

BY JOHN C. DIAMOND, JR.

David Walker's "Appeal" A Theological Interpretation

There are readily available a number of scholarly discussions concerning David Walker's famous "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World", a document originally written in 1829. Such discussions treat Walker's *Appeal* from various viewpoints. For examples: Gayraud S. Wilmore, in his recently published *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, accomplishes an excellent task of interpreting Walker from an historical vantage point, and placing him in the stream of radicalism in the black religious community. Herbert Aptheker's "One Continual Cry", which includes the full text of the third — and last — edition of Walker's *Appeal*, interprets the document in terms of American *secular* history and the politics of the early nineteenth century. While both of these treatments of Walker are extremely valuable, a different approach to Walker can be made, namely, the effort to interpret him *theologically*. This present article represents my initial effort at such theological interpretation and forms part of the preliminary research for a larger work devoted to the theological history of black Christians in America from the earliest period to the Civil War.

When Walker's *Appeal* is subjected to a careful theological investigation, perhaps the most striking feature of the document is to be seen in the number of times Walker finds it necessary to affirm his faith that God is a just God. By actual count, this affirmation is *directly* made thirteen times¹ in expressions such as: "... can he be to us a God of justice?";² "God, being a just and holy Being, will ...";³ and, "... cries and groans in consequence of oppression are continually pouring into the ears of the God of justice."⁴ While this mechanical procedure of counting the occurrence of similarly constructed words and phrases cannot, in itself, be held to establish very much concerning the theological character of the document, a very real indication of the nature of the work may be seen when the following is considered, namely, that a careful examination of the *Appeal* indicates that it is impossible to list all of those occasions upon which the justice of God is discussed *indirectly* without reproducing practically the entire text of the work! Indeed, when this is recognized, it may be stated — and the effort at full documentation of this assertion will be made in the context of this

¹Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry: David Walker's Appeal To The Colored Citizens of The World* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), pp. 65, 85, 92, 102, 108, 113, 114. See also pp. 67, 68, 74, where a direct affirmation of God's justice is found twice on each page here cited. Unless otherwise noted, all of the following citations are from this text.

²P. 85.

³P. 65.

⁴P. 67.

article — that the central *theological* concern of Walker is with the problem of evil, that is, with the apparent contradiction between his firm conviction that God is a just God and the oppressively cruel existential situation which is part and parcel of his experience and that of his fellow blacks in America. If this is a correct appraisal of the *Appeal*, then Walker has to be seen as more than just the author of a vibrant and powerful piece of antislavery propaganda, although this view of him is certainly true — as far as it goes. Interpreted theologically, however, Walker begins to appear as a theological mind of some magnitude, a mind at work probing the relationships between the just, good and perfect God known through Jesus Christ and the presence of evil in the world in general and in his world in particular. Of course, that which Walker has written in this document stands as his answer to the question, "Is God just?" But it is not at all difficult to postulate as the background — the immediate background — of the *Appeal* that Walker has not always been fully convinced that what he can now affirm with vigor and in writing represents the truth concerning God and his justice. In other words, there is every reason to believe that Walker has, on occasion, had some very real doubt in his mind concerning God's justice. On the one hand, this is the only way in which can be interpreted the following rather revealing statement by Walker: "God is just, and I know it — for he has convinced me to my satisfaction — I cannot doubt him."⁵ In an impressively similar statement, Walker writes:

... when I look over these United States of America, and the world and see the ignorant deceptions and consequent wretchedness of my brethren, I am brought oftentimes solemnly to a stand, and in the midst of my reflections I exclaim to my God, "Lord didst thou make us to be slaves to our brethren, the whites?" But when I reflect that God is just, and that millions of my wretched brethren would meet death with glory — yea, more, would plunge into the very mouths of cannons and be torn into particles as minute as the atoms which compose the elements of the earth, in preference to a mean submission to the lash of tyrants, I am with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness before my Maker, and exclaim again, thy will be done, O Lord God Almighty.⁶

On the other hand, once the slaves (and freedmen, as well) were introduced to the Christian God, and especially after their conversion to, and formal membership in, the church of Christ, unless we are to suppose that they were all both ignorant and fools, some of them at least must have begun to question whether the Christian God had, in fact, justice as one of his attributes. As will be pointed out below, Walker himself goes to some great lengths in his *Appeal* to provide answers for questions concerning God and evil, questions he seems to have raised personally, questions the answers to which would have been of interest and value to his reading audience. For these reasons, then, as well as for those to follow, it would seem to be a justifiable procedure to interpret Walker as

⁵P. 85.

