

# **Wesley and the Slave Trade**

**The hermeneutical basis for John Wesley's opposition to the  
Slave Trade with reference to contemporary ethical debates**

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## **Preface**

This study of Wesley's approach to the slave trade has been a highly enjoyable venture. I grew up within a Wesleyan context attending an independent Methodist mission hall and it was there that I first heard the good news about Jesus. Therefore, it has been an enormous pleasure to, in effect, return to my roots and investigate the thought of one of my spiritual forefathers on such an important topic.

My original motivation to investigate the hermeneutic of abolition came from a sermon Chris Green preached in Oak Hill chapel during the 2005-2006 academic year. Therefore, I would like to thank Chris both for his encouragement to set out in this direction and for his constant help and advice during the course of my research.

My wife Sarah, as always, has been a great support, ensuring that I maintain the right focus on studies whilst keeping them in perspective. She also has undertaken the thankless task of proof reading.

I would like to thank Wendy Bell for her help and advice in tracing relevant sources. I never fail to be amazed at the quality of resources available to us from the library. The nature of my research has resulted in the need for some off-site research and so I would also like to thank the staff of the British Library for their ever efficient support.

It risks becoming a cliché in these contexts and yet the fear of this should never prevent us from acknowledging that the gift of learning and study comes from God himself and so my prayer is that this work will result in more praise and glory to him.

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## 1. Introduction

On the 2nd February 1807, the House of Commons voted in favour of the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>1</sup> The celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event generated substantial interest in the subject of slavery, the history of abolition and the particular individuals involved, especially William Wilberforce. Biographies were written, museum displays opened and there was even a Hollywood film released.<sup>2</sup>

The history of the abolition movement is a subject worthy of interest in its own right, not least because of the part played in it by leading Evangelicals such as Wilberforce. However, our particular interest is in the way that the Abolitionists have been adopted by those involved in contemporary ethical debates such as questions about homosexuality and the role of women in church, home and the workplace.

The dilemma posed to contemporary Evangelicals is this: what should we do when the Bible appears to set out a position at odds with and even repulsive to the cultural norms of contemporary society? A number of authors<sup>3</sup> have argued that the abolitionist approach provides a hermeneutical basis from which to resolve these questions.<sup>4</sup> William

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<sup>1</sup> See William Hague, *William Wilberforce, The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Perennial), 2008, xv-xviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Amazing Grace* (2007) Directed by: Michael Apted, Walden Media.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press), 2001, Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 2007) and I Howard Marshall, "Mutual Love and Submission in Marriage," in *Discovering Biblical Equality* (ed. Ronald W Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Grothuis and Gordan D Fee Downers Grove, Il.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 186-204.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that there is agreement between contemporary authors on what the results of such a hermeneutic would be in terms of the answers to the question. Thus, there seems to be wide agreement that this hermeneutic offers support to egalitarian positions on womanhood. However, Webb remains conservative on homosexuality, although a number of authors are willing to move further on this point. See for example Vasey, *Strangers and Friends, a New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 13-14. See also, Via, Dan O. "The Bible, the Church and Homosexuality." Pages 1-39 in Dan O Via and Robert A J Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible, Two Views*. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

Webb has christened this hermeneutical approach as the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic.<sup>5</sup>

### **1.1. The Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic**

Webb's central thesis is that not every scriptural injunction is to be applied universally. Whilst some injunctions invite trans-cultural application, others are limited in their scope to the particular context.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the hermeneutical model is to enable the reader to choose between the two. Webb argues that the overall narrative of Scripture shows a movement in favour of redemption. Included within the idea of redemption must be freedom from oppressive cultural environments.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the models start by looking at where the Bible text stands in relation to the culture of its time and the culture of the reader. It may be assumed that in certain cases the scriptural injunction will result in better treatment of people than the culture of the day; however, that treatment may still be inferior to what is suggested by contemporary culture.<sup>8</sup> If this is the case, then the application of the injunction is likely to be culturally constrained. Webb then suggests a further set of clues from within Scripture that will confirm this to be the case.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the reader should consider extra-biblical clues such as science and social science.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, morality can be portrayed as in the diagram below progressing with time. Scripture contributes to that progression –indeed even escalating it. However, the progression continues after the completion of the canon of Scripture. This means that rather than simply looking at what the Bible says at any given point, we should attempt to trace out the trajectory of moral travel which Scripture places us on.

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<sup>5</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 16.

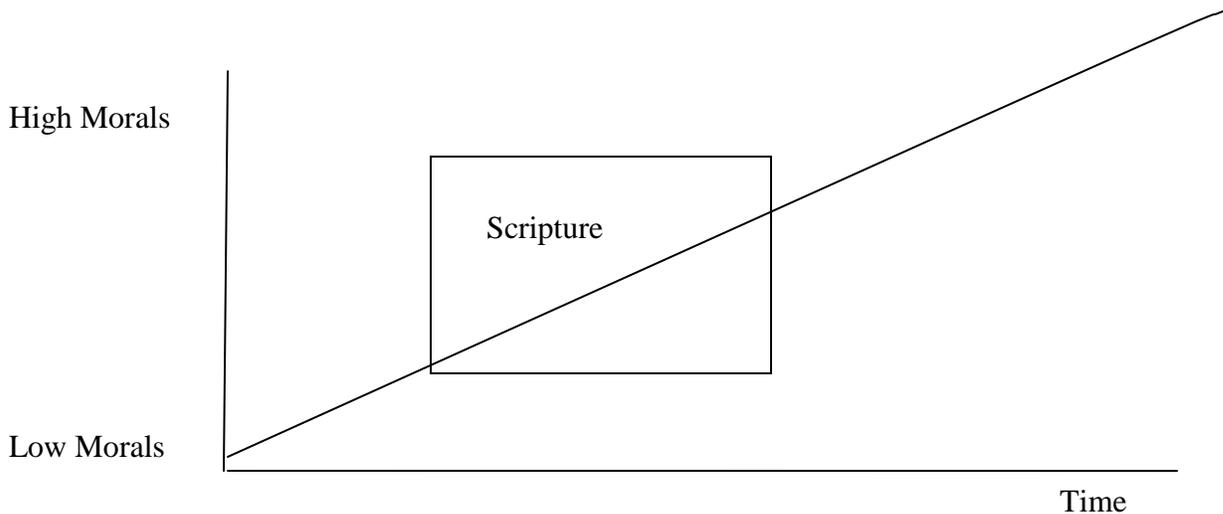
<sup>6</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> See Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 35-38.

