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Anthony Benezet, the True Champion of the Slave

IRV A. BRENDLINGER

Anthony Benezet was the greatest eighteenth century influence on the ending of British slavery and the slave trade. While names such as Wilberforce, Sharp and Clarkson ring with familiarity as champions of the slave, it is Benezet who occupies the position of foundational influence on these men and the entire cause. To substantiate this claim I shall briefly introduce his life and examine his antislavery activities and influences. However, it is most fitting to begin with his death and the public response to it. In this scene we receive a clearer vision of his life.

Philadelphia. May 3, 1784.

Anthony Benezet was dead. The funeral would be May 4, 1784, the day after his death. He would be mourned by hundreds of people, people of all social standings and educational levels, of diverse religious persuasions, of a broad variety of vocations, but most indicative of his life's accomplishments, by people of different races. For an eighteenth century Philadelphia funeral to be so attended is a clear statement of the unique character and accomplishments of the man being honored. A contemporary observed

the greatest concourse of people that had ever been witnessed on such an occasion in Philadelphia, was present, being a collection of all ranks and professions among the inhabitants, thus manifesting the universal esteem in which he was held. Among others who paid that last tribute of respect, were many hundred black people, testifying by their attendance, and by

their tears, the grateful sense they entertained of his pious efforts in their behalf.¹

Even more revealing of Benezet's core values is his will, reviewed five days before and completed on the very day of his death. After providing for the ongoing support of his wife through trust of his possessions or sale of his property if the interest from the trust were not sufficient, he instructed that a permanent trust be established to

employ a religious minded person or persons to teach a number of Negroe, Mulatto, or Indian Children to read and write, Arithmetic, plain Accounts, Needlework &c. And it is my particular desire founded on the experience I have had in that service that in the choice of such a tutor special care may be had to prefer an industrious careful person of true piety, who may be or become suitably qualified, who would undertake the service from a principal [sic] of Charity to one more highly learned not equally so disposed.²

With an eye to the individual as well as the group and the institution, the last sentence of the will reads, "And I leave unto Margaret Till an appresst & much afflicted black woman [...] the sum of five pounds."³

Not only was Benezet concerned for the individual and a system of education, but he provided also for legal assistance for those trying to break the bonds of the institution that produced and perpetuated the causes of degradation, the institution of slavery:

I also give unto James Star & Thomas Harrison the sum of fifty pounds in trust for the use of a certain Society who are forming themselves for the relief of such Black People & other who apprehend themselves illegally detained in Slavery to enable them to employ lawyers &c. to appear on their behalf in law & in all other cases afford just relief to these oppressed people.⁴

We will now take a closer look at the individual so honored by both blacks and whites at his funeral, the one who focused purposefully and almost exclusively in his will on the needs of black people.

1. Robert Vaux, *Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet*, (Philadelphia: James P. Parke, 1817), p. 134.

2. "The Will of Anthony Benezet," Pemberton Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, cited in Brookes, p. 166

3. *Ibid.*, cited in Brookes, p. 167.

4. *Ibid.*

I. Benezet's Life⁵

Anthony Benezet was born in St. Quentin, France, 31 January, 1713. He was a descendant of the legendary Benezet reputed to have received God's instructive vision of building the bridge across the Rhone at Avignon in the 12th century. This Benezet was canonized and the bridge was named "St. Benezet's Bridge."⁶ Later generations of Benezets became Protestants, some of whom were persecuted and even martyred for their faith. When Anthony was only two years old, his Huguenot father's property was confiscated in Catholic France. His parents, Stephen and Judith, fled to Rotterdam with their two year old son, Anthony and their four year old daughter, Marie Madelaine Judith. Brookes relays an interesting event in the escape:

They secured as their guide in the hazardous enterprise a clever youth, who used coolheaded strategy at one of the military outposts which then skirted the frontier. The youthful companion, approaching the sentinel at the border, displayed a gun which he was holding in one hand and a bag full of gold in the other, and naively said: "Choose! either you will allow these good people, who are victims of persecution, to pass, and you will be rewarded--or resist, and you shall die!"⁷

Obviously, the ploy succeeded, although one wonders how Benezet would have considered it in his adult, Quaker life! The journey would have been not only dangerous but also difficult, covering 170 miles in 12 days, with the young mother pregnant. She delivered three and a half weeks after their departure, but the child died within three months.⁸

The following August, 1715, the family left Rotterdam for England, staying one month in Greenwich before finding more permanent lodging in London. They remained in London for 16 years. Stephen was naturalized in England and prospered sufficiently so that upon emigrating to America he was able to purchase 1,000 acres and a brick home in Philadelphia. By now the family had increased to seven children, with an additional five hav-

5. The biographical section on Benezet is extracted largely from the thorough and excellent source, *Friend Anthony Benezet* by George S. Brookes, 1937.