⁶P. 92.

having a rather astute theological mind, a mind at work probing the answers to the questions of evil and God, utilizing as his twin points of departure his own vital Christian faith and the existential situation in which he finds himself along with his people.

It is convenient to begin with Walker's affirmation concerning the creative, sustaining God of justice:

There is a God the Maker and preserver of all things, who will as sure as the world exists, give all his creatures their just recompense of reward in this and in the world to come — we may fool or deceive, and keep each other in the most profound ignorance, beat murder and keep each other out of what is our lawful rights, or the rights of man, yet it is impossible for us to deceive or escape the Lord Almighty.⁷

Since God is describable in such terms as this, for Walker the question immediately arises, Why has God, if he is just, allowed the sons and daughters of Africa to be enslaved in the first place? Can a just Governor of the world even contemplate the actuality of harshly enforced suffering for blacks — or any other people — and still be regarded as God? In order correctly to answer this question, Walker finds it necessary to disclaim the validity of the kinds of answers put forth by slave-holding and Christian American whites. Among such answers is to be found that one which would deny that the enslaved blacks are, in fact, humans — men —, but rather that they are “a tribe of TALKING APES, void of INTELLECT!!! incapable of LEARNING. . . .”⁸ Walker is quite incensed at this declaration from Christian whites, regarding it as by far more damnable than anything previously recorded in the history of slave-holding societies throughout the world:

I call upon the professing Christians, I call upon the philanthropist, I call upon the very tyrant himself, to show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintains, that the Egyptians heaped the *insupportable insult* upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the *human family*. Can the whites deny this charge? Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes of *Monkeys* or *Orang-Outangs*? O! my God! I appeal to every man of feeling — is not this insupportable? Is it not heaping the most gross insult upon our miseries, because they have got us under their feet and we cannot help ourselves? Oh! pity us we pray thee, Lord Jesus, Master.⁸

To this charge that the enslaved blacks are non-human, Walker gives a multi-dimensional theological rebuttal. Firstly, Walker affirms, “Do we not belong to the Holy Ghost?”¹⁰ Are we not “the property of the Holy Ghost.”¹¹ Secondly, Walker insists that men, all men, are made in the image of God:

Man, in all ages and all nations of the earth, is the same. Man is a peculiar creature — he is the image of his God, though he may be subjected to the most wretched conditions upon earth, yet the spirit

⁷ P. 100, note.

⁸ P. 127, note (Walker's emphasis).

⁹ P. 72 (Walker's emphasis).

¹⁰ P. 114.

¹¹ P. 113.

and feeling which constitute the creature, man, can never be entirely erased from his breast, because God who made him after his own image, planted it in his heart; he cannot get rid of it.¹²

Therefore, thirdly, the slaves are men, mortal and morally responsible to God as are all men. Walker writes:

Are we MEN!! — I ask you, O my brethren! are we MEN? Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are they not dying worms as well as we? Have they not to make their appearance before the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the deeds done in the body, as well as we?¹³

Finally, Walker affirms that only the Ultimate can claim to be Lord and Master:

God made man to serve Him alone, and that man should have no other Lord or Lords but Himself — that God Almighty is the sole *proprietor* or *master* of the WHOLE family, and will not on any consideration admit of a colleague, being unwilling to divide his glory with another — .¹⁴

And again:

Have we any other Master but Jesus Christ alone? Is he not their Master as well as ours? — What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself?¹⁵

However, even if such answers were true — and obviously Walker thinks they are insultingly false — they would not to his mind answer the original question, Why has the just God allowed the enslavement of blacks in the first place? As a matter of simple logic, Walker can affirm that the earthly and therefore superficial cause of black enslavement lies with the whites, and he does so affirm throughout the *Appeal*. They have been unjust, and they continue to be unjust, they are, in fact, “the enemies of God.”¹⁶ But Walker’s theological mind cannot leave the matter there, as if the actions of white Christians were the ultimate cause of black enslavement. For this would indicate that white injustice was more potent than divine justice, and God could no longer be understood as being in divine control of his world. For Walker, therefore, the answer had to be found at a deeper level; enslavement, along with its attendant evils, must have a divine cause, that is, it must have been permitted by God as just recompense for disobedience on the part of blacks themselves. Thus it is that Walker is *willing* to pronounce a harsh sentence upon blacks, by writing:

Ignorance and treachery one against the other — a groveling servile and abject submission to the lash of tyrants, we see plainly, my brethren, are not the natural elements of the blacks, as the Americans try to make us believe; but these are *misfortunes which God has suffered* our fathers to be enveloped in for many ages, no doubt *in consequence of their disobedience to their maker*, and which do, indeed, reign at this time among us.¹⁷

¹² P. 127.

