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The Paradox of Theodore Parker: Transcendentalist, Abolitionist, and White Supremacist

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THE PARADOX OF THEODORE PARKER:
TRANSCENDENTALIST, ABOLITIONIST, AND WHITE SUPREMACIST.

by

JIM KELLEY

Under the Direction of David Sehat, Phd

ABSTRACT

Theodore Parker was one of the leading intellectuals and militant abolitionists of the antebellum era who has been largely overlooked by modern scholars. He was a leading Transcendentalist intellectual and was also one of the most militant leaders of the abolitionist movement. Despite his fervent abolitionism, his writings reveal an attitude that today we would call racist or white supremacist. Some scholars have argued that Parker's motivation for abolishing slavery was to redeem the Anglo-Saxon race from the sin of slavery. I will dispute this claim and explore Parker's true understanding of race. How he could both believe in the supremacy of the white race, and at the same time, militantly oppose African slavery. Parker was influenced by the racial "science" of his era which supported the superiority of the Caucasian race. Conversely he also believed that everyone, including African slaves, had human dignity.

INDEX WORDS: Race, Racist, Racism, Slavery, Abolitionism, Transcendentalism

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DEDICATION

To my daughter Shannon for her constant encouragement and example, and to my late wife, Roberta, for encouraging me to go back to school.

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1 PREFACE

A complex and contradictory man, Theodore Parker was a Unitarian clergyman who ministered to the largest antebellum congregation in Boston. From his pulpit he vigorously opposed slavery and became one of the most militant leaders of the abolitionist movement. While he consistently opposed slavery, he refrained from committing to the abolitionist cause until late in his career. However, as political events moved the country closer to civil war, he began to see slavery as the ultimate evil, and his abolitionism became increasingly militant. He risked arrest and imprisonment by actively assisting and hiding fugitive slaves to prevent them from being returned to bondage, and ultimately became one of the "Secret Six" financial supporters of John Brown's abortive raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Despite his fervent antislavery activities, Parker firmly believed that the Caucasian race, especially his Anglo-Saxon branch, was inherently superior to all others. Although he would not recognize the term, Parker's firm belief in white racial superiority would classify him as a "white supremacist." Today that term evokes hate filled images of the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazis marching to promote violence and racial hatred as a way of maintaining the socially and politically dominant position of the white race. While groups like these are perhaps the most visceral manifestations of white supremacy, the belief in the superiority of the Caucasian race goes far beyond these extremist fringe groups. Parker consistently maintained the superiority of the Caucasian race, but his views on race were much more complicated than those of modern day white supremacists.

It is important to put Parker's use of race into context. He believed that a person's capabilities were formed by their racial attributes. Since he considered his Anglo-Saxon tribe to

be the most advanced of all the races, this conviction allowed Parker to put them in the forefront of human progress. Parker viewed Africans as an inferior race, but still members of the human race who had been oppressed, brought to America involuntarily, and forced into bondage. Therefore, they deserved support and freedom. His descriptions of African-Americans were frequently derogatory, but were widely accepted in his time. Furthermore, his comments were often expressed in a context that either held open the possibility of future growth and advancement, or he qualified the slaves' lack of racial development as having been caused by the effects of forced servitude and lack of exposure to civilization.¹

Parker was also very class conscious and used racial descriptions and stereotypes to establish class boundaries. This was illustrated by his descriptions of the Irish who he considered to be a lower branch of the Caucasian race, Celtic rather than Anglo-Saxon. Unlike the African slaves, the Irish were coming to America voluntarily, and instead of being sent to the southern states, they were coming into Boston and other Northern seaport cities in ever increasing numbers. Their influx threatened to upset the demographics of Boston and to disrupt the social and political positions of the existing Anglo-Saxon majority. Parker not only considered the Celtic Irish to be members of a lower race, he also used race to classify them as a lower social class. It is telling that he rarely, if ever, used racial epithets to describe either free or enslaved blacks, but he did not hesitate to refer to the Irish as "paddies." A major issue that Parker had with the Irish immigrants was their Catholic religion which he believed supported

¹ I want to thank Parker biographer Dean Grodzins for his help by sharing his extensive knowledge of Theodore Parker with me via email and over lunch.

slavery. "The Catholic Clergy are on the side of slavery," he wrote, "they love slavery itself; it is an institution thoroughly congenial to them, consistent with the first principles of their church."²

While many people would call Parker's writings racist, a more accurate term would be "racialist." I define a "racist" as someone who believes in the superiority of their race, and who has hostile or hateful views toward other, usually dark-skinned, peoples. A "racialist" also believes that their race is superior to all other less advanced races, however, though derogatory and insulting, racialist views are not necessarily meant to be hateful. Racialists used stereotypical images to explain individual behavior and abilities. They often adopted a romanticized vision of other races and believed that they were "uplifting" members of lesser races. According to historian George Fredrickson, while these "romantic racialists" believed that there were differences between the black and white races, they "projected an image of the Negro that could be construed as flattering or laudatory in the context of some currently [nineteenth century] accepted ideals of human behavior and sensibility."³ Both anti and pro-slavery proponents used romantic racialist language and images to either promote slavery or to advocate its abolition.

Some scholars have argued that Parker's activism was strictly self-serving and that his only concern was to prevent Northern Anglo-Saxons from being contaminated by the sin of slavery. In this scenario Parker was not motivated to end slavery on humanitarian grounds,

² Theodore Parker, *A Letter to the People of the United States Touching on the Matter of Slavery*, (1848; repr., Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 356-357.

³ George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 101-102.

rather, as historian Michael Fellman put it, his sole desire was to employ "all possible ideological means of aiding the redemption of the honor and the future of the white race."⁴

Parker biographer R.C. Albrecht pointed out that Parker "believed in the perfectibility of man and community," and that he "devoted his life to bringing about that perfection."⁵ Like Fellman, Albrecht argued that Parker was not concerned with social justice, but in order to "perfect" his society, he wanted to abolish slavery "for the extension of democracy, the rights of man, and the salvation of the nation."⁶ Parker did believe that mankind could be improved or perfected as Albrecht argued, but his belief in the ability of mankind to improve extended to all races, not just the white Anglo-Saxons. His opposition to slavery went beyond merely trying to redeem the white race.

