Chapter 5

On War and Slavery: Benezet’s Peace Testimony and Abolition

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Anthony Benezet, despite his early and effective campaign against slavery and the slave trade, is sometimes faulted by critics for not fully appreciating the inexorable logic of the radical positions he endorsed. David Brion Davis, for example, dismisses him as “a kind of middleman of ideas who was led by antislavery zeal to collect and disseminate a radical, secular philosophy,” but who would not support extending to slaves the right to armed rebellion against their masters. Jonathan D. Sassi claims that Benezet, in his writings about Africa, failed to seize on expressions of Enlightenment cultural relativism that he found in the travel narratives from which he quoted so liberally. Highlighting these expressions might have strengthened his arguments that “African peoples and cultures stood on a level equal with European,” but he “apparently decided that their affirmations and implications were just too radical for him to embrace.”¹ These judgments may be correct as far as they go, but they seem to ask that we look at Benezet through a fairly narrow lens, one which confines us to our own expectations of an Enlightenment thinker. A wider look at his writings and actions might lead to a different conclusion: that the basis for his antislavery zeal comes not so much from the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment but more from his radical commitment to the peace testimony of his Quaker religion. He did not weakly apply Enlightenment ideals in his opposition to slavery but faithfully followed the radical call to peace that he believed came from the spirit of God.

Benezet’s Commitment to Quaker Peace Positions

Although Benezet practiced and preached peace throughout his lifetime, he published his most succinct peace testimony late in life. The year was 1780 and he was writing his *Short Account of the People Called Quakers*, when he began a section “On War” with this statement:

The Quakers absolutely declare against being concerned in the destruction of their fellow men, who equally with themselves are the objects of saving grace; hence [Quakers] can take no part in war, being persuaded that all wars stand in opposition to the intent and nature of the gospel: war being the sad effect of the fall of man; a fall from meekness, purity, and love, into sensuality, pride, revenge, and wrath.

Many of his co-religionists were content to “take no part in war”—to preserve the purity of the Society of Friends from laws that would require them to bear arms or to participate directly in military or martial exercises. But Benezet saw a larger obligation. He was convinced that the gospel enjoined “the followers of the meek and peaceable Jesus... to labour in the ability received from the blessed mediator to reconcile men unto God and one unto another.” As Christ had died to “restore unto fallen man the first life of purity and love,” those who have heard his spirit must follow him by participating in the great task of restoring the peaceable kingdom.

Benezet was a perfectly orthodox Quaker in believing that the spirit of God can come to any person as a free gift, but he laid heavy stress on the word

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2 The term “peace testimony” has been questioned by J. William Frost (private communication) as not reflecting 18th-century usage, which he says was “war testimony” in the discipline. I have not found the term “war testimony” in any of the 18th-century Quaker writings on peace that I have read, and it seems to stress the negative aspects of Quaker practice: do not bear arms, do not profit from war, do not pay for another to serve in your place. Two terms closely akin to “peace testimony” do occur in the writing of Benezet and his close associates: we find “peaceable principles” in the 1755 address to the Pennsylvania Assembly protesting the raising of taxes for war, and the phrase “peaceable testimony” in the 1775 “Epistle of Tender Love and Caution” and the 1780 “On War” in *A Short Account of the People Called Quakers*. So perhaps a better term would be “peaceable testimony,” but “peace testimony” is now instantly recognizable as part of the Quaker sensibility, and for that reason I have decided to use it to describe Benezet’s position.  