<sup>8</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> See Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> See especially chapter 7. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 209-235.



Webb is adamant that the abolitionists followed such a hermeneutic, arguing that:

Whether the labels for the approach are the same or different, debates about slavery, polygamy, monarchy, etc, have always had one side of the church appealing to a redemptive-movement hermeneutic (call it what you like) and the other side appealing to a static hermeneutic.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2. John Wesley and Slavery

In 1774, John Wesley published “Thoughts upon Slavery”<sup>12</sup> which he based closely on the work of a Quaker, Anthony Benezet.<sup>13</sup> The work divides into five sections. After introducing the topic and setting its scope, the second and third sections provide an account of the history of the trade including a description of the socio-economic and political conditions in Africa in comparison to the treatment of slaves once captured. The fourth and fifth sections provide the main argument responding first to the argument that the trade is justified with respect to reason, mercy and necessity before Wesley appeals to the hearts of those involved in the trade.

<sup>11</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (London: R Hawes, 1774).

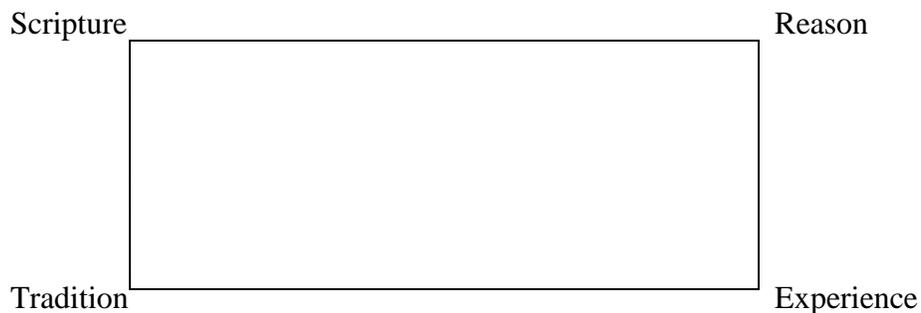
<sup>13</sup> Manfred Marquadt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*. Translated by John E Steely and W. Stephen Gunter. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 73.

Further evidence for Wesley’s position on slavery may be gleaned from his journal, sermons and his Explanatory Notes on both Testaments.

There are good historical reasons for conducting a study on Wesley’s argument for abolition considering his position in the Evangelical Awakening and his influence on Wilberforce, Newton and others.<sup>14</sup> However, I would suggest that Wesley has particular relevance for the hermeneutical question.

### 1.3. Wesley and the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic

Wesley has long been associated with a hermeneutical approach which sets Scripture alongside reason, experience and tradition as the four sources of authority.<sup>15</sup>



If reason here means “what within your culture you consider reasonable”<sup>16</sup> then one can quickly see how the Wesleyan Quadrilateral might be compatible with a Redemptive-Movement-Hermeneutic.

Thus, if we wanted to argue for a Redemptive-Movement-Hermeneutic in Wesley’s approach, we might start with Wesley as one whom, it is claimed, “explicitly refrains from using the Bible as a basis for discussion”<sup>17</sup> when opposing slavery.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Hague, *Wilberforce*, 9-14. See also John Pollock, *Wesley The Preacher*, (Repr. Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1989), 240-242.

<sup>15</sup> For a good example of this account of Wesley’s Hermeneutics see Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2000), 112-113. Johnston develops the hermeneutical approach for the purpose of contemporary cultural analysis in order to provide a framework for his analysis of the medium of film.

<sup>16</sup> Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 113.

We would go on to argue that Wesley does this because he recognises the following things:

1. Natural Justice, as understood in his contemporary culture, demonstrated the injustice of slavery. Thus, his culture offered a solution better than the Bible's toleration of some forms of slavery.
2. The "overall tenor" of Scripture shows a redemptive movement, thus away from slavery.
3. However, the Biblical data fails to support "the overall tenor."

Therefore Wesley, realising that the general principles of Scripture take him to a position which he cannot argue from the detail of Scripture, argues instead from Reason.

I am going to argue against this thesis. Instead, I want to suggest that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is anachronistic when applied to Wesley himself. Wesley recognised Scripture as the sufficient and final authority. Wesley in his own words was "*homo unius libri*" "a man of one book"<sup>18</sup> This was not, of course, in the sense of ignorance about other literature but in the sense that Scripture is the authority that everything else must take account of.

Thus, as Jones says, "the introduction of geometric metaphors is a mistake from the start."<sup>19</sup> Scripture does not sit alongside other authorities; rather,

For Wesley the elements are defined in such a way that they constitute one locus of authority with five aspects. Christian faith and practice are governed by

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<sup>17</sup> Marquadt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons I: 1-33* (Vol 1 of *The Works of John Wesley*; Edited by Albert C. Outler, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1985), 105. Cited in Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Scott J Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1995), 64.

Scripture, which is reasonable in its claims, exemplified in antiquity, vivified in personal experience, and most fully institutionalized in the Church of England.”<sup>20</sup>

But this appears to leave us with a problem. If Wesley was “*homo unius libri*” then assuming that Marquadt’s claim is true, why does Wesley argue from Reason, not Scripture?

Therefore, in order to prove our thesis, I would suggest that we need to answer the following two questions

- Why does Wesley appear to base a significant element of his case on arguments from outside of Scripture?
- What does Wesley actually do with Scripture in his argument?

## **2. Wesley’s argument against Slavery**

As we have already seen, Wesley’s thoughts on the Slave Trade are essentially a close re-working of a tract by the Quaker, Anthony Benezet. Wesley records in his Journal how he first came to read Benezet’s tract on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> February 1772.

