

6 John Cooper Advocates the Abolition of Slavery

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, September 20, 1780.]

Thoughtful Jerseymen were well aware of the contradiction between revolutionary rhetoric and social realities, especially the discrepancy between the equality proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence and the inequality of slavery. John Cooper (1729-1785) of Gloucester County is representative of the many men who opposed the institution of slavery for political as well as moral reasons. As a member of the Society of Friends, he was heir to traditional antipathy to human bondage. But having served on several local revolutionary committees, the Provincial Congress (1775-1776), the Continental Congress (1776), and the committee that drafted the state constitution of 1776, he was concerned that the existence of slavery would undermine both the quest for independence and the experiment in republicanism. Writing as a Quaker-Whig, Cooper delivers a stinging rebuke in the essay that follows to those who through acts of commission and omission sustained African slavery. Cooper was unique among New Jersey abolitionists in rejecting gradual manumission in favor of an immediate end to slavery.

[September 20, 1780]

Friends and Fellow-Citizens!

Whilst we are spilling our blood and exhausting our treasure in defence of our own liberty, it would not perhaps be amiss to turn our eyes towards those of our fellow-men who are now groaning in bondage under us. We say "all men are equally entitled to liberty and the pursuit of happiness;"¹ but are we willing to grant this liberty to all men? The sentiment no doubt is just as well as generous; and must ever be read to our praise, provided our actions correspond therewith. But if after we have made such a declaration to the world, we continue to hold our fellow creatures in slavery, our words must rise up in judgement against us, and by the breath of our own mouths we shall stand condemned.

The war has already been prolonged far beyond what we once thought the abilities of Britain would admit of; and how much longer it may please Providence to suffer it to rage, or what the final event of it may be, is to us altogether unknown. The children of Israel, we find, could not conquer their enemies whilst they, the Israelites, had "the accursed thing"² amongst them. And as tyranny is the accursed thing against which we have waged war, how can we hope to prevail against our enemies whilst we ourselves are tyrants, holding thousands of our fellow-creatures in slavery under us?

The Lord did not leave it a doubt with Joshua³ what was the reason they could not succeed; he told him in plain terms the reason was because they had also transgressed his covenant — they had "the accursed thing" among them. And if the Lord is still the same God, deciding the controversies amongst men upon the same principles, then, although Britain may have transgressed his covenant⁴ in endeavouring to enslave us, if we are not only also, but equally in the transgression,

by holding the Africans and their posterity in slavery, how can we expect he will decide in our favour, unless we recede from such our transgression? Unless we abolish tyranny, "the accursed thing," from amongst us, and do that justice to others which we ask of him for ourselves? Nay, how can we have the face even to ask of him a blessing on our endeavours, however laudable they may be, to defend ourselves against tyranny and oppression, whilst we are thus acting the part of tyrants and oppressors? Surely we ought rather to blush at our own conduct; — to acknowledge our own transgressions, and, before we presume to solicit a blessing, endeavour, if possible, to obtain forgiveness. Can we imagine our prayers to Almighty God will meet with his approbation, or in the least degree tend to procure us relief from the hand of oppression, whilst the groans of our slaves are continually ascending mingled with them? I fear, indeed, that not only our prayers, but our publick fastings, are an abomination in his sight, and will so remain until we have washed our hands from tyranny, and the voice of a slave is not to be heard in our land.

But let me beseech us not to deceive ourselves; should we undertake to abolish tyranny, and to put an end to that other accursed thing, the gain of oppression hitherto derived from our slaves, as Saul did when he undertook to destroy Amalek.⁵ It seems, from what he said to Samuel⁶ on meeting with him soon afterwards, that he thought he had done all that was needful — that he had really fulfilled the will of the Lord. But alas! he was greatly deceived. For he had coveted, and the people had coveted, what they had no right to enjoy; and by yielding to this evil covetous spirit he drew down the vengeance of Heaven upon him, and his fairest hopes were blasted.

They could not, it seems, bear to give up all — the King and the best of the things they saved. And if we keep our present slaves in bondage, and only enact laws that their posterity shall be free, we save that part of our tyranny and gain of oppression, which to us, the present generation, is of the most value — is like the King, and the best of the sheep and the oxen; and however specious or plausible the preambles of those laws or our pretensions may be, we shall plainly tread in the footsteps of Saul; and I fear our reward, like his, will be the vengeance of Heaven, and the blasting of our fairest hopes. . . .

Let us, my countrymen, derive wisdom from those who have gone before us: Let the people and their rulers beware of an evil covetousness.

In our publick and most solemn declarations we say, we are resolved to die free; — that slavery is worse than death. He, therefore, who enslaves his fellow-creature must, in our esteem, be worse than he who takes his life; and yet, surprising as it may seem, we hold thousands of our fellow-men in slavery, and slumber on under the dreadful load of guilt—Worse than murderers and yet at ease! A melancholy reflection indeed, that habit should be capable of reconciling the human mind to the greatest of all crimes—of lulling it to rest in the practice of that which, ere long, must cause it to tremble before the great, the awful tribunal; where all deception will be done away, and our transgressions appear in their fullest magnitude and greatest deformity! . . .