6. The story of this legend can be found in Brookes, pp 2-3.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 14 (citing Jacques Pannier, *Antoine Benezet, un Quaker en Amerique*, Toulouse, 1925)

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15. The departure date from St. Quentin was 3 February, 1715. Years later Anthony would reflect on his Huguenot heritage: "It was by the intolerants that one of my uncles was hanged, that an aunt was sent to a convent, that two of my cousins died at the galleys and that my father, a fugitive, was ruined by the confiscation of his goods." This quotation is contained in a letter from Francois, Marquis de Barbe'-Marbois, quoted in full in Brookes, pp. 451ff.

ing died in England.⁹ Anthony was 18 years of age and had received some education in business (mercantile).

Before we leave Anthony's family, it is interesting to note that his father, Stephen had both Quaker and Moravian acquaintances. In London he was familiar with the Quakers who supported the school that Anthony probably attended (in Wandsworth), and he actually joined the Quakers.¹⁰ Stephen also knew Peter Bohler,¹¹ the Moravian so influential a few years later in John Wesley's life.¹² Once in America, Stephen joined the Quakers (Philadelphia Meeting). Eventually, however, his Moravian connections became stronger. Both Spangenberg and Zinzendorf stayed in the Benezet home, and in 1743 Stephen left the Quaker meeting and became a Moravian. When a Moravian congregation was formed in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, he became the first treasurer and covered the cost of the first catechism printing. In 1743 he also moved from Philadelphia to Germantown (now, in the NW part of Philadelphia). At this time he became a trustee of the Charity School, whose purpose it was to educate poor children without payment. The Charity School later became the College of Pennsylvania, and eventually the University of Pennsylvania.¹³ In 1751 Stephen Benezet died; his funeral was preached by the Presbyterian, Gilbert Tennent.¹⁴

Anthony, on the other hand, after arriving in America at age 18 (1731) soon joined the Quakers.¹⁵ Five years later, age 23 (1736), he married Joyce Marriott (also age 23), who had been recognized by the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting as a Quaker minister since she was eighteen years old.¹⁶

9. Brookes, *passim*.

10. Brookes, p. 17, 19

11. *Ibid.*, p. 19

12. Peter Bohler is the Moravian whom John Wesley asked in May of 1738, before his Aldersgate experience, if he should quit preaching because he was not fully assured of his own faith. Bohler responded with the encouraging words: "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith" (*The Works of John Wesley*, Jackson Edition, 1872, Vol. 1, p. 86).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Closer examination reveals that the Charity School was founded in 1740 but didn't function as a school, rather as a "house of Publick Worship." The building was called the "New Building," located on Fourth Street near Arch, and George Whitefield preached there in November, 1740. One of the original trustees, from 1740, was Benjamin Franklin. In 1751 a "Publick Academy," which had been envisioned by Franklin in 1749, opened in the "New Building." Franklin served as the president of the board until 1756. It was this institution which offered free education to the poor and later became the University of Pennsylvania. It is fascinating to trace the University of Pennsylvania to the building housing the Charity School of which Anthony Benezet was a Trustee. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition, 1910-1911, Vol. 1, p 115). It is also interesting to realize that Stephen Benezet had been a fellow trustee with Franklin in 1743.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2

15. *Ibid.*, p. 16. Henry Van Etten, *George Fox and the Early Quakers*, p 124, indicates that four years earlier in England he had joined the Quakers, but that is not verifiable. Brookes, p. 16, mentions that Roberts Vaux (*Memoirs*) gives the same view.

Anthony and his new bride spent the next three years in the Philadelphia area, but he had no clear vocational direction. During this time a daughter was born to them, but she died within her first year. In 1739 the couple moved to Wilmington, Delaware where Anthony pursued a manufacturing career. This enterprise was short lived; they returned to Philadelphia within six months.¹⁷

In 1739, the year after Wesley's Aldersgate awakening in London, Benezet embarked on the career that he would follow for the rest of his life. He began teaching school at Germantown. During this time he also served as proofreader in a printing office that produced a German newspaper, tracts, books, almanacs and a Bible. Thus, it appears that he was fluent in German, English and French. He remained at the Germantown school for three years, until 1742, when he began teaching at the Friends' English School of Philadelphia (also known as the Philadelphia Public School, English, and later as the William Penn Charter School). His annual salary was 50 pounds.¹⁸ He remained at the post for twelve years (until 1754), and during his fourth year was encouraged by the completion of a new school house, located at the southeast corner of 4th and Chestnut.¹⁹ During his second year of teaching in Philadelphia, his son, Anthony, was born, but the infant tragically died after only six days.²⁰ For the first three years of teaching in Philadelphia, the Benezets lived in Germantown, probably about eight miles from the school on Chestnut. In 1745 they moved nearer the school and in 1753 they purchased a house on the north side of Chesnut, very near the school.²¹ It was during this period that Benezet began a special and unusual teaching ministry that continued for twenty years. From 1750 to 1770 he used his evenings to teach black persons in his home. The curriculum included the basics of education as well as principles of the Christian faith.²² In 1770 Benezet persuaded the Quakers of Philadelphia to construct a school building solely for the purpose of giving black children a free education. Funds were contributed by Benezet's personal friends, Philadelphia Quakers and London Quakers and from his own private resources.²³