Both Fellman and Albrecht failed to recognize the impact that Parker's religious faith had on his antislavery convictions. Furthermore, Fellman pointed to a statement by Parker that "when slavery is abolished, the African population will decline in the United States, and die out of the South as out of Northhampton and Lexington,"⁷ to mean that Parker believed that the

⁴ Michael Fellman, "Theodore Parker and the Abolitionist Role in the 1830's," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 61, No. 3, (December, 1974), 684.

⁵ R.C. Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), preface.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷ Theodore Parker, Letter to Sarah Hunt, June 3, 1858, in Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Theodore Parker: a Biography*, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1874), 472-473. In the letter, Parker wrote about a "curious law of nature, - the strong displaces the weak," and compared the races to strains of grass. He noted that when a farmer sows a field with two types of grass, by the third year the stronger of the two will take over, "but little by little the native grasses, stouter than what he scattered there, come up, and in a few years have killed out the other from the soil. Thus the white man kills out the red man and black man. When slavery is abolished, the African population will decline in the United States, and die out of the South as out of Northhampton and Lexington." Parker was referring to what he considered a scientific law that New England was an inhospitable climate for the "tropical" African race and that after emancipation freed blacks would either voluntarily migrate to a warmer climate or be absorbed into the dominate white race. Parker was not talking about racial extinction, but rather racial assimilation.

African race was not only inferior, but that “slavery merely buoyed up an inferior race and the ending of slavery would do away with the former race.”⁸ Fellman is correct that Parker, like other abolitionists, failed to prepare for a multiracial society following emancipation. However, rather than buoying up an inferior race as Fellman claimed, Parker's Transcendentalist faith taught him that slavery retarded the moral and intellectual development of the slaves and that it was preventing them from realizing their inherent human dignity and rights.

These scholars used a modern concept of race and racism and failed to see race as Parker did. Parker viewed race as a lens that allowed him to explain the historical advance of mankind and civilization, and it permitted him to put his own Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race in the forefront of progress. These arguments also failed to take into account Parker's use of race to establish social and class boundaries, and they overlooked the internal conflict caused by his deeply held religious beliefs. To understand Parker, one must first recognize that the foundation for his convictions was based on Transcendentalism that stressed the use of reason and intuition to discern truth and also believed that everyone, including slaves, had inherent human dignity. Parker's faith in reason led him to be influenced by contemporary scientific opinions, many of which were attempting to explain racial differences by establishing racial hierarchies. However, he did not accept scientific pronouncements blindly, and he rejected theories that conflicted with his Transcendentalist belief in the "inner light" and human dignity of all people.⁹ As the leader of the largest religious congregation in New England and as a Transcendentalist, Parker felt that it was his duty to protect and improve the moral condition of his flock that, for him, included all of society, especially Northern society.

⁸ Fellman, “Theodore Parker and the Abolitionist Role,” 681.

⁹ Phillip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History*, (New York, Hill and Wang, 2007), 143-144.

Parker's consistent compulsion for reform must be understood in the context of his time. He was an intensely religious man, and it was his deep religious convictions that fueled his passion for reform. He was torn between his belief in the human dignity of everyone, including slaves, and his faith in reason and science which in his era taught that there was a hierarchy of races with the white Anglo-Saxons on top. His belief in universal humanity caused him to reject the biological school of racial science that claimed that racial differences were permanent, and led him to adhere to the environmental school of racial thought that held out the possibility that races could change and involve. While Parker never wavered from his belief in the supremacy of the white race, his opinion of the ability of Africans and their willingness to defend their freedom changed as his abolitionism became more militant.

2 CHAPTER 1: EARLY YEARS, RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY AND ABOLITIONISM

Theodore Parker was born in 1810 in Lexington, Massachusetts near the village green where the American Revolution began. At about the age of ten, he witnessed a re-enactment of the famous battle where "the shot heard around the world" was fired.¹⁰ The battle had a special meaning to him as it was his grandfather, Captain John Parker, who commanded the militia company that first met the British regulars. His grandfather's role in the battle was a matter of immense personal pride to Parker and a topic to which he would later refer to on many

¹⁰ Theodore Parker, Letter to Bancroft, September 10, 1858, in Jonathan Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, (1864; repr., New York: Bergman, 1969), Vol. 1, 11-12.

occasions. According to Parker's friend and biographer Jonathan Weiss, his most prized family heirlooms were a British musket taken from a "grenadier of the 43rd Regiment," and his grandfather's "own light fowling-piece which he had carried at Quebec," both of which Parker kept in his Boston study.¹¹ Parker never knew his grandfather since the captain died of dysentery a few months after the battle. As Parker wrote, "He was sick on the day of the Battle of Lexington, but did his duty from 2 A.M. till 12 at night. On the 17th of June he was too ill to be allowed to enter the turmoil of the Battle of Bunker Hill, so he discontentedly commanded troops who did no fighting that day."¹²

Parker also wrote of an uncle on his father's side who had "served many years in the revolutionary war; he was in the battles of Saratoga and of Yorktown, had failed in business, gone to South Carolina, and married a woman with some property at Charleston, where he then lived."¹³ He did not mention if some of the wife's property might have been slaves.¹⁴

Parker was proud of his grandfather and took great pride in the courage and ideals of the revolutionary generation. His early years were filled with frequent celebrations, parades, re-enactments and stories of the courage of his grandfather and other members of the revolutionary generation, which instilled in Parker a strong sense of regional pride. These childhood experiences gave Parker a strong sense of regional identity and the conviction that his native New England had been settled by a particularly strong, courageous and religiously pious group of Anglo-Saxon colonists. In his later sermons and letters he would frequently refer to his

¹¹ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 11.