In returning, I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave Trade. I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern: And it infinitely exceeds in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.”<sup>21</sup>

Wesley was clearly struck by the force of the argument and so wanted to lend his name to it in order to ensure its wider dissemination. The argument that Wesley and Benezet

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<sup>20</sup> Note that Jones modifies the model slightly by the separation of Tradition into two parts; first ‘antiquity’ meaning the writings of the church fathers and then the position of the Church of England at the time, hence the reference to “five aspects” as opposed to four. Jones, *John’s Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, *Journal Volume III*, 453.

make is as follows. First of all, they set out the historical background to African slavery. They tell us that:

The beginning of this may be dated from the remotest period of which we have an account in history. It commenced in the barbarous state of society, and in process of time spread into all nations. It prevailed particularly among the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, and the ancient Germans; and was transmitted by them to the various kingdoms and states which arose out of the Roman Empire. But after Christianity prevailed, it gradually fell into decline in almost all parts of Europe. This great change began in Spain, about the end of the eighth century; and was become general in most other kingdoms of Europe, before the middle of the fourteenth.”<sup>22</sup>

So, Wesley argues that Christianity had in effect already abolished slavery but then something changed:

“From this time slavery was nearly extinct till the commencement of the sixteenth century, when the discovery of America, and of the western and eastern coasts of Africa, gave occasion to the revival of it. It took its rise from the Portuguese, who, to supply the Spaniards with men to cultivate their new possessions in America, procured Negroes from Africa, whom they sold for slaves to the American Spaniards. This began in the year 1508.”<sup>23</sup>

Wesley then goes on to describe the situation in which the Africans lived prior to their enslavement. He describes the natural condition of their homelands; Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast in glowing terms. For example:

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<sup>22</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, I.3.

<sup>23</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, I.4.

the soil is in general fertile, producing abundance of rice and roots. Indigo and cotton thrive without cultivation; fish is in great plenty; the flocks and herds are numerous, and the trees loaden with fruit.”<sup>24</sup>

Then he describes how the slaves were procured. He tells us that fraud was often used with potential slaves being tricked onto the boats where they were then detained.<sup>25</sup> He accuses the traders of stirring up trouble and violence in order to profit:

by prevailing upon them to make war upon each other, and to sell their prisoners. Till then they seldom had any wars; but were in general quiet and peaceable. But the white men first taught them drunkenness and avarice, and then hired them to sell one another.”<sup>26</sup>

Notice two important subtexts here. First of all, Wesley is arguing that tradition is against the slave-traders. This type of slavery is a recent innovation. The myth that we are rescuing the Africans from barbaric suffering is nonsense.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, he seeks to destroy the myth that slavery was in a sense some kind of salvation for those bought and sold because they are rescued from barbaric conditions. In fact, they are portrayed here as being removed from a pleasant, almost idyllic life to face humiliation, illness and the threat of death as they are branded, stripped naked and shipped in suffocating conditions.<sup>28</sup>

From there, Wesley goes on to deal with a central argument in favour of slavery, namely that it is supported by natural justice. The basis for this argument is that it is legitimate to keep people captive as prisoners of war. However, Wesley responds:

Slavery is said to arise from captivity in war. The conqueror having a right to the life of his captives, if he spares that, has then a right to deal with them as he

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<sup>24</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, II.5.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, III.1.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, III.2.

<sup>27</sup> So also in section IV.4. He challenges the suggestion that the Slave traders and owners are in some way acting mercifully towards the slaves. John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, IV.4.

<sup>28</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, III.5-6.

pleases. But this is untrue, if taken generally, -- that, by the laws of nations, a man has a right to kill his enemy. He has only a right to kill him in particular cases, in cases of absolute necessity for self-defence. And it is plain, this absolute necessity did not subsist, since he did not kill him, but made him prisoner.”<sup>29</sup>

It had also been suggested that slavery was legitimate because people had sold themselves into service. Wesley comments

It is said, Secondly, slavery may begin by one man's selling himself to another. And it is true, a man may sell himself to work for another; but he cannot sell himself to be a slave, as above defined. Every sale implies an equivalent given to the seller, in lieu of what he transfers to the buyer. But what equivalent can be given for life or liberty?”<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Wesley appeals to their consciences:

May I speak plainly to you? I must. Love constrains me; love to you, as well as to those you are concerned with. Is there a God? You know there is. Is he a just God? Then there must be a state of retribution; a state wherein the just God will reward every man according to his works. Then what reward will he render to you? O think betimes! before you drop into eternity! Think now, "He shall have judgment without mercy that showed no mercy."<sup>31</sup>

And further:

If, therefore, you have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God,) render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, IV.3.

<sup>30</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, IV.3.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, V.3.

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, V.3.

Wesley's motives were underpinned by Gospel imperatives so that he closes with a prayer for the slaves:

O thou God of love, thou who art loving to every man, and whose mercy is over all thy works; thou who art the Father of the spirits of all flesh, and who art rich in mercy unto all; thou who hast mingled of one blood all the nations upon earth; have compassion upon these outcasts of men, who are trodden down as dung upon the earth! Arise, and help these that have no helper, whose blood is spilt upon the ground like water! Are not these also the work of thine own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood? Stir them up to cry unto thee in the land of their captivity;<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Why does Wesley argue from outside of Scripture?

#### 3.1 The Quadrilateral Position

Marquadt's claim that Wesley bases his arguments outside Scripture seems to come from his statement:

I would now inquire, whether these things can be defended, on the principles of even heathen honesty; whether they can be reconciled (*setting the Bible out of the question*) with any degree of either justice or mercy.<sup>34</sup>

Marquadt sees this as an argument based upon Natural Justice. In other words, it might be said that he is arguing from 'Reason' where reason means "what within your culture you consider reasonable."<sup>35</sup>

Why might Wesley choose to do this? The Wesleyan Quadrilateral would suggest that Wesley sees this as the most appropriate authority in this context. This might be argued

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<sup>33</sup> John Wesley *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, V.7.

<sup>34</sup> Italics mine. Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.1), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 113.

first by reference to his understanding of Scripture's Authority and secondly by reference to his understanding of Experience.

