritten by the Old Testament, Christian tradition, the Prayer Book and the institution of Fast Sermons, and acknowledged in theory by everyone but infidels and ‘practical atheists’. We have seen it endorsed by Quakers and Baptists,

¹⁹² Sharp, *Law of Liberty*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁹³ Anstey, ‘A Re-interpretation’, p. 313.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

Wesleyans and Unitarians, Evangelicals and Latitudinarians, Afro-British Calvinists and Scottish Moderates. Besides being a common currency among the devout, judicial providentialism was embedded within practically every level of abolitionist discourse. We have found it in sermons, lectures, pamphlets, treatises, newspaper articles, petitions, correspondence and parliamentary speeches. Even the poets of abolition returned again and again to the theme of divine retribution.¹⁹⁴ Abolitionists invoked God’s wrath whether they were addressing Caribbean planters, English Methodists, American Patriots, the genteel literate public, the corporation of Oxford, or the House of Commons; and they did the same in private communications with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord North, Lord Dartmouth, Queen Charlotte and George Washington.¹⁹⁵ Even the short sketch which set out the evidence to the parliamentary committee on the slave trade, found space to cite Ezekiel’s prophecy against slave-trading Tyre and warn of ‘the just punishment of AN AVENGING PROVIDENCE’.¹⁹⁶

Although such claims evoked a good deal of scepticism from cultural and political elites, they were taken up by a variety of parliamentarians. As Boyd Hilton has observed, Wilberforce’s biblical jeremiads were echoed in ‘scores of similar imprecations’ in Parliament in the two decades up to 1807. Eminent figures like George Canning and William Pitt spoke the language of judicial providentialism, and Hilton suggests that even if their biblical rhetoric was insincere, ‘the speakers expected the humbug to resonate with MPs’,

¹⁹⁴ See James Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace*, pp. 211, 212, 221, 268-69, 301-02, 340, 348, 359, 360, 370, 399-400, 403, 417, 427, 443. These references cover the two decades leading up to 1792.

¹⁹⁵ See Brun, ed., *Am I not a Man and a Brother?*, pp. 302-04, 491-92, 508-09.

¹⁹⁶ *A Short Sketch of the Evidence*, p. 20.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

correctly gauging that it ‘struck a chord with the parliamentary classes, who were the only people who could actually do abolition’.¹⁹⁷

In the 1807 debates, Lord Grenville set the tone with an ardent speech on abolition as a matter of justice, urging the Lords not ‘to plunge deeper and deeper into this sea of guilt’.¹⁹⁸ That earned praise from James Stephen, who had advised Grenville throughout the process: ‘You demanded Abolition on principles that made it an oblation to Heaven, as well as a blessing to mankind’.¹⁹⁹ Stephen may have been putting his own spin on the speech - while Grenville referred repeatedly to the ‘stain’ and ‘guilt’ of ‘this iniquitous traffic’, the published versions make no explicit reference to the nation’s relationship with God. But several other speakers - including the Foxite Whig Samuel Whitbread, the Bishop of Durham and the Duke of Gloucester - insisted that abolition was imperative if Britain was to avert ‘the wrath of Heaven’ and regain divine favour. Once again, defenders of the slave trade fumed at claims that it had incurred God’s wrath in the form of hurricanes.²⁰⁰ The clearest statement of the abolitionists’ judicial providentialism came from Lord Mahon:

Let us wash our hands clean of this foul pollution, let us act upon the principles of equal and impartial justice, and we may then look, with pious but firm confidence, to the protection and support of that Supreme Disposer of events, in whose hands victory is placed; who disposes of the fate of empires, and who can in an instant

¹⁹⁷ Hilton, ‘Why Britain Abolished her Slave Trade’, pp. 77-79.

¹⁹⁸ *Substance of the Debates on the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade* (1808), p. 21. For a slightly different version of the speech, see *PD*, viii. 657-664 (5 Feb. 1807).