¹² Parker, "Autobiography," in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹⁴ Dean Grodzins, "Theodore Parker," *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biographies*. <http://uudb.org/articles/theodoreparker.html>; R. C. Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1971; Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. I.

grandfather's exploits and to the courage of Boston's revolutionary leaders like John Hancock and John and Samuel Adams as a way of exhorting his congregants and readers to live up to the founding principles of the revolution.¹⁵

Despite having a prominent grandfather, Parker did not grow up in affluence. Theodore was the eleventh and final child of the captain's son, John, and Hannah Parker. Although his father had little formal education, Parker described him as highly intelligent with a natural aptitude for math and a love of reading.¹⁶ Parker inherited his father's passion for reading and learning, as well as a life-long interest in science. However his childhood was marred by tragedy which influenced his deep religious convictions. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was twelve, and by the age of twenty-seven, he had lost his father and seven of his siblings, largely to the same disease. The loss of his parents and so many siblings made him realize that life was fragile and that his own life might be short. Parker would die of tuberculosis at the age of forty-nine.¹⁷

Parker entered public school at age six and was soon recognized for his academic ability. According to Weiss, by the time Parker was eight "he was called one of the greatest readers in the town."¹⁸ When Parker was ten, Unitarian Minister William H. White began teaching at the South District School in Lexington. Seeing the potential in Parker, White took him under his tutelage and taught him Latin and Greek. Parker had an aptitude for languages and would later claim a reading ability of twenty tongues. He began teaching at the local school at the age of sixteen and at nineteen he passed the entrance exam for Harvard. Unfortunately he was unable

¹⁵ Paul Teed, "The Politics of Sectional Memory: Theodore Parker and the Massachusetts Quarterly Review," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (Summer, 2001), 301-329.

¹⁶ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 22-23.

¹⁷ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1; Grodzins, "Theodore Parker;" Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*.

¹⁸ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 42-43.

to afford the fees so he studied the curriculum independently while living at home and working with his father on the farm. Because he could not pay the fees, no degree was granted.¹⁹

In 1831 he moved to Boston to accept a teaching position at a private school. As a dutiful son and to fulfill his obligation to help his father on the farm, he hired a laborer to take his place to work the farm for him.²⁰ While in Boston, Parker attended the "protracted meetings" of Dr. Lyman Beecher, the most prominent preacher of his time. He wrote that he "greatly respected the talents, the zeal, and the enterprise of that able man, who certainly taught me much; but I came away with no confidence in his theology . . . A year of his preaching about finished all my respect for the Calvinistic scheme of theology."²¹

Teaching in Boston was a lonely experience for him, so in 1832 Parker moved to Watertown, Massachusetts to start his own school. The school proved to be a success, and his stay in Watertown had a great impact on his life. It was there that he met his future wife, Lydia Cabot, the youngest daughter of a prominent wealthy Unitarian Boston family. It is also where he met Unitarian Minister Convers Francis who introduced him to Transcendentalism, a philosophy that was gaining popularity among young Unitarians of the time.²²

Jonathan Weiss, one of the younger Transcendentalist, likened the arrival of Transcendentalism and the influence on it by German philosophers to a ship that "produced some confusion when Leibnitz, Spinoza, Kant, Gothe, Herder, Schleiermacher, Jean Paul, Jacobi, and the rest sailed in to Boston Harbor and discharged their freight."²³ According to Weiss,

¹⁹ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 17 - 48; Grodzins, "Theodore Parker;" Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*.

²⁰ Parker, Letter to Dr. Gridley Howe, March 23, 1860, in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 50.

²¹ Parker, "Letter from Santa Cruz, 1859," in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 57.

²² Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1.

²³ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 161.

Transcendentalism created a "new school of Unitarianism that sought to found a philosophy giving to truth her own authority, to the Bible the authority of a record harmonizing with reason, to Christ the authority of displaying what the soul can recognize on its own evidence . . . to reason the right of rejecting everything everywhere that is irrational."²⁴

Perhaps the best definition of Transcendentalism was by Parker's friend and Brook Farm founder George Ripley who wrote:

There is a class of persons who desire a reform in the prevailing philosophy of the day. These are called Transcendentalists. - because they believe in an order of truths which transcends the sphere of the external senses. Their leading idea is the supremacy of mind over matter. Hence they maintain that the truth of religion does not depend on tradition, or on historical facts, but has an unerring witness in the soul. There is a light, they believe, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world; there is a faculty in all, the most degraded, the most ignorant, the most obscure, to perceive spiritual truth, when distinctly repented; and the ultimate appeal, on all moral questions, is not to a jury of scholars, and hierarchy of divines, or the prescriptions of a creed, but to the common sense of the race.²⁵

It was a conflict caused by the two poles of Parker's Transcendentalism; the ability of every individual to experience religious truth, and the belief in "mind over matter" or the use of reason that led to the paradox between his militant abolitionism and his belief in the superiority of the white race. His conviction that everyone, even the "most degraded" slave had the ability to feel religious emotions and obtain spiritual meaning meant that they had inherent human dignity. Thus, to keep a human in bondage was a sin. At the same time, his belief in "mind over matter" and the power of reason led him to believe many of the "scientific" racial theories of his time, which attempted to prove the inferiority of darker skinned races.

²⁴ Ibid., 163.

²⁵ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 143.