In 1754, Benezet resigned his position at the Friends' School, apparently for reasons of needing a less strenuous schedule. Within one month, however, he was back teaching, but this time at a Quaker school for thirty girls, who each paid tuition of 40 shillings. Classes were mornings only and Benezet's salary was 80 pounds for the year. This position lasted only for a

16. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

year and 1755 found Benezet serving as an Overseer of the Public Schools and taking the position of manager of the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia.²⁴ Two years later, when the teacher of the girls' school resigned, Benezet returned, under the arrangements of the newly resigned teacher: tuition of 30 shillings per girl and a salary of 20 pounds for the year.²⁵ After nine years, in 1766, he resigned for health reasons.²⁶ At that time he moved to Burlington, New Jersey where he had built a home some two years earlier. Both he and Joyce were active in the Burlington Monthly Meeting, she as a minister and he as an elder.²⁷ Although he used the respite to write, it appears that he was not happy away from teaching. Nine months later he returned to Philadelphia to resume teaching, leaving Joyce in Burlington. He taught twelve poor girls for an annual salary of 20 pounds.²⁸

Benezet remained at this teaching post until 1782, when he was 69 years old. At this time the Negro school²⁹ which he had initiated in 1770 was without a teacher. Rather than allow it to stop functioning, Benezet resigned at the Girls' School in order to give his last two years to the Negro school. He would have made the change a year earlier had he not been dissuaded by friends who were concerned that the task would be too strenuous for him.³⁰ The curriculum included reading, writing and arithmetic.³¹ So it was that Benezet spent his last years teaching, and more particularly, teaching those he had worked so hard to liberate, as we shall discuss in the next section. However, before leaving the biographical section which has focused on his teaching career, it would be well to look briefly at the spirit and wisdom of the man as reflected in some his teaching experiences.

Anthony was clearly a man ahead of his time. In an age that saw corporal punishment as not only necessary for classroom order but also as beneficial to the student, Benezet had a different approach. He frequently used creativity to help his students progress past their inappropriate behavior rather than simply reacting with punishment.³² He scheduled times of recreation and exercise to break up the study day.³³ In an age that saw speech and hearing deficiencies as problems to be punished, Benezet was moved with compassion. On one occasion a girl who was deaf and dumb

24. *Ibid.*, p. 38. He served as hospital manager for one year, elected in 1757 (Brookes, p 39, f.n.23)

25. William Penn Charter School Records, cited in Brookes, p. 40

26. William Penn Charter School MS Records, cited in Brookes, pp. 42-3

27. Brookes, p. 44

28. *Ibid.*

29. Although the term "Negro school" would not be appropriate in the twentieth century it is used here because it was the normal designation in the eighteenth century and also was the term Benezet used.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 47. The first teacher at the Negro school was Moses Patterson; John Houghton immediately preceded Benezet as master (pp. 47- 48).

was enrolled in his school. Brookes indicates that “he devised plans whereby he could instruct her, and [...] after two years of tuition, accompanied by faith and patience and perseverance, she was enabled to share in a degree the fellowship of society denied her by an age which despised such unfortunate children, and sometimes put them to death.”³⁴ In an age that was only just beginning to see the value of high quality education for children, Benezet wrote a tract proposing numerous innovations which have since become normative: a fixed and livable income so a stable teacher, even one having a family, could establish a permanent career in contrast to the customary low wage that attracted only transient, single teachers; a home, garden, orchard and stable be erected on the school property for the teacher; the giving of money by the community so a fund could be established, rather like an endowment which would provide for a teacher’s salary and for educational expenses of the poor. For children who lived too great a distance from school to attend, he offered the plan of their boarding with the school master, thus giving him a financial increase from the board and giving them an otherwise impossible opportunity.³⁵ Finally, in an age that saw black people at worst as less than human, at best, inferior to the white race, Benezet transcends the 18th century prejudices by openmindedly observing reality. He speaks on this topic best for himself:

I can with truth and sincerity declare, that I have found amongst the negroes as great a variety of talents as amongst a like number of whites; and I am bold to assert, that the notion entertained by some, that the blacks are inferior in their capacities, is a vulgar prejudice, founded on the pride of ignorance of their lordly masters, who have kept their slaves at such a distance, as to be unable to form a right judgment of them.³⁶

Motivated by a genuine concern for fellow human beings, Benezet tuned his heart to their needs and became resourceful and innovative in trying to respond to those needs. As a result, his reputation as an effective and

32. Brookes gives a delightful example, p. 34. It seems that two boys constructed a miniature pillory (a sort of stocks) and placed a tortured mouse in the pillory on Benezet’s desk. The following poem was attached: “I stand here, my honest friends, For stealing cheese and candle-ends.” Of course, the test was to see how the teacher would respond. Rather than react in anger and punish the boys, once they were identified, Benezet pointed them out as examples of compassion, comparing them to most who would have killed the mouse for its theft. Rather than punishment, it was a lesson in compassion.