### **3.1.1. By reference to the Authority of Scripture**

Jones argues that, "Wesley never suggests that the Bible contains all we need to know on every subject of human knowledge."<sup>36</sup> So, for example, "Wesley's scientific interests are governed by the empirical method of his time, and not by proofs drawn from Scripture."<sup>37</sup> This might imply a 'Two Kingdoms' approach to revelation where special revelation deals specifically with the church and salvation but there is "a common, natural moral standard to which Christians, members of the spiritual kingdom, should ordinarily appeal when interacting with others in their lives in the civil kingdom."<sup>38</sup>

Where Scripture does speak about a subject, Wesley's primary concern is to ensure that his interpretation of each passage conforms "to the whole scope and tenor of Scripture."<sup>39</sup> Jones equates this to "the analogy of faith" common within Protestant circles.<sup>40</sup> Wesley thinks that there is a narrative running through Scripture and our interpretation of individual texts should be subject to this. The question then is what happens when his interpretation doesn't fit the overall tenor. Wesley answers that question in his sermon on "Free Grace." That sermon set Wesley at odds with Whitfield over the subject of Predestination. With regards to those texts quoted in support of eternal Election, Wesley argues:

Whatever that Scripture proves, it never can prove this. Whatever its true meaning be, this cannot be its true meaning. Do you ask 'What is its true meaning then?' If I say, 'I know not,' you have gained nothing. For there are many Scriptures the true sense neither you nor I shall know till death is swallowed

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<sup>36</sup> Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Acton Institute, 2001), 45.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, *Sermons III*: 71-114. (Vol 3 of *The Works of John Wesley*; Edited by Albert C Outler. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), 552.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 46.

up in victory. But this I know; better it were to say it had no sense at all than to say it had such a sense as this.<sup>41</sup>

We might suppose, then, that something similar happens with regards to slavery. For reasons that we will outline below, Wesley regarded the trade to be incompatible with the “tenor of Scripture.” However, when it came to specific Scripture texts on the subject, it was not possible for him to build a case for abolition. Indeed, if Marquadt is right then:

Neither the Old Testament nor any of the Gospels contain any fundamental protests against slavery; in fact, many passages assume its existence as a given. The Church has repeatedly appealed to such passages to justify its renunciation of social change.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, it might be suggested that Wesley leaves Scripture to deal with the general principles of redemption whilst drawing on Reason for the specific arguments relating to ethical questions such as slavery.

### **3.1.2. By reference to Experience**

In a letter to Granville Sharpe dated October 11<sup>th</sup> 1787, Wesley claimed that “Ever since I heard of it first I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid Slave Trade.”<sup>43</sup> Roy Hattersley thinks that Wesley is being a little bit disingenuous. It is true, he argues, that “Wesley certainly felt compassion for those among them who were mistreated.”<sup>44</sup> However, “there is no evidence that the Georgia missionary ever thought about emancipation”<sup>45</sup> until “Sharp and Funnel stirred the conscience of the nation.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See, Wesley, *Sermons III*, 556.

<sup>42</sup> Marquadt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> John Wesley “Letter to Granville Sharpe: Oct 11 1787” in *The Letters of John Wesley, AM* (8 vols.; Edited by John Telford. London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 8:17.

<sup>44</sup> Roy Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning* ( London: Doubleday, 2002), 390.

<sup>45</sup> Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley*, 390.

<sup>46</sup> Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley*, 390-391.

Wesley's view does appear to have changed over time. On the one hand, he never seems to regard slaves as second class citizens in the sense that the possibility of redemption was never closed to them. His Journal Entry of the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1736 tells how he "was glad to see several Negroes at church"<sup>47</sup> when he first arrived in Charlestown. The same entry tells of his unsuccessful attempt to engage them in religious instruction.<sup>48</sup>

However, the Journal is for the most part silent on the subject of slavery. His colleague, Whitfield, defended ownership<sup>49</sup> but, unlike with their sharp disagreement over predestination, there appears to be no record of a dispute over this matter. Furthermore, Wesley's entries regarding early meetings with John Newton do not raise the subject of slavery.<sup>50</sup>

More explicitly, he seems to allow for some forms of slavery in his Explanatory notes, explaining with regards to Exodus 21:20 that "Direction is given what should be done, if a servant died by his master's correction. This servant must not be an Israelite, but a Gentile slave, as the Negroes to our planters."<sup>51</sup>

His publication of "Thoughts" in 1774 appears to be his first significant contribution on the other side of the debate. So what brought about the change? The argument above would suggest that Reason plays a strong part but there seems to be more to it than a cold engagement with the rational arguments of campaigners.

We might then trace the influence of experience on his opposition to slavery both through his own observations of its effects and in the accounts he reads. First, we see in his reading of those accounts a response that is both intellectual and emotional. His reading

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<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley A.M.* (Vol 1 of *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley A.M.*; London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 40.

<sup>48</sup> Wesley, *Journal Volume 1*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley*, 112-113,

<sup>50</sup> Pollock, *Wesley The Preacher*, 240.

<sup>51</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament Volume 1*, 272.

of one slave's account on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1791 prompts him to write what proved to be his last letter to Wilberforce, encouraging him in the struggle.<sup>52</sup>

Secondly, with regards to his own experience, we might identify his frustration, even back in Georgia, at the slaves' lack of spiritual knowledge.<sup>53</sup> In "Thoughts" he lays the blame for this ignorance at the door of the owners.<sup>54</sup> Does Wesley see a connection between their reluctance and his previous position on Exodus 20? If a heathen slave is permitted by analogy to the Jew-Gentile distinction, then his conversion is not in the owner's interest.

It is certainly the case that Wesley sees a connection between their physical and their spiritual slavery, praying at the end of "Thoughts," "O burst thou all their chains in sunder; more especially the chains of their sins! Thou Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed!"<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Clarkson makes a similar connection, accusing his opponents of "unwillingness to convert them to Christianity, because you suppose you must use them more kindly when converted."<sup>56</sup>

### **3.2. Response in support of the thesis**

To understand why Wesley makes the move he does, we need to establish a correct understanding of his use of Reason and Experience. First, we need to deal with a general misconception about what is meant by Experience. For Wesley, this is not a private, subjective experience, governing interpretation of Scripture. Rather, it is comparable to what Wilberforce calls "the practical influence of religion."<sup>57</sup> Wesley talks about Experience in order to counter "formalism."<sup>58</sup> He believes that there is a practical

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<sup>52</sup> Pollock, *Wesley The Preacher*, 258.

<sup>53</sup> Wesley, *Journal Volume 1*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade*, (IV.9), 41.

<sup>55</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts upon the Slave Trade*, (V. 7) 52.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*: 89. Cited 4<sup>th</sup> June 2008. Online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10611/10611-h/10611-h.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> William Wilberforce, *A letter on the abolition of the slave trade addressed to the freeholders and other inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: Cadel and Davis, 1807), 320.