Parker was admitted to Harvard Divinity School in 1834 where he was drawn even closer to the Transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism was viewed with skepticism by some of the faculty, but was popular among the young students. It became the foundation of Parker's beliefs and drew him away from the orthodox views held by Unitarians of that time on the divinity of Jesus and the importance of miracles. He excelled at Harvard and graduated in 1836. In June of 1837 he was ordained and settled at the Spring Street Church in West Roxbury. Later that year, he and Lydia were wed and set up their household in a home near the church. In addition to Lydia, her spinster Aunt Lucy also moved in, a situation that would lead to some marital tension.²⁶

Spring Street was a small church of about sixty families, not the prestigious position he had hoped to get. However, his ministerial duties left him time to indulge other intellectual pursuits, and he became a regular contributor to many religious and scholarly publications. Parker quickly gained notice around Boston and became an influential spokesman for the Transcendentalist movement. In the summer of 1838 he returned to Harvard to hear Ralph Waldo Emerson deliver his famous and controversial "Divinity School Address" in which Emerson questioned the orthodox view that the authority of the scriptures was based on supernatural authority. Emerson's speech was criticized by the orthodox clergy, but was defended by others, including Parker. Parker would soon find himself the center of a similar controversy.²⁷

On May 19, 1841 Parker preached the ordination sermon for Reverend Charles Shackford at the Hawes Place Church in South Boston. Parker did not consider his sermon, *The Transient*

²⁶ Grodzins, "Theodore Parker," *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biographies*; Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*.

²⁷ Grodzins, *American Heretic*; Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*.

and Permanent in Christianity, to be one of his best nor did he expect it to be controversial. He actually considered it to be rather poor and weak. Nevertheless, the firestorm that erupted from it had a dramatic effect on his life and career. Shackford was an orthodox Unitarian, not a Transcendentalist, and he considered his ordination as a chance improve with clergy across theological divides. Toward this effort, he invited three orthodox Protestant ministers from neighboring churches, a Congregationalist, a Methodist, and a Baptist.²⁸

Parker felt that the truth of Christianity rested on Jesus' teachings, rather than on his infallibility or divinity. Likewise, Parker stressed the importance of using reason to find religious truth. By doing so he felt that man would "revere still more the word of God spoken by 'godly men of old,' but revere still more the word of God spoken through Conscience, Reason, and Faith, as the holiest of all."²⁹ Parker felt that religious leaders had misconstrued the teachings of Jesus, but that their misinterpretations were transient and would not stand the test of time. "They have piled their own rubbish against the temple of Truth where Piety comes to worship," he declared, "what wonder the pile seems unshapely and like to fall? But these theological doctrines are fleeting as the leaves on the trees."³⁰ Parker believed that the truth of Christianity did not depend on the infallibility of Jesus anymore than scientific facts depended on the infallibility of their discoverer. "It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on

²⁸ Grodzins, *American Heretic*; Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, (Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1961).

²⁹ Parker, "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, Frances Powers Cobbe, ed., (London: Trubner and Co., 1865), Vol. 8, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

the personal authority of Jesus," Parker declared, "more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes."³¹

The initial reaction to his sermon was polite; however, an uproar over his comments soon erupted. The three orthodox Protestant ministers condemned Parker in the newspapers as un-Christian, forcing the Unitarians to react. The other Unitarians of the time, like Parker, considered themselves to be Christians, but unlike Parker, as religious liberals they were sensitive to criticism from their Protestant clerical colleagues. The orthodox Unitarian belief at the time was that the truth of Christianity had been revealed to Jesus in a miraculous manner, and that the truth of Christianity rested on the authority of Jesus, beliefs which Parker's sermon disputed. However, as religious liberals they also believed in the right of free inquiry, which made it difficult for them to publicly condemn or censure him.³²

His reputation as a religious maverick was reinforced when he published his *Discourse on Religion* in 1842, in which he again questioned the miraculous authority of Jesus. In it he also expounded on his concept of the universal ability of all mankind to experience religious truth. "It is, indeed, most abundantly established, that there is a religious element," he wrote. "We discover religious phenomena in all lands, wherever man is found . . . among the Cannibals of New Zealand, and the refined voluptuaies [sic] of old Babylon; in the Esquimaux [sic] fisherman and the Parisian philosopher."³³ By questioning the authority of Jesus, Parker put his fellow Unitarian colleagues in a difficult position.

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Grodzins, *American Heretic*; Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*.

³³ Parker, *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, (1842; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1972), 19, 31.

The situation came to a head in January, 1843 when Parker was invited to attend the meeting of the (all Unitarian) Boston Association of Ministers to explain his beliefs. He was asked to resign, but refused. To have removed him would have violated the Unitarian principle of free inquiry, so as twentieth-century Unitarian theologian Conrad Wright wrote, "the closest thing the Unitarians ever had to a heresy trial was over."³⁴ The controversy did cost Parker the fellowship of many of his clerical colleagues, who refused to exchange pulpits with him. Fortunately his congregation stuck by him and the notoriety that it caused would eventually lead him to even greater fame as a preacher.³⁵

Although he continued to speak out against what he considered to be theological errors, he soon began to focus more and more on social reform including the abolition of slavery. His involvement with the antislavery movement was an evolutionary process in which he moved from a moderate opponent of slavery to one of the most militant and out-spoken abolitionist leaders. According to Parker's friend and fellow Transcendentalist, Franklin B. Sanborn, Parker's abolitionism had four stages, a "general disgust at slavery which most of the Massachusetts Whigs had, from 1838 to 1844, - the special opposition to Texas annexation and the Mexican War, from 1844-1850, - the movement against the execution of the Fugitive Slave Law from 1850 to 1855, - and finally, the movement to protect Kansas from the curse of slavery, to render Judge Taney's infamous Dred Scott decision inoperative, and to support John Brown's active warfare against slavery in Missouri and Virginia."³⁶ Although Parker did not fully commit

³⁴ Wright, *Three Prophets in Religious Liberalism*, 42.

³⁵ Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*; Grodzins, *American Heretic*; Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*.

³⁶ Editors preface, in Theodore Parker, *The Rights of Man in America*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., (1911; repr., Negro Universities Press, 1969), pages unnumbered.

to the abolitionist movement until later in his career, he preached against slavery as a young minister.