33. Letter from Deborah Logan, former Benezet student, to Roberts Vaux, about 1825 (in Brookes appendix, pp. 466-470).

34. *Ibid.*, p. 42

35. *Some Observations Relating to the Establishment of Schools* Submitted by the Committee, Anthony Benezet and Isaac Zane, to the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, 1778 (contained in Brookes, pp. 492ff).

36. Brookes, pp. 46-47, citing Roberts Vaux, *Memoirs of Anthony Benezet*, p. 30

compassionate teacher extended far. And the same genuine concern for others caused Benezet's influence to go beyond the structure and the discipline of the classroom. It caused his eyes to be open to the injustices that society caused, perpetuated and rationalized.

II. *Benezet and Slavery*

It is difficult for us of the twentieth century to imagine the injustices of the eighteenth century when the church as an institution and the overwhelming majority of Christians unequivocally supported the enslaving of one race by another. The atrocities are incomprehensible to us, with the number of black persons victimized being perhaps three times greater than the number of Jews later killed in the holocaust. There were, however, voices in the wilderness, those solitary persons of sensitive conscience who could see beyond the social conventions and the Biblical hermeneutic of their day to a greater truth. And there were even fewer who not only could see, but were also willing to act, taking whatever steps possible to change the situation of the oppressed. Such individuals are rightly termed "prophets," those who speak forth the truth, who act upon that truth and who inspire others also to see and act upon God's truth. By this definition Anthony Benezet was a prophet. In this section, a brief introduction to Benezet's antislavery writings will be made, followed by an exploration of his influence on other antislavery activists and an assessment of his significance in the antislavery fight.

Before perusing the content of some of Benezet's antislavery writings, it is helpful to list them in chronological order, setting them in the overall context of his life:

1754 *The Epistle of 1754, Presented to the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends*, written during his final (12th) year at the Friends' English School of Philadelphia (William Penn Charter School) and a year after he had moved into his own home on Chestnut Street.

1759 *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes with some Advice thereon extracted from the Yearly Meeting Epistle of London for the Present Year*, written while he was teaching at the Quaker Girls' School in Philadelphia.

1762 *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes*, written while still at the Girls' School.

1766 *A Caution and Warning to Great-Britain, and Her Colonies, in A Short Representation of the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions*. 1766 was the year Benezet moved to Burlington, New Jersey, devoting himself to writing and not teaching for a brief tenure of only nine months. This forty-five page tract is almost exclusively extracted from *A*

Short Account, but some of its content is also included in *Some Historical Account*.

1771 *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants with an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade*

1772 *A Mite Cast into the Treasure: or, Observations on Slave-Keeping*

1778 *Serious Reflections affectionately recommended to the well disposed of every religious Denomination, particularly those who mourn and lament on account of the Calamities which attend us*. Benezet wrote the three documents from 1771 - 1778 while teaching a small number of girls at the Girls' School in Philadelphia.

1783 Letter sent to Queen Charlotte of Great Britain.

1784 *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, respectfully recommended to The Serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great-Britain, by the People called Quakers*. The final two pieces were written while Benezet was teaching at the Negro school he had initiated in Philadelphia, the last tract composed in the year of his death.

Benezet's first writing on slavery, *The Epistle of 1754*, is a brief (three page), but clear statement against slavery and the slave trade intended to motivate Quakers to take consistent action against slavery.³⁷ He begins by acknowledging the fact that the Yearly Meeting has opposed the importing and buying of slaves, but in spite of that the number of slaves among Quakers has increased. He then specifies the reasons slavery should not be allowed among Friends:

— "To live in ease and plenty by the toil of those whom violence and cruelty have put in our power, is neither consistent with Christianity nor common justice,"

— "where slave-keeping prevails, pure religion and sobriety declines,"

— to enslave another clearly contradicts Christ's command that we "love one another as I have loved you,"

— separation of slave husbands from their wives promotes adultery,

— slavery tends to "lessen our humanity,"

Finally he implores fellow Quakers to examine their motives in keeping slaves. If their motives are anything other than for the slave's own good, then the "love of God" and the "influence of the Holy Spirit" are clearly "not the prevailing principle in you... ." ³⁸ It is obvious from the rest of the

37. *The Epistle of 1754 Presented to the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends*, reprinted completely in Brookes, pp. 475-477

Epistle that the slave's own good is never the primary motivation for slavery. Some of the themes he developed more fully in subsequent tracts are found in seminal form here.