¹⁹⁹ James Stephen, *The Dangers of the Country* (2nd edn, 1807), pp. vi-vii.

²⁰⁰ *PD*, viii. 670-71 (5 February 1807), 967 (23 Feb. 1807); ix. 61-62, 65 (9 March 1807), 115, 134 (16 March 1807). See also *The Substance of the Debates*, pp. 21, 29, 83-85, 180, 205, 235.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

crush and annihilate that tremendous and gigantic power, which for reasons known only to Himself, He has thought fit to raise up for the terror and punishment of Europe.²⁰¹

For Mahon, as for Wilberforce and Stephen, God was the prime agent in contemporary history. Nations who crossed him were headed for decline and fall, nations that repented would regain his favour. This reading of events invested them with heroic purpose and prompted anxious activism. God was saying things with wars. He was warning nations with blood on their hands of impending doom. Abolitionists saw themselves as participants in a cosmic drama orchestrated by Providence. When Thomas Clarkson first learned from William Dillwyn of the labours of Benezet, Sharp and Ramsay, he sensed his high calling: ‘My mind was overwhelmed by the thought that I had been providentially directed to [Dillwyn’s] house; that the finger of Providence was beginning to be discernable; that the dayspring of African liberty was rising, and that probably I might be permitted to become a humble instrument in promoting it’.²⁰²

This transcendent dimension is largely missing from contemporary scholarship on abolition, including Christopher Brown’s formidable analysis. He demonstrates persuasively that

²⁰¹ *PD*, viii. 971 (23 Feb. 1807).

²⁰² Clarkson, *History*, i. 215-16. See Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, which argues that ‘the essence of reform’ was ‘the radical joining of Heaven and Earth’, ‘a broad sacralisation of the world’ (pp. 7-8). For reflections on the challenge of writing about providentialism and supernaturalism within the constraints of methodological naturalism see D.B. Davis, ‘An Appreciation of Roger Anstey’, in C. Bolt and S. Drescher, eds, *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform* (Folkestone, 1980), pp. 11-15; R. Orsi, *Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); C. Davis, ‘Living with the Living God: Radical Religion and the English Revolution’, in C. Durston and J. Maltby, eds, *Religion in Revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2006), ch. 1.

‘Tremble Britannia!’

abolitionists used their campaign to build up moral capital with their contemporaries. What we need to add is that they sought to restore their moral capital with Heaven. Abolition alone would wash away blood guilt and thus avert divine wrath. It might revive the honour of the empire, or lend prestige to Evangelical causes, or burnish the reputation of the Quakers, or turn Thomas Clarkson into a romantic hero, but above all else, abolition would mend Britain’s fractured relationship with God. And that – more than anything – was in the national interest.

When the slave trade was abolished in 1807, it was celebrated in precisely these terms. Not only had Britannia’s reputation been restored, so had her special relationship with Providence. Abolitionism was about national shame and honour; it was also about national guilt and divine favour. God’s wrath had been propitiated. ‘His wrath subsides’, wrote one poet, ‘and all his frowns recede’.²⁰³ When Lord Grenville was installed as Chancellor of Oxford, Robert Southey acclaimed his role in averting God’s vengeance - ‘they/Who fear the Eternal’s justice, bless thy name,/Grenville, because the wrongs of Africa/Cry out no more to draw a curse from Heaven/On England!’.²⁰⁴ The emotional dynamic of Britain’s relationship with God had changed. The face of Providence had once glowered, but now it smiled. Commemorative iconography testified to that. As Boyd Hilton suggests, the campaigns that led to abolition in 1807 and emancipation in the 1830s are ‘the supreme example of the politics of atonement’.²⁰⁵

University of Leicester

JOHN COFFEY

²⁰³ ‘Liberty’, *Weekly Entertainer*, xxxvii (1807), p. 338.

²⁰⁴ Robert Southey, ‘Spoken in the theatre at Oxford, upon the installation of Lord Grenville’, in Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery*, p. 224.

²⁰⁵ Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, p. 209.