In "A Sermon on Slavery," which he originally delivered on January 31, 1841 to his West Roxbury church and repeated in Boston on June 4, 1843, he laid out some reoccurring themes that he would evoke in his later orations. As he would often do later, Parker made comments that many scholars have interpreted to be critical of the ability of Africans to defend themselves. "If the African be so low, that the condition of slavery is tolerable in his eyes, and he can dance in chains," Parker said, "it is all the more a sin, in the cultivated and strong, in the Christian (!) to tyrannize over the feeble and the defenseless."³⁷ These scholars failed to account for his preceding comments where Parker pointed out that the reason that Africans accepted slavery was that they had not experienced the civilizing effect of Christianity and thus did not realize the extent of their humanity. "The African thus made the victim of American cupidity and crime," Parker declared, "the state of slavery, it will be said may not appear so degrading as to you and me, for he has never before been civilized . . . Christianity has not revealed to him the truth, that all men are brothers before God, born with equal rights. But this fact is no excuse or extenuation of our crime."³⁸

Parker felt that the reason for the Africans' docility was that they had not yet experienced the enlightening experience of Christianity and did not realize that they had the same God-given human rights as their masters. In this sermon, Parker, as he would often do later, made slavery a national sin by laying the blame on Northern complicity as well as on Southern greed when he reminded his parishioners that "the sugar and rice we eat, the cotton we wear, are the work of

³⁷ Parker, "A Sermon on Slavery, January 31, 1841," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 4. (Sermon reprinted from Boston 1843 edition)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, 3-4.

slaves."³⁹ Another reoccurring theme that Parker would later use, and which he would personally practice, was that God's law trumped the law of man, and that God's law needed to be obeyed, even if it meant disobeying the laws of man. "There is no supreme law but that made by God," he said, "if our laws contradict that; the sooner they end or the sooner they are broken, why, the better."⁴⁰

The controversies surrounding Parker took a personal toll, and he feared that his ministerial career might be over. However, his congregation stood by him as he pushed in new intellectual directions. In September of 1843, Parker and Lydia took a long sabbatical to Europe, which he would later refer to as a year of "recovery, observation and thought."⁴¹ While in Europe he was moved by the "effect which despotic, monarchic, and aristocratic institutions have on multitudes of men" which he felt caused the poverty, repression and ignorance that he witnessed in the slums.⁴² As a response he further developed his "American Idea" as a way to avoid the pitfalls that he saw in Europe. He often described his vision as an "Industrial Democracy," which Parker saw as a society where everyone could achieve based upon their own merits and abilities, as opposed to an aristocracy where rank and position were inherited.⁴³ However, his first encounter with injustice on the trip occurred while in New York while waiting for his ship to sail.

On a visit to the New York Court of Sessions he witnessed the trial of a black man who was charged with abusing his wife. "This poor negro at trial for a crime showed me in miniature the whole of our social institutions," Parker wrote, "1. He was the victim of Christian cupidity,

³⁹ Ibid., Vol. 5, 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Vol. 5, 13.

⁴¹ Parker, "Theodore Parker's Experiences as a Minister," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 291.

⁴² Ibid., 291.

⁴³ Grodzins, "Theodore Parker," *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biographies*.

and had been a slave. 2. From this he had probably escaped, by what was counted a crime by his master. 3. He was cast loose in a society where his colour debarred him the rights of a man, and forced him to count himself a beast, with nothing to excite [s]elf-respect either in his condition, his history, or his prospects . . . Oh, what wrongs does man heap on man!"⁴⁴

In Europe Parker was excited to meet with many of the intellectuals and scientists who had inspired him and with whom he had corresponded. In a letter to his friend Convers Francis, which he wrote while in England, he reported that he had "seen Carlyle twice, taken tea with him on Sunday night; and taken breakfast with Babbage, and had a fine visit; saw his wonders and heard his wonders. I shall have much to tell you some day."⁴⁵ He appeared to be less enthused by a meeting with the Pope, which he had in company with a group of other Americans. While he spoke kindly of the Pope, noting his "simple dress of a monk" and his "benevolent face," the audience did not seem to make a major impression on Parker as he only made a small note about it in his journal and did not record any emotional reaction to the meeting.⁴⁶ This is not to say that he was not impressed by the art and beauty of the churches and shrines that he visited, but his negative opinion of Catholicism was unchanged or perhaps reinforced. From Florence he wrote in another letter to Convers Francis that he loved "the music and architecture of Catholicism; its doctrines, its rites, and its general effect, I must say, I hate all the more in Europe than I hated at home."⁴⁷

Although he had preached on social ills previously, upon his return he began to emphasize individual transformation less and began to speak out more on the social issues of

⁴⁴ Parker, "Journal," in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 200.

⁴⁵ Parker, Letter to Dr. Francis, October 18, 1843, in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 223.

⁴⁶ Parker, "Journal, March 3, 1843" in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 210.

⁴⁷ Parker, Letter to Dr. Francis, January 28, 1844, in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*. Vol. 1, 227.

slavery, poverty, crime, drunkenness and greed. Despite, or perhaps because of, his continued notoriety, many people wanted to hear him. In January, 1845 a group of men met and passed a resolution that read, "Resolved, that the Rev. Theodore Parker shall have a chance to be heard in Boston," and began a search for a suitable place for Parker to speak.⁴⁸ At first Parker was reluctant to leave his congregation at Spring Street and preferred to speak in Boston on Sunday evenings in order that he might continue to serve his West Roxbury congregation. However the only place available was the Melodeon Theater on Sunday mornings. Parker eventually agreed to their entreaties and left West Roxbury to form the 28th Congregational Society in Boston. Despite the fact that the Melodeon was a damp, dingy building, attendance grew until he was attracting over two thousand congregants on Sunday mornings. From his Boston pulpit Parker's influence increased as his writings and sermons were widely circulated, both nationally and internationally, and he became one of the nation's most forceful and eloquent spokesmen on social issues including temperance, woman's rights, poverty, as well as slavery.⁴⁹

His sermons often drew many of the luminaries of the abolitionist movement including William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Julia Ward Howe, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Louisa May Alcott, as well as African-American historian William Cooper Nell. After a few years, the congregation moved to the Boston Music Hall where even larger audiences came to hear him speak. Parker's rise in popularity and his large following caused consternation among his former colleagues who tried to keep their own congregants from jumping ship to attend Parker's church. His congregation was only nominally Unitarian, and many of his followers called themselves "Parkerites."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Parker, "Some Account of My Ministry," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 190.