<sup>58</sup> Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 33.

outworking in response to Scripture seen in terms of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the work of sanctification and Assurance.<sup>59</sup>

Secondly, Reason does not exist as a body of culturally conditioned knowledge. Rather, “it means a faculty of the human soul; that faculty which exerts itself in three ways: by simple apprehension, by judgment and by discourse.”<sup>60</sup> It is this faculty, “(assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God.”<sup>61</sup>

The implication of this is that there are two groups of people. There are those who, by the Holy Spirit’s enabling, are willing and able to understand and submit to Scripture and there are those who are not. Therefore, with regards to the second group, Wilberforce argues “I cannot persuade myself that they are so much under the practical influence of religion, that if they should convince their understandings, we should alter their conduct.”<sup>62</sup> This makes him unwilling to engage with them in a discussion about Scripture. I would suggest that Wesley is exhibiting the same reluctance.<sup>63</sup>

How then can a conversation take place with the wider public? Both Wesley and Wilberforce clearly regard this as possible, otherwise their writing is in vain. The answer is that even for those who reject Scripture, “Those great principles” are...”manifest in them; for God hath showed it to them - By the light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See Jones, *John’s Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 95.

<sup>60</sup> This definition appears in his sermon, “The Case for Reason Impartially Considered.” John Wesley, *Sermons II 34-70* (vol. 2 of *The Works of John Wesley*; Edited by Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 590.

<sup>61</sup> Wesley, *Sermons II 34-70*, 592.

<sup>62</sup> Wilberforce, *A Letter on Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 320.

<sup>63</sup> Jones comments that changes in society “meant that the authority of the Bible was questioned as never before, and that even those who accepted its authority viewed it in a manner different from earlier periods. Hans Frei, in his *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, argues that this transition is best characterized as the loss of the narrative sense of Scripture. This new way of looking at the world no longer used the lenses of Scripture to see, but viewed Scripture itself as one more object to be investigated. The automatic certainty and authority of the sacred writings was no longer assumed, but had to be demonstrated in new ways.” Jones, *John’s Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Wesley is commenting here on Romans 1:19. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, (Repr. London: Epworth Press, 1976), 520.

In one sense this is a resort to Natural Law as suggested above, but not in the sense that Wesley allows for a separate sphere of revelation independent from Scripture. There are a number of reasons for concluding this. First, because of how Wesley does interact with Scripture<sup>65</sup> and secondly because his argument here is really a concession within a particular and constrained context.

This is best seen by answering the question of what exactly are “these things” which relate to justice and mercy? The answer is that they are the elements of his opponents’ argument; namely that the nature of the trade is compatible with justice and mercy. It is compatible with justice because slavery is legitimate in three situations:

- i. When slaves taken captive in war (because taking captives is necessary within warfare in the same way that killing is).<sup>66</sup>
- ii. When a slave sells himself.<sup>67</sup>
- iii. When someone is born into slavery.<sup>68</sup>

The slavers argue that their position is compatible with mercy because it is in order to rescue men and women from death that they take them.<sup>69</sup>

Wesley, therefore, responds by demonstrating first that the argument from justice falls down by reference to legal theory. He quotes from Judge Blackstone to show first that the justification for killing and taking prisoners in wartime cannot be extended to maintaining their captivity after war because:

War itself is justifiable only on principles of self-preservation: Therefore it gives us no right over prisoners, but to hinder their hurting us by confining them. Much

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<sup>65</sup> We will develop this in the next section.

<sup>66</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.3), 31.

<sup>67</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.3), 32.

<sup>68</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.3), 33.

<sup>69</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.4), 33.

less can it give a right to torture, or kill, or even to enslave an enemy when the war is over.<sup>70</sup>

With regards to those who sell themselves into slavery, he argues that it is not possible to sell yourself but only your labour because it would not be possible for the buyer to provide appropriate consideration for an entire life. So of course, if the first two justifications fall, then so does the third as it is dependent upon the first two.<sup>71</sup>

Secondly, he refutes their appeal to mercy as a justification because it is their desire for slaves which leads them to induce the behaviour amongst the inhabitants of Africa which leads to the threat of death.<sup>72</sup>

The important thing to note then is that it is not Wesley who raises the argument from Natural Law principles. Rather, it is his opponents. Wesley is responding to them. In effect, he engages in a form of thought exercise asking the question “Suppose I were to allow you to argue on your terms without reference to Scripture, would that destroy my case?” Wesley’s conclusion is that “*even*” by reference to “principles of...heathen honesty”<sup>73</sup> their argument fails.

#### **4. What does Wesley actually do with Scripture?**

In the previous section, we noted three assertions that might be made about Wesley’s use of Scripture in support of a redemptive-movement position. First, that Wesley would be willing to ignore texts if they didn’t fit his overall scheme. Secondly, that he could change his view of Scripture based on experience. Thirdly, that he was prepared to argue his case from outside Scripture.

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<sup>70</sup> Judge Blackstone, cited in Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.3), 1-32.

<sup>71</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.3), 33.

<sup>72</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.4), 33-34.

<sup>73</sup> (italics mine) Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (IV.1), 29.

We have already responded to the third assertion, indicating why Wesley might want to do this. Later in this section, we will develop our response further by refining our understanding of how Wesley makes the extra-scriptural argument. However, before we do that, we will consider each of the first two assertions in turn:

- Does Wesley ignore those texts which do not fit his overall scheme?
- Does Wesley change his understanding of Scripture in response to Experience?

#### **4.1. Does Wesley ignore problematic Scripture verses?**

The first assertion is based on Wesley's preference to leave verses supporting predestination un-interpreted.<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting, therefore, that, whatever we may think about his specific conclusions, when Wesley leaves the text un-interpreted; he is in line with the mainstream of Protestant hermeneutics in two respects

First, with regards to the "whole tenor of Scripture," as Jones points out, this equates to the Analogy of Faith used by reformers such as Luther and is in line with contemporary assumptions that Biblical interpretation should be consistent the unifying narrative which the whole of Scripture tells.<sup>75</sup> We note in this respect that Wesley is concerned "not only [with] the whole scope and tenor of Scripture, but also to *those particular texts* which expressly declare, 'God is love'."<sup>76</sup>

Secondly, if by "had no sense at all" Wesley actually meant that some texts do not have a meaning then that might be problematic, not least because it would not fit with what else we know about his views on Scripture. However, the wider context of the quotation shows that Wesley simply means that, in some cases, our present understanding may limit our ability to determine an accurate interpretation of the text.

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<sup>74</sup> Wesley provides no comment on a significant number of slavery related texts including: Exodus 12:44; 21:5; 21:21; 21:26-27; Leviticus 22:11; 25:44-46; Deut 5:15 and 15:18.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 46.

<sup>76</sup> Wesley, *Sermons III*, 552.