¹³ P. 79 (Walker’s emphasis).

¹⁴ P. 67 (Walker’s emphasis).

¹⁵ P. 79.

¹⁶ P. 91.

¹⁷ P. 84 (emphasis mine).

At this juncture, it may be necessary to remind the reader that the concern of this present article is not with the *soundness* of Walker's theological positions, particularly not with this last position. Rather, the concern here is simply to document the assertion that, theologically speaking, the central concern of the *Appeal* is with the idea of the justice of God, and, further, to substantiate the assertion that Walker, in dealing with the doctrine of the justice of God, demonstrates that he is possessed of a keenly probing theological mind, able to relate in a coherent manner a variety of other theological ideas to his central concern. With this reminder, a return can be made to the argument.

According to Walker, if God is the just Governor of the world, he must require obedience from all men — his creatures —. He must also be able to respond to disobedience — often in rather harsh terms. For disobedience is, in reality, the effort to dethrone the Lord and Creator of the universe, substituting another and lesser being, a mere creature, in God's place. For such theological requirements, blacks must understand that, ultimately, God had to sentence blacks to a period of enslavement, ignorance, treachery and servility.

Once Walker has reached this point, the point where he can pronounce to enlaved blacks that they are themselves the cause of their own enslavement, in the sense that they share in the guilt and, therefore, in the penalty given upon their fathers who, centuries before, had offended the tremendous majesty of the just God, once Walker has reached this point, it is evident that he has broken through the limitations of earthly cause and effects into the region where he stands before the clear vision of the Sovereign Lord, the just God who can and has acted in response to sin. It is against the background of this vision of a powerful and stern God of justice that the words of Walker, quoted earlier in a different context, now are seen to take on their fullest meaning. "I am compelled," Walker writes, "to shrink back into nothingness before my Maker, and exclaim again, *thy will be done*, O Lord God Almighty."¹⁸ In the face of this demonstration of his own humility and awareness of the great difference between himself and God Almighty, it is, further, understandable that Walker could caution a similar humility to his brethren. "Remember also," he writes to blacks, "to lay humble at the feet of the Lord and Master Jesus Christ, with prayers and fastings."¹⁹

If then, it is in this theological form that Walker gives his answer to the first question concerning the justice of God and the presence of evil in experience, in what theological form does he cast his answer to the second question, namely, If God is just, will he continue to permit the

¹⁸P. 92 (emphasis mine). At another point in his discussion, Walker writes: "Do the whites say, I being a black man, ought to be humble, which I readily admit? I ask them, ought they not to be as humble as I? or do they think that they can measure arms with Jehovah? Will not the Lord yet humble them? or will not these very colored people whom they now treat worse than brutes, yet under God, humble them low down enough" (p. 144).

¹⁹P. 73.

agony of black enslavement? Walker's answer is "... God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors. ..."²⁰ Or again:

The God of the Etheopeans [sic], has been pleased to hear our moans in consequence of oppression; and the day of our redemption from abject wretchedness draweth near, when we shall be enabled, in the most extended sense of the word, to stretch forth our hands to the LORD our God. ...²¹

Or again, to emphasize that this answer is characteristic of Walker:

But has not the Lord an oppressed and suffering people among them? Does the Lord condescend to hear their cries and see their tears in consequence of oppression? Will he let the oppressors rest comfortably and happy always? Will he not cause the very children of the oppressors to rise up against them, and oftentimes put them to death? "God works in many ways his wonders to perform".²²

By way of these citations, it become evident that the stern, Majestic and Sovereign God has also attributes of love and mercy: he has "heard their cries" and can "see their tears", and out of his compassion he will respond. Because, therefore, God is now fully aware of the agonies of the enslaved, and because America is a Christian nation, having had from its inception the teachings of the Lord, Jesus Christ, oppressive America will be punished by God. It is only just that this occur. Walker writes:

Will the Lord suffer this people to go on much longer taking his holy name in vain? Will he not stop them, PREACHERS and all? O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION is at hand, and will be speedily consummated. ...²³

At another point, Walker states the same theme:

Know this, my dear sirs, that although you treat us and our children now, as you do your domestic beast—yet the final result of all future events are known but to God Almighty alone, who rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and who dethrones one earthly king and sits up another, as it seemeth good in his holy sight. We may attribute these vicissitudes to what we please, but the God of armies and of justice rules in heaven and in earth, and the whole American people shall see and know it yet, to their satisfaction.²⁴

It may now become clear the reason for which Walker's favorite name for the Sovereign Lord is *God Almighty*, a term that occurs eleven times in the *Appeal*.²⁵ Variations of this name also occur. Thus, Walker can speak of the "God of armies"²⁶ and the "God of battles."²⁷ For God to

²⁰ P. 62.

²¹ P. 66.

²² P. 66.

²³ P. 108.

²⁴ P. 102.

²⁵ Cf. pp. 63, 73, 89, 92, 101, 102, 104, 105, 108, 111, 138. Occasionally, the name, "Lord Almighty," is used, as on p. 100.

²⁶ Pp. 102, 73.

²⁷ P. 100.

be just, he must possess the power necessary to enforce his decrees, which, in the context of American slavery means the power to destroy both the practice and the practitioner.

It may now, further, become clear the reason for which Walker can affirm what can be called the violent solution to the sinful spectacle of Christian America's involvement in black enslavement. For if God has seen the agony; if God is willing to be merciful (to blacks); if American whites have heard Christ's gospel; if blacks have remained humble before their creator, if God is, in fact, just, then violence toward whites is just under God. Therefore Walker can write concerning his own willingness to fight:

The man who would not fight under our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom and of God — to be delivered from the most wretched, abject and servile slavery, that ever a people was afflicted with since the foundation of the world, to the present day — ought to be kept with all of his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his cruel enemies.²⁸

Since he can affirm violence for himself, he can recommend it to others:

Now, I ask you, had you not rather be killed than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children? Look upon you mother, wife and children, and answer God Almighty! and believe this, that it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty; in fact, the man who will stand still and let another murder him, is worse than an infidel, and, if he has common sense, ought not to be pitied.²⁹

Walker, in his *Appeal*, is not quite certain concerning the full details of the way in which America will meet her destruction. On occasion, such destruction seems to come by the hands of the slaves themselves, who will rise up in righteous rebellion. At other times Walker speaks of a Liberator who will be raised up by God. "Beloved brethren — here let me tell you, and believe it," he writes:

that the Lord our God, as true as he sits on his throne in heaven, and as true as our Saviour died to redeem the world, will give you a Hannibal, and when the Lord shall have raised him up, and given him to you for your possession. O my suffering brethren! remember the divisions and consequent sufferings of *Carthage* and of *Hayti*. . . . The person whom God shall give you, give him your support and let him go his length, and behold in him the salvation of your God. God will indeed, deliver you through him from your deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America. I charge you this day before my God to lay no obstacle in his way, but let him go.³⁰

From this impending destruction, Walker affirms that there is only one hope, and that is to be found in universal repentance by whites. "I tell you," Walker writes, "that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your country are gone!!! For God Almighty will tear up the

²⁸ P. 75.

²⁹ P. 89.

³⁰ P. 83.

very face of the earth!!!”³¹ Again: “O Americans! Americans! I call God . . . to witness, that your *Destruction is at hand*, and will be speedily consummated, unless you *repent*.”³² This appeal by Walker, to the white citizens of America, stands as his final word not only to whites, but to blacks.

In the opinion of the present writer, both of his initial assertions have been substantiated and documented. On the one hand, the central theological concern of Walker's Appeal is, in fact, the justice of God, or better, the problem of evil, and Walker has demonstrated his “solution” to this problem. Fundamental to this solution is Walker's faith that God is the Stern, Powerful, Just, Sovereign Lord of the Universe, who punishes disobedience — sin — whether it arises from the hand of blacks or whites. Thus, black enslavement is viewed as punishment for earlier black disobedience. By the same token, whites, who have had the advantages of education and the Gospel, should have recognized that the just God, who is also merciful, has heard the agonies of the oppressed and will respond, indeed, is responding with liberation. Since whites have not responded to God in Jesus Christ and ended their oppressiveness, being thus disobedient to God, they merit destruction, which can only be averted by their full repentance.

On the other hand, Walker shows himself to be a theologian of some stature, especially by the manner in which he has been able to make divine sense out of the slave experience.

³¹ P. 104.

³² P. 108.