⁴⁹ Grodzins, *American Heretic*; Albrecht, *Theodore Parker*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Although he was not yet a fully committed abolitionist, he began to lecture at abolitionist venues. In November of 1844 he spoke to the Adelphi Union, also known as the "Negro Lyceum." He found the experience gratifying, and his speech was enthusiastically received by the audience. After being introduced by William Cooper Nell as a "friend of Mankind," he recorded in his journal that he had not been "gratified with any applause received this long time as tonight."⁵¹ He also started meeting and befriending anti-slavery leaders such as Frances Jackson and Samuel J. May, both of whom became close friends. In addition, Parker became acquainted with the best known abolitionist leader, William Lloyd Garrison, who would eventually begin attending Parker's services.⁵²

The war that the United States fought with Mexico between 1846 and 1848 moved Parker into the next phase of his anti-slavery activities. Parker, like other abolitionists, saw the war as an attempt to expand slavery by annexing Southwestern territories, including California, which were currently claimed by Mexico. Adding new slave states would have opened the door to the spread of slavery into other Western territories and would have increased the influence of southern politicians, whom Parker frequently referred to as the "Slave Power."

While Parker condemned the war as an "utter violation of Christianity," he had no doubt that the final outcome would be a victory for the United States because, as he put it, the "Mexicans cannot stand before this terrible Anglo-Saxon race, the most formidable and powerful the world ever saw." While he gave Mexicans credit for having previously abolished slavery, he

⁵¹ Parker, "Journal, November 19, 1844," Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 35.

⁵² Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 472-473.

termed them a "wretched people; wretched in their origin, history, and character" who could "never stand before us. How they perished in battle!"⁵³

Parker's description of the war as a conflict between two races rather than two nations reflected the influence of the work of late-eighteenth century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder. As a Transcendentalist, Parker was heavily influenced by the works of German philosophers, and he had added the complete works of Herder to his extensive library. According to historian George Fredrickson, "Herder attempted to deal impartially with a variety of cultural or national gifts."⁵⁴ Using this philosophy, romantic racialists like Parker were able to see special traits in separate ethnic groups or nations. Anglo-Saxons were portrayed as strong and resourceful with a desire to conquer and expand, yet with an innate love of individual liberty. Africans on the other hand were often seen as meek and gentle, and were sometimes portrayed as childlike. These supposed humble characteristics of the African were often used by some romantic racialist writers to portray blacks as being capable of becoming truer Christians than Anglo-Saxons because of the Caucasians' naturally aggressive traits. As Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing wrote in his essay, "Emancipation," the African was better suited to experience Christianity because he "carries within him, much more than we, the germs of a meek, long-suffering, loving virtue."⁵⁵

According to historian Paul Teed, another aspect of Herder's work was that he did not see nations as "the product of political contracts between individuals," but rather based on common

⁵³ Parker, "A Sermon of War, Preached at the Melodeon, Sunday, Jun 7, 1846," in *Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons*, Vol. 1, (Boston: Horace B. Fuller, 1867), N. Y. Times E-Books, 66, 95, 94-95.

⁵⁴ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 97.

⁵⁵ William Ellery Channing, "Emancipation," in Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 106.

cultures, race, religion and language.⁵⁶ This allowed Parker to see American accomplishments resulting from their Anglo-Saxon race rather than based on any geographical or environmental advantages that the country may possess. Thus, in Parker's rationale, Mexico was not destined to lose to a stronger United States, but rather the "Mexicans" were doomed to lose to the racially superior "Anglo-Saxons."⁵⁷

Following the war, some pro-slavery spokesmen advocated annexing all or at least a portion of Mexico itself. However, the idea of annexing Mexico met opposition from some of the strongest proponents of slavery because they feared the prospect of assimilating the "inferior" mixed blood population of Mexico. In a speech on the Senate Floor, John C. Calhoun argued against annexation because the United States had never "incorporated into the union any but the Caucasian race. . . . Ours is a government of the white man . . . in the whole history of man . . . there is no instance whatever of any civilized colored race, of any shade, being found equal to the establishment and maintenance of free government."⁵⁸ Calhoun's opinion of the Mexican people was not dissimilar to Parker's description of them as a "wretched people, wretched in their origin, history, and character."⁵⁹ However, Parker did not have the fear of racial assimilation that Calhoun did. The Anglo-Saxon race "had a nationality so strong, that while they have mingled with other nations . . . they have stoutly held their character through all," he said in an 1848

⁵⁶ Paul Teed, "Racial Nationalism and its Challengers: Theodore Parker, John Rock, and the Antislavery Movement," in *Civil War History*, Vol. 41, No. 2, (June, 1995), 146.

⁵⁷ For more on Herder's work and romantic racialists see Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

⁵⁸ John C. Calhoun, "Senate Speech Against the Annexation of Mexico, Jan. 4, 1848," in Fredrickson, 136.

⁵⁹ Parker, "A Sermon of War," in *Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons*, Vol. 1, 94, 95.

sermon, and "they have thus modified feebler nations joined with them."⁶⁰ Reflecting the influence of Herder, Parker believed that racial mixing would result in a new and improved version of the Anglo-Saxon breed.