This, then, is an approach of last resort. Wesley's preference as we see in "Thoughts" is to use appropriate methodology in order to ensure consistency between individual texts and "the overall tenor." In so doing, Wesley shows the same concern for precision and careful definition associated with wider Protestantism.<sup>77</sup>

First, Wesley makes distinctions. Early in the essay, Wesley states, "By slavery, I mean domestic slavery, or that of a servant to a master."<sup>78</sup> This is an important distinction for the abolitionists so that Clarkson will also argue for "a general division of slavery into *voluntary* and *involuntary*."<sup>79</sup>

Wilberforce also makes such distinctions in his letter to his constituents arguing that the distinction between Jewish and Gentile slaves in the Old Testament was also relevant to the contemporary context. It was only within the remit of the Jews to hold slaves on an involuntary basis. They could do so because God intended to demonstrate the special nature of his relationship to his people. However, the work of Christ on the Cross has removed the distinction between Jew and Gentile and therefore the permissibility of ever holding slaves.<sup>80</sup>

Secondly, he draws implications from one aspect of Biblical teaching. 1 Timothy 1:10 identifies "manstealers"<sup>81</sup> as among those who will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In his explanatory notes, Wesley equates this term to the slave traders declaring them to be "the worst of all thieves, in comparison of whom, highwaymen and housebreakers are innocent."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Richard A Muller, *Post Reformation Dogmatics Volume One: Prologomea to Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1987), 18. The archetype example of such careful distinguishing would be Francis Turretin. See, for example, how he sets out question 11 in his "Institutes" as "Whether there is a natural law, and how it differs from the moral law. The former we affirm, the latter we distinguish." Turretin, Francis, *Institutes*, XI.1.1. (Giger, 2.1). In addition, one may wish to consider Baxter's approach in his *Christian Directory* where he explains that he will endeavour to be "competently exact in the directions" and to "speak to many cases because I speak to many families, where all are not in the same condition." Baxter, *Christian Directory*, 7-8.

<sup>78</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, (I.1), 3.

<sup>79</sup> Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 318-319.

<sup>81</sup> Contemporary versions such as the NRSV actually use the word "slave-traders."

<sup>82</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 772.

Wesley treats this condemnation as not only applying to those who take slaves captive but rather to all those involved in the trade.<sup>83</sup> So, for example, he says that his appeal “equally concerns every merchant who is engaged in the slave-trade”<sup>84</sup> because “it is you that induces the African villain to sell his countrymen”<sup>85</sup> and “every gentleman that has an estate in our American plantations; yea, all slave-holders, of whatever rank and degree.”<sup>86</sup>

This is not about moving from a generic principle to specific examples but rather from one concrete situation to analogous ones. The merchant and the buyer are as guilty as the original “manstealer”<sup>87</sup> who is mistreating his countrymen because they are encouraging and funding his activity so that they do what he does. They are without excuse; they cannot claim even to turn a blind eye to what is happening – they are fully implicated.<sup>88</sup>

In other words, Wesley is using the faculty of Reason to interpret and understand Scripture in a coherent and consistent manner.

#### **4.2. Does Wesley change his understanding of Scripture in response to Experience?**

Earlier, we noted that when Wesley talks about experience, he normally means an objective outworking of Scripture, common to all believers. However, this does not rule out the possibility that subjective experience plays some part in shaping his views. For example, as we saw earlier, his own conversion experience influences his interpretation of Romans 8:15.

Then we have the problem of his explanation of Exodus 21:20 where he seems to treat the Jew-Gentile distinction as comparable to the Christian-Heathen distinction in a way

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<sup>83</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.4-V.6), 47-52.

<sup>84</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.4), 47.

<sup>85</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.4), 47-48.

<sup>86</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.5), 49.

<sup>87</sup> Usually and conveniently for the apologists for the trade these were the slaves’ fellow Africans. See Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.4), 48.

<sup>88</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.5), 49.

that justifies slavery. This interpretation would be both incompatible with his later opposition to slavery and with Wilberforce's treatment of the Jew-Gentile distinction as outlined above.

There are, however, three considerations which should qualify our understanding of Wesley's use of experience here. First, we need to consider the circumstances in which his explanatory notes are produced. After writing his notes on the New Testament Wesley came under some pressure to provide an equivalent for the Old Testament. However, he was greatly reluctant because of "my insufficiency for such a work, of my want of learning, of understanding, of spiritual experiences."<sup>89</sup> It was not just that he saw the task as beyond his own knowledge, but he also complains of "the want of time,"<sup>90</sup> adding "not only as I have a thousand other employments, but as my day is near spent, as I am declined into the vale of years."<sup>91</sup>

Although Wesley thinks that other existing works are more than suitable, he is persuaded that there is a need to make such knowledge available to the wider public at an affordable price. Thus he goes ahead but relies heavily on the works of Matthew Poole and Matthew Henry<sup>92</sup>. The extent to which he relies upon Henry may be seen by setting Wesley and Henry's comments on Exodus 21:20 side by side

### **Wesley**

Direction is given what should be done, if a servant died by his master's correction.

### **Henry**

Direction is given what should be done if a servant died by his master's correction.

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<sup>89</sup> He records his protest in the Preface to the notes. See Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* (3 Vols.; London: William Pine, 1765) 1. iii.

<sup>90</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1.iii.

<sup>91</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1.iii.

<sup>92</sup> He comments on Henry that "It is too large a purchase but there are thousands who would rejoice to have it." Thus Wesley's central motive for producing the "Explanatory Notes" appears to have been to put such works into the hands of the wider public at an affordable price. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1.iv.

This servant must not be an Israelite, but a Gentile slave, as the Negroes to our planters; and it is supposed that he smite him with a rod, and not with any thing that was likely to give a mortal wound, yet if he died under his hand, he should be punished for his cruelty, at the discretion of the judges, upon consideration of circumstances.<sup>93</sup>

This servant must not be an Israelite, but a Gentile slave, as the negroes to our planters; and it is supposed that he smite him with a rod, and not with any thing that was likely to give a mortal wound; yet, if he died under his hand, he should be punished for his cruelty, at the discretion of the judges, upon consideration of circumstances.<sup>94</sup>

It can be seen that Wesley has simply abridged Henry, providing a word for word reproduction of his first sentence.<sup>95</sup>

However, Wesley does not always follow Henry. On Leviticus 19:20-22, Henry claims that the one who “has sexual relations with a woman who is a slave” is treated differently than in the case of a free woman

for the honour of freedom that it should not be punished as the debauching of a free woman was, so great was the difference then made between bond and free.<sup>96</sup>

Wesley clearly is unhappy with this and instead insists that

The reason of this difference is not from any respect which God gives to persons, for bond and free are alike to him, but because bond - women were scarce wives,

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<sup>93</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*, 1.272.