While each of the tracts is valuable, the most significant are *A Short Account*, 1762, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, 1771, and *A Mite Cast into the Treasure: or, Observations on Slave-Keeping*, 1772. In the eighty pages of *A Short Account*, Benezet states early his threefold purpose. He intends 1) to show how evil slavery is: it subverts our relationship both to God and to our fellow human beings, 2) to discount arguments in support of slavery so as to prevent those considering involvement, and finally 3) to demonstrate the danger to those already involved in the business.³⁹ To reinforce his arguments, Benezet quotes numerous persons who have travelled in Africa and witnessed African culture and the capturing of slaves. His arguments include the horrendous nature of both the processes which enslave Africans and the "seasoning" which makes them fit slaves. Little is left to the imagination.⁴⁰ By contrast, he points to the high level of culture, intelligence and industry of the native Africans. Quoting philosophers such as George Wallace and Francis Hutcheson, he buttresses his argument with the principles of liberty and the foundation of human benevolence. Also using the Bible, Benezet recalls the New Testament story of the debtor who cast into prison a fellow who was indebted to him. Benezet challenges: "think then, and tremble to think, what will be your Fate, who take your fellowservants by the throat, that owe you not a penny, and make them prisoners for Life."⁴¹ Closing the tract on the topic of the problem of riches compared to the needs of the poor, Benezet calls to mind the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.⁴²

Some Historical Account of Guinea (1771) is a lengthier treatment (some 143 pages) of the problem of slavery that again quotes African travelers, philosophers and theological writers. Benezet introduces the work by stating his purpose to "republish most serious parts of said tracts" so those of influence may "put a stop to any further progress" of slavery and the slave trade.⁴³ He makes a very strong case for the natural state of Africans, noting their excellent qualities which are only ruined by contact with Europeans.

38. Ibid.

39. Benezet, *A Short Account*, p. 6

40. For example, Benezet cites a method utilized to persuade slaves to eat: they were forced to eat pieces of a fellow slave who had been chopped up, the fate they could all expect if they failed to eat. After an attempted slave revolt, slaves were forced to eat the hearts and livers of some of the rebels and then forced to watch the execution of a woman, hanged by her thumbs. This account is contained in *A Short Account*, p. 49, *Some Historical Account*, p. 124 and *A Caution and Warning*, p. 27

41. Ibid., pp., 62-3

42. Ibid., pp. 79-80

43. Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, p. ii

He repeatedly appeals to the humanity and sympathy of the reader as he explicitly describes inhuman atrocities inherent in slavery. He adds the future judgment and retribution of God in case the appeal to humanity is not sufficient. For practical consideration and to give evidence to the reality of the overwork and insufficient care of slaves he gives the statistics of necessary slave replacements. Repeatedly he cites "gain" as the predominant motive for slavery and notes the ability of slaveholders to "justify" the practice by means of their hardened hearts. He quotes the French philosopher Montesquieu to show that slavery is harmful to both the slave and the master. Quaker John Woolman is cited giving five principles that oppose slavery (pp. 74-75) and Benezet takes an unequivocal position on negro equality. He then appeals to the British legal system to show that slavery is inconsistent with the foundational laws of the empire. Finally, he answers objections to negro equality and sets forth three proposals to deal constructively with the ending of slavery and the subsequent adjustment of the work force.

A short, but pithy tract, published in 1772, addresses the major issues of slavery: the equality of negroes and whites, the problem of overcoming prejudice, how the slave trade fuels the institution of slavery and how slavery and Christianity are completely incompatible. In *Observations on Slave Keeping*, Benezet⁴⁴ marshalls a number of forces to drive home his points, including Bible quotations, allusions to Biblical pericopes, threat of God's judgment, quotations of John Locke and explanations of how difficult it is to overcome prejudice. He begins his argument by asserting the strength of prejudice when associated with a vested interest. This appears to be an attempt to disarm the reader by rocking the foundation of his or her position: "The power of prejudice over the minds of mankind is very extraordinary; hardly any extreams [sic] too distant, or absurdities too glaring for it to unite or reconcile, if it tends to promote or justify a favourite pursuit."⁴⁵ With time and reinforcement, he explains, such prejudice becomes "so rivited" that even religious people cannot "hear the voice of impartial justice."⁴⁶

Benezet then quotes scripture encouraging aid on behalf of the poor (Proverbs 31:8-9), adherence to the Golden Rule and recognition of the Biblical prohibition against stealing a man, which was a capital offense (Exodus 21:16).⁴⁷ Five pages from the end he offers a threat based on a biblical story: "But if, with Dives, thou art preferring this world's treasure [a

44. While the a title page does not list an author, there is sufficient evidence for Benezet's authorship, including style, consistency of argument bases and the fact that the tract is bound together with other Benezet writings. The full title of the tract is: *A Mite Cast into the Treasure: or, Observations on Slave-Keeping*.