Parker saved some of his strongest racial comments for the Celtic Irish. In his undated missive, "Some thoughts on the Charities of Boston," his dislike of the Irish was in full bloom. Where today we might examine issues demographically in order to ascertain causes of poverty and other social problems, Parker took an ethnological approach and considered racial abilities and characteristics as being both the cause and, in some cases, the solution to a problem. Parker believed that "(1) Anglo-Saxon pauperism . . . is easily disposed of. (2) German pauperism [recent immigrants as opposed to original Anglo-Saxon settlers] will give us little trouble. (3) Jewish pauperism will take care of itself . . . and will be taken charge of by Jewish Almsgiving – which is the distributive virtue of that people." "African Pauperism," Parker felt, could be "easily dealt with. The negro is the least acquisitive of all men; his nature is tropical."⁶¹

After disposing of any problems with Anglo-Saxon and German poverty, supposedly because they were naturally self-reliant; Jewish poverty, since Jews would take care of their own; and African poverty, because they could naturally get by with less; Parker launched into a two-page tirade about "Celtic Pauperism" that he called "our Stone of Stumbling." He claimed that "the Irishman has three bad things – *bad-habits, bad religion, and worst of all a bad nature.*" (Parker's emphasis) "In dealing with Irish poor I lay down 3 maxims," he declared, "(1) The Irishman will always lie if it is for his momentary interest. (2) He will not work while he can

⁶⁰ Parker, "The Political Destination of America and the Signs of the Times, 1848," in *Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons*, Vol. 2, 187.

⁶¹ Parker, *Some Thoughts on the Charities of Boston*, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Theological Library; Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 396-398.

exist by begging. (3) He will steal when he can get a chance . . . I might add a 4th – Paddy will get drunk if he can find liquor . . . the bulk of our pauperism is Irish."⁶²

Parker felt it had been a mistake to put the "headquarters" of the main charitable organization "near the center of the Boston Paddy –Land," because according to Parker, the Irish "squats in the Ante-room of the Provident Aid Society" and "the till of Charity draws Paddies."⁶³ He then recommended that if the aid society were to build a new facility, it "should not be in such fatal proximity to the Irish," and it "should be ventilated well."⁶⁴ Parker saw poverty as a problem that was caused by and could be ameliorated by the abilities and expectations of various racial groups, except by the hapless Irish. By classifying the Irish as a lesser race and as a lower class of Caucasian, he used race as a social construct to preserve the social and political position of the Anglo-Saxons from the increasing influx of Irish immigrants.

Parker's speeches and sermons were often published and circulated throughout the South as well as the North, which sometimes provoked southern slave owners to write rather heated responses to Parker. In January of 1848 he received such a letter from a slave-holder near Athens, Georgia, which resulted in a spirited exchange of correspondence. The slave-owner, whose name is unknown, wrote a long letter that used the Old Testament story of Ham's curse to justify slavery. He challenged "You Negrophilists" to prove that the scriptures did not countenance the "slavery of the children of Ham, who are veritably the negro race."⁶⁵

At this point in time, Parker felt that it was possible to have a civil discourse with southerners about slavery. He replied that "you need not suppose that I have any spite against

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Letter to Parker from Unnamed Slave Owner, Athens, Georgia, January, 1848, in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 79.

the slaveholders." He believed that slave-holding was a sin but that he would not condemn someone because they owned slaves. "I know what sin is," he said, "God only knows who is a sinner."⁶⁶ Parker disputed the validity of the story of Ham, saying that he considered it a "foolish story got up to satisfy the hatred which the Jews felt against the Canaanites."⁶⁷ This provoked another long letter from the slave-holder in which he criticized Parker's theology and ridiculed all abolitionists. At this point Parker grew frustrated, and in March he replied with a short note. He wrote that he now saw that it was useless to discuss slavery with the correspondent and that he confessed "my inability to reason with you." Parker would soon move from trying to reason with slave-owners to more direct violent action to oppose slavery.

In 1848 Parker published his *Letter to the People of the United States Touching on the Matter of Slavery*, in which he detailed the negative effects of slavery on the general population as well as on the slave himself. In it, Parker expressed some sentiments that he would later abandon, but he also laid out some themes that he would continue to use and to expand upon. There were "many kind and considerate slave-holders whose aim is to make their slaves as comfortable and happy as possible while they are slaves," he wrote, "men who feel and know that slavery is wrong, and would gladly be rid of it." However, Parker noted that even under the "mildest and most humane of masters" slavery was still wrong and "brings intensity of suffering."⁶⁸ As he had written to the Georgia slave-owner earlier, Parker, like many other moderate abolitionists, refrained from directly condemning slave holders and hoped to end slavery by using moral arguments to urge them to free their slaves. The idea that there were

⁶⁶ Parker's reply to above, in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 81.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁸ Parker, *A Letter to the People of the United States Touching on the Matter of Slavery*, (1848; repr., Freeport, N.Y., Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 31.

"kind and considerate" masters is one that he would completely jettison as his abolitionist fervor intensified.

One theme he expressed in the letter was his often repeated definition of democracy as "government of all, for all and by all," which in the *Letter* he contrasted to the oligarchy of the slave-holding southern states as "government over all, by a few, and for the sake of that few."⁶⁹ Another theme that he would consistently maintain was that slavery kept the slaves from realizing and attaining their full human potential. The slave was "only continued in slavery by restraining him from the civilization of mankind in this age," Parker explained, "his mind, conscience, soul - all his nobler powers - must be kept in a state of inferior development, otherwise he will not be a slave in the nineteenth century, and in the United States."⁷⁰ Parker would consistently maintain his belief that members of the African race had the possibility for growth and improvement. They were held back by the repressive effects of slavery and only by preventing them from realizing their humanity could they be kept in bondage.