<sup>94</sup> Matthew Henry, *An Exposition on the Old and New Testament, Volume 6* (London: James Nisbit, 1706), [No page Numbers].

<sup>95</sup> Henry, in his own unabridged version, continues to say “But, if he continued a day or two after the correction given, the master was supposed to suffer enough by losing his servant. Our law makes the death of a servant, by his master's reasonable beating of him, but *chance-medley*. Yet let all masters take heed of tyrannizing over their servants; the gospel teaches them even to forbear and moderate threatenings, considering with holy Job, *What shall I do, when God riseth up?*” Henry, *An Exposition on the Old and New Testamen,t* [No Page Numbers].

<sup>96</sup> Henry, *An Exposition on the Old and New Testament*.

and their marriages were scarce true - marriages, being neither made by their choice, but their masters authority, nor continued beyond the year of release, but at her master's or husband's pleasure.<sup>97</sup>

Therefore, Wesley does not slavishly follow Henry. However, more often than not, he keeps his wording. So first and foremost, the Explanatory Notes are another man's work which has been abridged. One of Wesley's intentions in producing this was to make Henry's work more widely available to those who could not buy it themselves, which helps to explain why he fails to comment on so many relevant verses.<sup>98</sup> Where possible, he makes amendments but the constraints of time and his own perceived inadequacies mean that more often than not he simply reproduces Henry.

Secondly, thus far, we have not talked about the fourth aspect of the quadrilateral, Tradition. The temptation, post John Henry Newman, is to think of this in terms of the Church developing theology in response to Reason and Experience<sup>99</sup>. However, we need to remember that Wesley writes pre-Newman so this is unlikely to be his understanding of tradition. Instead, by Tradition he means 'what is the mind of the whole church on this?' He is particularly interested in what the Anti-Nicene Fathers said. So what he is saying is that tradition is 'what the church has always thought.'

Now look at what he does with regards to slavery. Wesley insists that "after Christianity prevailed, [the trade] gradually fell into decline in almost all parts of Europe."<sup>100</sup> So Wesley sees slavery as something that the Church has historically been against. His views here are in line with Clarkson's, who argues that the doctrine of human equality before God is a Christian one which "could not fail of having their proper influence on

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<sup>97</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament*, 1.410.

<sup>98</sup> See Section 3.1 footnote 1.

<sup>99</sup> Newman's approach to tradition is exemplified in his understanding of Apostolic succession leading to the clergy having the ability to innovate with regards to doctrine as demonstrated by them receiving the gift of "binding and loosing." Newman, John Henry. "Tract 7: The Episcopal Church Apostolical." in Vol. 1 of *Tracts for the Times. 1833-34*. (Ed by Members of Oxford University. London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1840), 3. I am in agreement with Jones here. See Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 64.

<sup>100</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (I.3), 5.

those, who first embraced *Christianity*, from a *conviction* of its truth; and on those of their descendents afterwards.”<sup>101</sup> He goes on to say “we have a positive proof that the *feudal system* had no share in the honour of suppressing slavery, but that *Christianity* was the only cause; for the greatest part of the *charters* which were granted for the freedom of slaves in those times.”<sup>102</sup>

Thus Wesley’s point is that the abolitionists are not the innovators. This means that even insofar as his own experience impacts upon his understanding of Scripture, he expects this to be in line with the mind of the church. Reason and Experience do not give him access to new knowledge which hasn’t always been available to the church.

Wesley and Clarkson have found support from contemporary historian, Rodney Stark who argues that it was Christianity that made significant contributions to the growth of modern civilization. Stark says that: “Just as science arose only once, so too, did effective moral opposition to slavery. Christian theology was essential to both.”<sup>103</sup> He goes on to acknowledge that:

This is not to deny that the early Christians condoned slavery. It is to recognise that of all the world’s religions, including the three great monotheisms, only in Christianity did the idea develop that slavery was sinful and must be abolished.<sup>104</sup>

The point is this.

Although it has been fashionable to deny it, antislavery doctrines began to appear in Christian theology soon after the decline of Rome and were accompanied by the eventual disappearance of slavery in all but the fringes of Christian Europe.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 16.

<sup>102</sup> Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, 16.

<sup>103</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch Hunts and the End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press. 2004), 291.

<sup>104</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 291.

<sup>105</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 291.

And in fact:

When Europeans subsequently instituted slavery in the New World, they did so over strenuous papal opposition, a fact that was conveniently ‘lost’ from history until recently.<sup>106</sup>

Although, it is also worth reflecting that the Medieval religious environment saw the church sought to exploit superstition and fear among people for profit, putting a monetary value on souls through the imposition of indulgences and such like. Such an environment where against Wesley’s argument lives were valued in financial terms and where the church hierarchy in effect exercised ownership over others is exactly the sort of environment in which slavery could flourish. A spiritual reformation was needed before Christians would be properly equipped to lead an ethical revolution.

Thirdly, even within his official definition of Experience, Wesley would not want to exclude the sense that this Experience will lead to a growth in knowledge of God and understanding of Scripture. As he explains in “Christian Perfection,” “it should be premised that there are several stages in Christian Life as well as in natural.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, he himself would have no problem with acknowledging change and development in his position. However, for Wesley this reflects the frailty of human understanding rather than some lack within Scripture itself.<sup>108</sup> His understanding of Scripture, Reason and Tradition means that the insights of experience are not private to the individual; they do not result in a new perspective unavailable to the wider public, nor do they result in new knowledge not already available in Scripture for the discerning reader. For Wesley, it remains true that Scripture governs experience and not the other way round.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 291.

<sup>107</sup> There, Wesley compares Christian development to child development: “some of the children of God being but new born babes, others having attained to more maturity.” John Wesley, *Sermons II: 34-70*, 102.

<sup>108</sup> He states “No one is so perfect in this life as to be free from ignorance. Nor...from mistake. Wesley, *Sermons II: 34-70*, 101. And further “With regards to the Holy Scriptures themselves, as careful as they are to avoid it, the best of men are liable to mistake...Hence even the children of God are not agreed as to the interpretation of many places in Holy Writ.” Wesley, *Sermons II: 34-70*, 102.

