

In the Words of Slaves

After the American Revolution, the founders of the American republican experiment were conflicted about the use of slave labor in their new nation. Slavery was contradictory to the foundation of the ideals of liberty; however, it was an essential part of the Southern agrarian economy. In the end, slavery was not put to a stop; instead, it was deemed a necessary evil. As the Northern states' economies moved away from slavery, the Southern states became "slave societies." Slave labor was vital to Southern economic growth and it was an integral part of Southern culture and society. Southerners no longer looked at slavery as a necessary evil, but as a "positive good" for slaves and whites alike.

Proslavery advocates considered African slaves inferior to whites; they believed black people were not suited for anything other than slavery. Southerners believed that slavery made a society civilized and claimed that Southern slaves were happier living as slaves than as free people. The Southern slave advocates considered slavery a "positive good." They asserted slaves favored their position as slaves; they professed slaves were more civilized with the teaching of Christian values; and they claimed that the benefits of shelter, food, and care were accommodated through slavery. The slaves' viewpoint counters that of the Southern proslavery advocates. The reality of slavery was that the slaves were miserable being held in bondage, they had access to a perverse form of Christianity, and they were not adequately fed nor were they shepherded by caring owners.

The misery of slave life was depicted in a slave song identified as source 18. The song equated the life of a slave to that of the persecuted Israelites from the Bible. In many

biblical tales the figures are held captive and oppressed, a fate to which the slaves related. In “Excerpts from the Autobiography of Frederick Douglass,” Douglass claimed that in contrast to what whites believed, slave songs were songs of sadness. The slave’s sorrowful songs were testaments to the anguish they experienced in their lives. The songs of slaves reflected the ache in their hearts and many songs were prayers asking to be released from the chains of bondage. The poem “Prayers” confirmed their innate desire to be freed: “Lord, deliver us from bondage.” The preacher-slave in “Freedom” was told to sermonize to his fellow slaves that obedience would guarantee them an entrance to heaven. Heaven is considered the pinnacle of Christianity, but the preacher slave knew there was something better than heaven, and that was freedom. Despite the possibility that he could be severely punished for preaching anything other than obedience, the preacher told his fellow slaves that praying would set them free. The proslavery claim that slaves were *happy and content* with the disposition of slavery is false based on the lack of corroboration from the slaves who spoke primarily of sadness and desired freedom.

White masters did not give sermons about Christ to their slaves; they preached about obeying their master. The slaves in “Same Old Thing,” “Freedom,” and “Forbidden Knowledge” were proselytized repeatedly about obedience and servitude. The slaves in “Forbidden Knowledge” were told that there is no heaven for the slave because they were not even humans. Slaves were not allowed to pray as illustrated in the story “Prayers.” The children lied when their master asked them if they were praying, for they knew that this was not allowed. The slaves in “Burning in Hell” were threatened with violence by their owner/overseer when he thought they were praying.

Family is an important aspect of Christianity, but in slavery, slave children, parents, and husbands and wives were sold to different owners irrespective of the fact that families were broken apart. Many white slave owners did not uphold their marriage vows and raped their women slaves and fathered slave children. Frederick Douglass, the mulatto slave that escaped slavery, had a father that was a white man. The slave, Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs), told in her autobiography how her master raped her repeatedly. The slaves were not preached to about Christ, but about obeying their master, slaves were told not to pray, their families were torn apart, and the rape of slave women was a common occurrence. Proslavery advocates proposed that the slaves would be civilized with Christian values while enslaved; instead, they only had access to a perverse form of Christianity.

A slave song identified as source 17 spoke of how the slave worked hard to provide food for the plantation, but the slaves are given the scraps and the dregs. “Hog-Killing Time” showed how not only would the owner keep his slaves starved he would also give his slaves food that he believed to be poison. It was not uncommon for a slave master to abuse his slaves. The slave in “The Old Parrot” was whipped for taking cookies and the master in “Papa’s Death” killed a slave father because if he wanted to he could. A fugitive slave in “Excerpt from ‘The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave’” presented the most vicious example of the abuse that the slaves received from their owners. Thompson’s owner would whip his slaves at every whim, often lining up all of his slaves together to be whipped. The master’s son emulated his father and did the same to the slave children. Thompson’s master forced his slaves to whip other slaves, including husbands whipping wives and parents whipping their children. These examples do not

support the proslavery claim that slavery provided slaves with the benefit of food and care. Counter to this claim, the slaves were fed scraps and poisoned food and they were beaten and killed at the whim of the owner who was responsible for their well-being.

The Southern proslavery advocates claimed that slavery was good for the African slave. They emphasized that slavery provided the slave with good care, the slaves were instilled with Christian values, and slavery would bring them happiness and contentment. The stories and the songs from the slaves clearly demonstrate that the slaves were neither happy nor content being enslaved, the slaves' greatest desire was freedom from bondage, and they suffered at the hands and the words of abuse in the name of Christian values. Despite what the proslavery advocates claimed in regard to the positive good of slavery, the words of the slaves prove that those claims were unequivocally false.