45. Benezet, *Observatiions on Slave Keeping*, p. 3.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., p.5

reference to slavery as purely fueled by profit motive] to that which ought to be laid up in heaven,—I fear thou will share his lot in the conclusion.”⁴⁸

Throughout the tract statements appear that assert human equality. One wonders if his experience of teaching black persons in Philadelphia enlightened his understanding. He reflected, “they are equally the work of an Almighty hand, with a soul to save or loose [sic].” The implication was obvious: “every individual of the human species by the law of nature comes into the world equally intitled [sic] to freedom at a proper age.”⁴⁹

To defend slavery for the sake of Christianity (to evangelize Africans) was to Benezet tantamount to describing the Spanish Inquisition as an expression of love.⁵⁰ The tract concludes with quotations of John Locke that clearly promote personal liberty and responsibility: “Every man has a property in his own person, this nobody has a right to but himself, the labour of his body, and work of his hands are his own.” “For one man to have an absolute arbitrary power over another, is a power which nature never gives”⁵¹ Such perspectives clearly imply an understanding of human equality, liberty and the responsibility to effect justice that are beyond the norm of the eighteenth century. The tract remains good reading and retains its relevance two and a quarter centuries later! This fact may speak to either Benezet’s unusual foresight or human slowness to grasp reality.

Much more could be said about Benezet’s writings, but this brief survey reveals both the flavor and the thoroughness of his approach. While not normally proof-texting from the Bible, he reflected its principles and was particularly skillful in utilizing parables and other pericopes. He occasionally used scripture either to introduce or to tie together his argument. It seems as if the biblical ethic of love and mutuality were the underpinnings of his entire antislavery endeavor. However, he did not stop there. Benezet’s wide reading is graphically revealed by his frequent and relevant citing of such philosophers as Locke, Wallace, Hutcheson and Montesquieu. In fact, one of his major contributions is that he took the philosophical arguments against slavery of such individuals and made them available to the populace, showing the relevance of academic thought to a practical problem. Sound philosophical insight was no longer isolated in the cloister but applied to life. Individuals not accustomed to reading philosophy could benefit by discovering it in Benezet’s writings in a form that could be understood in the context of a societal dilemma. This blending of biblical and philosophical insight with a tenacious drive to effect change significantly influenced other antislavery activists. He not only wrote for the general population but was also eager to influence those with political power, as may be seen in his let-

48. *Ibid.*, p. 18

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 9,19-20

50. *Ibid.*, p. 20

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23

ter to Queen Charlotte of England in 1783. The letter introduces the accompanying antislavery tracts and encourages the queen to consider the plight of the slaves and the “divine displeasure” that may occur to the nation that promotes such injustice.⁵²

In a way that seems quite extraordinary, Anthony Benezet exerted an influence on individuals who became significant in the fight against slavery that is far out of proportion to his learning, his office or his location. As one examines key figures who brought about the end of British slavery and the slave trade, there is an unusual frequency with which Benezet’s life intersects with theirs through his writing. Not all influence can be traced, but there is evidence that Benezet was a key factor in the antislavery work of Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and John Wesley on the English side, as well as a number of persons on the American side.

Granville Sharp was a dominant antislavery activist in England who represented slaves in lawcourts. His work resulted in triumphs which eventually led to the benchmark Somerset case in 1772 (Sharp represented James Somerset), after which slave owning in England proper was no longer legal. He entered the cause by advocating for Jonathan Strong, a runaway slave in 1767. At that time he became acquainted with the writing of Benezet. In Sharp’s words, “When G.S. was involved in the first law-suit [...] in 1767, he accidentally met with a copy of this book [probably Benezet’s 1762 *A Short Account*] on a stall, and, without any knowledge whatever of the author, caused this edition to be printed and published.”⁵³ From this point the two men corresponded regarding slavery and the slave trade, and it is probable that this correspondence was a major factor in Sharp’s increasing successes in the abolition of slavery in England.⁵⁴

Thomas Clarkson became the dominant researcher in the cause, supplying the abolitionists, especially William Wilberforce, with primary material for the extensive antislavery battle in Parliament. Clarkson entered the cause, however, as the result of the senior essay contest at Cambridge, 1785. The assigned topic was, “Is it right to enslave men against their will?”, an issue about which Clarkson knew little and was not deeply concerned. Benezet’s 1771 tract, *Some Historical Account*, had been circulated in England that very year, and Clarkson discovered it in researching for his essay. Clarkson not only won the contest but he altered his vocational plans from ministry to give his life to antislavery work. His own comment establishes

52. The letter is quoted in Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, Vol. 2, pp. 172-175.

53. Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq.*, London, Henry Colburn and Co., 1820, p. 97. Hoare notes that two years later, 1769, when Sharp published his first tract against slavery, *The Injustice and dangerous Tendency of tolerating Slavery*, Benezet republished it in Philadelphia with no knowledge that Sharp had republished his *Short Account*.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 115

the significance of Benezet in his initial research and in discovering his new life direction: "In this precious book I found almost all I wanted."⁵⁵

John Wesley's entering the battle against slavery can be connected directly to Benezet's influence. Wesley's journal entry for 12 February, 1772 states:

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.⁵⁶

Frank Baker indicates that,

Immediately he became Benezet's ally in this great campaign, and a month or two later Benezet wrote to Granville Sharp: "My friend, John Wesley promises he will consult with thee about the expediency of some weekly publications in the newspaper, on the origin, nature, and dreadful effects of the slave trade."⁵⁷