<sup>109</sup> Jones, *John’s Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 100.

### 4.3. The Relationship of the Extra-scriptural argument to Scripture

We argued above that Wesley's appeal to Natural Justice did not in itself imply a "Two Kingdoms" approach to the public sphere. As stated earlier, this is demonstrated by the way that Wesley's argument does interact with Scripture.

This interaction may not be immediately obvious. The contemporary reader will search in vain for reference to chapter and verse. However, because one of Wesley's maxims was to "speak as the oracles of God,"<sup>110</sup> what we might find are frequent, un-signposted quotations and allusions.<sup>111</sup>

We have already seen such an example in the way that Wesley draws out the implications for those who purchase and own slaves; they benefit from and 'induce' those who "steal, rob, murder men, women, and children."<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Wesley's final appeal is saturated in scriptural quotes and allusions. To name but some: First, he insists that those who have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God,) *render unto all their due.*<sup>113</sup> Secondly, he warns that their wrongdoing will be punished, quoting Jesus when he says "that day it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for you!"<sup>114</sup> Thirdly, he appeals to their better conscience with the words "to-day, if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart."<sup>115</sup>

Given that the final appeal is anchored in scriptural reasoning, this strengthens our argument that the setting aside of Scripture was a mere tactical move. Even within that limited context, one may well argue that the appeal to justice and mercy are far from being Scripture neutral. In a historical context where a rich Christian heritage remained

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<sup>110</sup> On 1 Peter 4:11, see Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 884-885. Cited in Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 111. See also a letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> February 1777 to Mrs Barton. John Wesley, *The Letters of John Wesley*, 6.256.

<sup>111</sup> Jones, *John's Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 131.

<sup>112</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.4), 48.

<sup>113</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.6), 51-52.

<sup>114</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.3), 47.

<sup>115</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (V.3), 47.

in place and the very legal system was rooted in the Bible, it would be reasonable to argue that Wesley was assuming a common understanding of what those words meant, not by reference to Natural Law but to a sub-conscious awareness of Scripture.<sup>116</sup>

We may surmise, then, that Wesley's personal experiences and reading do impact his understanding of slavery. He does change his position on slavery. However, this is in the sense of Reason and Experience interacting with Scripture with Scripture as the final authority, not in the sense of four authorities together with Reason and Experience speaking separately to or controlling Scripture.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, we may conclude that our investigation supports our preliminary thesis. First, that Wesley's hermeneutic does not fit the template of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral and thus secondly, that his argument does not support a Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic. Before we develop our conclusions further, we need to spell out some limitations which constrain what we can and cannot infer from our study.

### 5.1. Limitations

I would suggest three limitations which constrain our study. The first concerns the nature of Wesley's method. We need to remember that Wesley does not set out his argument as a theological treatise or sermon. There is the additional complication that neither here, not in general, does Wesley make his hermeneutical assumptions explicit in a systematic fashion.<sup>117</sup> This means that any attempt by Wesleyan scholars to identify his hermeneutic will always be based on gleaning comments from different parts of his works. Therefore,

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<sup>116</sup> This would be another example of the risks of anachronistically reading back into Wesley a contemporary treatment of Natural Law as independent from Revealed Law. Rather, even for Aquinas, the existence of Natural Law does not exclude the need for revelation to enable men to understand God's divine Law. See e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae. Volume 29. The Old Law* (Translated and Edited by David Booke and Arthur Littledale; London, Blackfriars, 1969), 2.100.1-3 (Booke and Littledale, 29. 57-59).

<sup>117</sup> Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture*, 12-13.

we should always beware the risk of anachronistically imposing our own hermeneutic upon him.

Secondly, we are constrained by the scope of this study. A broader study would benefit from greater analysis of other abolitionists, especially Clarkson and Wilberforce. I am, however, satisfied that whilst there may have been differences in detail, Wesley's approach is broadly representative of the movement. For example, Clarkson's major essay follows a similar approach in describing the situation arguing on his opponents' terms and making careful implications and distinctions. We have, throughout the course of this study, sought to highlight the consistency between the position of Wesley and other Abolitionists at key points in the argument.

Thirdly, we are limited by the nature of the study as an historical investigation. This permits us to make inferences about historical support for the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic. However, this in itself does not provide conclusive evidence as to its usefulness. Other tests are more pertinent to the reliability of a hermeneutical model. All the same, because historical support is claimed for the model, it is reasonable to ask whether such support exists.

## **5.2. What implications may we conclude?**

Having said that, I believe that there are some important implications we can draw from our study.

First, we would want to highlight the way in which Wesley's genuine concern to let Scripture speak as the final authority is seen at work in his argument.

Secondly, Wesley is fundamentally theologically conservative in his use of Tradition. Rather than using it to show the development of the mind of the church, he uses it to demonstrate the consistent, historical mind of the church as agreed on this subject.

Thirdly, this is not to deny the way that other factors influence Wesley. It is true that his views change over time, no doubt shaped by his reading and his experience. But Wesley would always see these factors as controlled by, not controlling, Scripture. If it could be shown to him that his argument conflicted with the plain truth of Scripture in terms of its whole tenor, he would change his position.

Fourthly, we note the dividing line that Webb wishes to draw between hermeneutical models that allow movement and those which demonstrate a static view of Scripture, where each text is treated in isolation and applied absolutely.<sup>118</sup> We can be clear that Wesley doesn't do that. He understands that there is movement in Scripture. 1 Timothy 1 is trans-cultural in a way that Leviticus 21 is not. However, there is a crucial difference.

Webb's hermeneutic sees a trajectory beyond Scripture. His model requires that our understanding of Scripture be subjected to our cultural insights.<sup>119</sup> For Wesley, any movement is within Scripture only. Such movement should be detectable from any culture at any time. For Wesley, a right understanding of Scripture controls the cultural insights.

For these reasons, we may conclude that Wesley's hermeneutic does not fit within the Redemptive Movement scheme. The debates about contemporary hermeneutics and ethics will no doubt continue. Furthermore, we may expect those who are arguing from a redemptive movement model to continue to do so. However, if they intend to do so whilst claiming historical support from the Abolitionists, they should think again. If they want to prove their argument they will need to turn elsewhere for their evidence.

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<sup>118</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 30-35.

<sup>119</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 36.

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