If we are determined not to emancipate our slaves, but to hold them still in bondage, let us alter our language upon the subject of tyranny; let us no longer speak of it as a thing in its own nature detestable, because in so doing, as hath been observed, we shall condemn ourselves. But let us rather declare to the world, that tyranny is a thing we are not principled against, but that we are resolved not to be

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slaves, because we ourselves mean to be tyrants. Such a declaration would certainly be more candid, or at least would better correspond with the conduct I have mentioned, than those we have usually made; though perhaps it might not be quite so pleasing, for justice is so lovely, and virtue so amiable, that we all love to be deemed their votaries, however estranged we may be from their ways.

Whatever colouring slavekeeping may receive from interested individuals who wish to keep it on foot, there is something in its nature so universally odious, that we meet with but few of the slavekeepers themselves that are willing to be thought tyrants; like unchaste women, they cannot bear to be deemed what they really are; for nothing is more clear, than that he who keeps a slave is a tyrant. Without tyranny, there can be no slavery in the sense here meant. And where slavekeeping is countenanced and upheld by any state or empire, the tyranny becomes national, and the iniquity also; and in such case a national scourage may very well be looked for. If, therefore, neither the love of justice, nor the feelings of humanity are sufficient to induce us to release our slaves from bondage, let the dread of divine retribution — of national calamities — induce us to do it.

I know it is not fashionable for those who write news-paper pieces to risk their names with the pieces they publish; but I shall venture to deviate from the custom in this particular case, because however unpopular it may be, I have a desire to appear one of the testimony bearers against a practice so unjustifiable as slavekeeping is at all times and in all countries, but more especially in this at the present juncture.⁷ I have endeavoured to express my ideas in as few words as possible; and as the piece is short, so when fully and impartially considered, I hope it will prove offensive to no individual.⁸

JOHN COOPER

1. Actually a paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

2. The greed and covetousness of the Israelites, symbolized by the Babylonian mantle, shekels of silver, and wedge of gold taken as booty by Achan. As long as Israel held these items, Jehovah withheld his support and thus caused the defeat of Israel at Ai. Josh. 7.

3. Son of Nun who replaced Moses as the leader of Israel. After Jehovah told Joshua that the Israelites had been defeated at the city of Ai because of the transgression mentioned above, Joshua sought out the culprit, destroyed him and his possessions, and then conquered Ai with the support of an avenged God. Josh. 1-7.

4. "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." Luke 6:31. Cooper's footnote.

5. Saul, the first king of Israel, who led his people in wars of conquest against the rival Ammonites, Moabites, Philistines, and Amalekites. Although ordered by Jehovah to sack the city of Amalek and destroy the inhabitants and all their possessions, Saul, bowing to the wishes of his followers, spared King Agag and took fine livestock and goods as booty. Only inferior animals and unwanted commodities were destroyed. An angry Jehovah subsequently

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rejected Saul for disobeying his commandment. 1 Sam. 11-15.

6. The prophet Samuel, who anointed Saul as king and to whom Saul related his disobedience of God's instruction at Amalek. 1 Sam. 15.

7. Cooper's candor did not diminish his popularity in Gloucester County, for he was elected to the Legislative Council in October 1780. True to his convictions, he requested permission on December 30 to introduce a bill entitled "An Act to abolish Slavery throughout this State." Permission was denied by a vote of 6-4. The councilors were no more ready to discuss the volatile issue than were the members of the lower house (see Doc. 10, note 5). *Journal of the Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the State of New Jersey, October 24, 1780-January 9, 1781* (Trenton, 1781), p. 57.

8. An essay challenging Cooper's view appeared in the *Gazette* two weeks later and touched off a lengthy pro- and antiabolition debate in the press. See Doc. 8.

7 "A Freeman" on the Electoral Process as a Safeguard of Liberty

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, October 4, 1780.]

The electoral process was the dynamic element in the operation of republican government. It was through popular elections that the people made their will known and either sustained or removed their representatives. In recognition of this cardinal principle, the state constitution of 1776 (see Sec. VII, Doc. 6) provided for both maximum opportunity for the citizenry to participate in the political process and maximum accountability on the part of elected officials. Annual elections were deemed central to the working of the new political order and were included with trial by jury and freedom of religion as the three rights which could never be denied by the government. Important offices that had been appointive during the colonial period (most notably councilmen, sheriffs, and coroners) were now made elective; even though most government officers were chosen in joint session of the council and assembly (the most important of which were the governor, judges of the supreme court and court of common pleas, attorney general, secretary of state, state treasurer, and justices of the peace), the people had indirect control over those posts in that they elected the legislators. Suffrage was widespread, being granted to anyone who had attained the legal age of twenty-one, had resided in a county for at least one year, and possessed personal property worth a minimum of £ 50 proclamation (a modest sum rendered almost meaningless by inflation). Since there were no franchise restrictions based on sex or race, women and blacks voted in New Jersey until prohibited by law in 1807. The right to vote and