Two years later Wesley published his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. In this work the influence of Benezet can be most clearly seen. More than half of the tract is so fully dependent on Benezet's *Some Historical Account* that Stanley Ayling accused Wesley of blatant plagiarism.⁵⁸ The purpose of this article is not to address the question of plagiarism,⁵⁹ but to explore the influence of Benezet. Wesley did indeed avail himself of Benezet's material. The path of Benezet's influence followed these lines: It appears that Wesley wrote Sharp of his desire to publish against slavery and Sharp supplied Wesley with "a large bundle of Books and Papers on the subject," including Benezet's tract.⁶⁰ Sharp then responded to Wesley with an evaluation of Wesley's unpublished manuscript. The letter indicates "great satisfaction" and that no "alteration is necessary." It also acknowledges that "you have very judiciously brought together and digested [...] some of the principal Facts cited by my Friend Mr. Benezet and others."⁶¹ After Benezet saw Wesley's published tract, he

55. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the...Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, Vol I, p. 207.

56. John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, Jackson Edition, vol III, p. 453.

57. Frank Baker, *The Relations Between the Society of Friends and Early Methodism*, London, 1949, p. 22.

58. Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley*, London, 1979, p. 283.

59. For a discussion of Wesley and plagiarism, see Brendlinger, *A Study of the Views of Major Eighteenth Century Evangelicals On Slavery and Race*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982, pp. 389 - 392.

60. Letter from Sharp to Benezet, 7 January, 1774, quoted in Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810*, London, Macmillan, 1975, p. 240.

wrote Wesley a complimentary letter and had the tract republished in America.⁶² The reality, however, is that not only did Benezet influence Wesley, but also through Wesley his own influence continued to spread. Wesley's tract reached three editions in 1774, a fourth in 1775 and a fifth in 1776. A copy was found among the 354 books of George Washington's library.⁶³ Even beyond the tract, Benezet's influence on Wesley and through Wesley continued. In a letter that Wesley wrote to the *Monthly Review*, November, 1774, he quoted American newspaper advertisements offering rewards for the severed heads of runaway slaves. Benezet had sent the ads to Wesley in a letter of May, 1774.⁶⁴ The expansive mix of influence can be seen in future interconnections as Wesley corresponded with Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp and eventually William Wilberforce.

Through his writings Benezet was able to attract significant and influential people to the antislavery cause. Sharp, Clarkson and Wesley are formidable examples. On the other side of the Atlantic his influence can be seen in his relationship with Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, among others, whom he enlisted to the cause. Further, within his own denomination he was a key thinker in shaping Quaker policy on slavery and the slave trade. He helped translate the ideals and values of George Fox and John Woolman into specific practice for Yearly and Monthly Meetings. His ability to blend philosophical concepts with Biblical principles and passages and apply them persuasively to elicit an empathic human response enabled him not only to effect change within the Society of Friends but also to transcend denominational and geographical boundaries in his concern for human justice and dignity. Roger Anstey aptly states that Benezet brought "the moral philosophy of the age, with all its appealing emphasis on liberty, benevolence, happiness, justice, and so forth, to the support of a position reached on religious grounds, and so makes a more comprehensive case to the world at large."⁶⁵ In light of all of these facts it is difficult to overstate the importance of Benezet.

Summation: the Contribution

What gives one life such a clear sense of direction and such a persistent pursuit of that direction, especially when it stands in direct opposition to the cultural norms and the overwhelming Christian opinion of the day? In reading both the tracts and correspondence of Anthony Benezet, it becomes

61. Letter from Granville Sharp to John Wesley, undated, but datable to early 1774, in private collection of Wesley College Library, fo. 314, used by permission of Dr. Dairmaid MacCulloch.

62. Letter from Benezet to Wesley, 23 May, 1774, quoted in Brookes, p. 85.

63. John S. Simon, "George Washington's Library" *WHS Proceedings*, Vol. XIII, p. 1.

64. Letter from Benezet to Wesley, 23 May, 1774, quoted in Brookes, p. 105.

65. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 217.

clear that his foundational and consistent motivation was his Christian faith. While it would be exciting to discover one theological distinctive or unique hermeneutic on which his entire system pivoted, such is not the case with Benezet. His response was simply one of common sense and the practical application of the overarching principles of Christianity, particularly the love of God and the love of neighbor. Granted, his Quaker pacificism stood in direct conflict to all of slavery because slaves were both taken and retained by an "act of war." Yet even his pacifism was subsequent to the more central truth of love of neighbor. Genuine love *demands* practical expression.

Benezet himself recognized this Christian motivation and gave expression to it. The opening sentence in his letter to Queen Charlotte states that he acts from "a sense of religious duty."⁶⁶ In a letter to Granville Sharp he articulates both his core motivation and his understanding of black people, whom he describes as "our neighbors, whom we are by the Gospel enjoined to love as ourselves."⁶⁷ The common sense test of our love was simply the Golden Rule, which, when applied to slavery could have no other outcome than the abolishing of such an unequal relationship. To Benezet, all arguments based on biblical prooftexts which seemed to support slavery (e.g., Paul's encouraging slaves' obedience in Eph., 6:5-8), or theological systems that appeared to work around the difficulties of slavery were demolished by the principle of love and the mutuality of the Golden Rule. Anything else was rationalization, justification of greed or an example of the power of prejudice when it facilitated financial gain.

Because the gospel made this kind of love possible, Benezet opposed anything that deterred the spread of that gospel, and in his mind nothing deterred it as effectively as slavery. In 1767 he wrote the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which supported slavery, stating that the slave trade and slavery were the "greatest impediment to the promulgation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."⁶⁸ Benezet's motivation was linked to the whole of Christianity, especially to the all pervading central core of love for God and love for all humankind. As stated above, Benezet's application of his faith was common sense and practical rather than theologically complex and sophisticated. But, above all, it was his faith that drove his tireless endeavors on behalf of the slave. It was the practicality and inclusiveness of his faith that enabled him to link arms and even celebrate friendship with people of such diverse religious persuasions and vocations as the deist Benjamin Franklin, the physician Benjamin Rush, the Calvinist George Whitefield, the Anglican Granville Sharp and the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. And

66. Letter from Benezet to Queen Charlotte, 1783, quoted in Clarkson, *History*, Vol. 1, p. 172.

67. Benezet to Sharp, 14 May, 1772, quoted in Brookes, p. 292.

it is safe to say that it was his faith that fostered the persistence which contributed to his massive influence.

Anthony Benezet is buried in an unmarked grave, in the Friend's Burial Ground in Philadelphia, as was his desire. While we shall keep faith with his desire to avoid vanity and ostentation, it is *most* genuinely in keeping with his spirit and purpose if we can learn from his life and example how we too may influence our age with the claims of the gospel of love, touching the deepest recesses of human need with the imperatives of the Kingdom of God. Anthony Benezet is dead, but his example lives on exerting a powerful influence and motivation for those who see the injustices of society and are not willing to be cynical or passive about bringing change where human need cries for human care. In the truest spirit of Christian love and responsibility Anthony Benezet is alive.

68. Benezet to the S.P.G., 26 April, 1767, quoted in Brookes, p. 272. While the above focus on the common sense principles of love and mutuality are true, this was discovered by the present writer only after suspecting that there *might* be a doctrinal distinctive that fueled Benezet's singlemindedness. When it was discovered that Benezet had translated from the French and republished a tract entitled *The Plain Path to Christian Perfection*, the suspicion was fed. Perhaps Benezet had been influenced by Wesley's concept of Christian Perfection. Perhaps his emphasis on love was similar to Wesley's perspective that "Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love" (John Wesley, *Letters*, Telford, Vol. VI, p. 223, To Walter Churchey, 21 Feb., 1771). The same theme is seen in another Wesley letter: "what is it [perfection] more or less than humble, gentle, patient love! (Letters, Vol. VII, p. 120, to Ann Loxdale, 12 April, 1782). In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Wesley affirmed that we should aspire to "nothing more but more of...love" (Works, Vol. XI, p. 430, Jackson ed., 1872). Would it not be exciting to learn that while Benezet clearly influenced Wesley to work against slavery, Wesley was the theological influence that persuaded Benezet of the power of holiness and its social implications? After examining the book and reading Benezet's preface it became apparent that "Christian Perfection" of the title was not the equivalent of Wesley's doctrine. In fact, the book that Benezet translated from the French, according to his 1780 preface was originally written "in the German language about two hundred and fifty years ago" (*The Plain Path to Christian Perfection*, Philadelphia, 1831, preface by Benezet for an edition printed in 1780, p. iii). The thesis of the small book is that reconciliation with God is to be found "solely by renouncing ourselves, denying the world, and following our blessed Saviour in regeneration" (subtitle, preface, p. i). Benezet's preface points out that early Christianity was characterized by humility, contrition towards God and love towards others. This was the sacrifice acceptable to God, but it was lost after the early church, and replaced by "pomp and show, strange modes of worship and confused and dark opinions" with teachers and leaders who "assumed an authority and respect from their offices" (preface, p. 4). It is only by an inward work, a purifying fire, that the "corruption and hardness of their hearts" can be changed and the "root of sin" destroyed (preface, pp. ix - x). Benezet's preface concludes with the words: "The Christian religion, is indeed the simplest thing in the whole world, and the most easy to understood, if *self* is but truly renounced" (preface, p. xii). The book then lays out in ninety-nine pages (15 chapters) ways to die to sin and to renounce the will. The flavor of the book is more reflective of a medieval mystical approach than that of John Wesley. The point of this discussion is to simply confirm that Benezet's motivation lay not in a particular doctrine, but the whole of the Christian message which he believed focused on love.

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