Another theme in his *Letter* that he would return to in the future was his classification of southerners as a lesser part of the Anglo-Saxon family who had degenerated due to their embrace of slavery. He often described southerners as less industrious, less educated and less religious than the robust Northerners, and he felt that Southerners had abandoned the democratic principles of the revolutionary generation. He noted that when the Declaration of Independence was written, slavery existed in all thirteen colonies. But, "in the religious colonies of New England it was always unpopular and odious," Parker explained, and "after the revolution therefore it speedily disappeared."⁷¹ Conversely, in the Southern colonies "the character of the

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

people was different," he wrote, and "religion never held so prominent a place in the consciousness of the mass as in the sterner and more austere colonies of the North."⁷² Political events would soon bring the reality of slavery to Parker's New England and he would be confronted with the reality that slaves who had escaped to the safe haven of Boston, including members of his congregation, could be forced back into captivity.

3 CHAPTER 2: FUGITIVE SLAVE ACT, PARKER'S TRIAL, AND RACIAL SCIENCE

The next phase of Parker's abolitionism was marked by the passage by Congress of a series of bills known as the Compromise of 1850. One part of the compromise was the Fugitive Slave Act, which gave federal authorities the power to arrest escaped slaves who had fled to free states and to return them to their owners without a jury trial. The act also made it a federal felony for anyone to assist escaped slaves. In 1793 Congress had passed a weaker fugitive slave law that asserted federal authority on the rendition of escaped slaves, but it left enforcement to the states. Southern slave owners felt that some Northern free states were less than diligent in this duty.⁷³

For example, in Massachusetts where slavery was unpopular, no slave was returned under the 1793 law, and Massachusetts became known as a haven for escaped slaves. The Fugitive Slave Act converted the current network of federal commissioners into a

⁷² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷³ Dean Grodzins, "'Slave Law' versus 'Lynch Law' in Boston: Benjamin Robbins Curtis, Theodore Parker, and the Fugitive Slave Crisis, 1850-1855," *Massachusetts Historical Review*, Vol. 12, (2012), 1-33.

bureaucracy for apprehending and returning escaped slaves. Federal commissioners were the most common federal court officials. They were paid on a fee-for-service basis and performed such administrative tasks as taking depositions, and also had the power to arrest and hold for trial people charged with lesser federal charges. Under the new act slave owners or their agents were able to apply to a federal commissioner for a warrant for the return of a person who they claimed to be their property. The commissioner was paid ten dollars if he granted the warrant and five if he did not. Furthermore, the alleged slave was not given the right of a trial, and instead of state officials, federal marshals and sometimes federal troops were now used to enforce the law.⁷⁴

This act infuriated northern citizens who had previously been ambivalent about slavery and who now saw this intrusion of federal power on their “states rights” as a threat to their own freedoms. Although they had previously been disparaged and abused, the Fugitive Slave Act gave the arguments of the abolitionists more credence and motivated them to redouble their efforts. It also increased Parker's antislavery militancy and led him to become a nationally recognized spokesman for the cause. Where a few years previously he had written about “kind and considerate” slave owners, he now began to write about the right and obligation of slaves to defend themselves with physical force. “The fugitive slave has the same natural right to defend himself against the slave catcher that he has against a murderer or a wolf,” Parker wrote, “the man who attacks me to reduce me to slavery . . . alienates his right to life.”⁷⁵

Parker also began to expand his concept of the “American Idea” and to stress that slavery was incompatible with the principles of a free nation. In a speech to the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in May of 1850 he defined his concept as three basic points, all of

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Parker, “The Function and Place of Conscience in Relation to the Laws of Men, September 22, 1850,” in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 148; Grodzins, “‘Slave Law’ versus ‘Lynch Law’ in Boston.”

which were based on the Declaration of Independence. The first was that "all men have unalienable rights," and secondly, "all men are created equal." His third point was that the purpose of government was to provide every man the "opportunity for the enjoyment and development of all these unalienable rights." Parker believed that freedom and slavery were diametrically incompatible concepts and realized that the existence of both would lead to civil war. "We cannot have any settled and lasting harmony until one or the other of these ideas is cast out of the councils of the nation," he said, "so there must be war between them before there can be peace."⁷⁶

Parker was alarmed by the threat that the Fugitive Slave Act posed to the black citizens of Boston, some of whom were members of his congregation. The lack of due process meant that even free blacks were fearful of being arrested and being sent into bondage which caused great angst among the African population of the North. According to Parker's biographer Jonathan Weiss, "more than forty fled from Boston alone, within three days from the signing of the Bill from the President."⁷⁷ "Vigilance Committees" were formed in many cities and towns to prevent the arrest of fugitive slaves by monitoring and preventing slave hunters from completing their tasks. Parker was the leader of the Boston committee and his efforts earned him the unofficial title of "Minister-at-Large" for fugitive slaves. At least a quarter of the committee's membership and the majority of the executive committee were members of his congregation. Often violence or the threat of violence was used to harass the slave hunters in order to prevent them from capturing their victims.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Parker, "Slave Power in America, New England Anti-Slavery Convention, May 29, 1850," *Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons*, Vol. 3, 44; Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 105, 106.

⁷⁷ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 92.

⁷⁸ Dean Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston," 1-33.

In October of 1850, one month after the passage of the act, two slave hunters arrived in Boston from Macon, Georgia intending to capture escaped slaves, William and Ellen Craft, who were members of Parker's congregation. The Craft's escape from Georgia was unique. As described by Parker's friend and fellow abolitionist, F.B. Sanborn, Ellen was "so nearly white . . . that in her journey of four days from Macon to Philadelphia she passed successfully as a young [male] slaveholder traveling North with his body servant [William]."⁷⁹ Parker hid Ellen in his house and as he wrote in his journal, "that is a pretty state of things, that I am liable to be fined 1000 dollars and gaoled for six months for sheltering one of my own parishioners, who has violated no law of God, and only took possession of herself!"⁸⁰ Parker did more than just hide and protect the Crafts. He convinced the slave hunters that it would be better for their health if they left Boston without their prey.

The slave hunters' presence was well known in Boston, and they had been subjected to considerable harassment by citizens on the streets. With a threatening crowd outside, members of the Vigilance Committee, led by Parker, visited them at their hotel. Parker recorded the visit in his journal. "I came to keep them safe from harm." Parker told them, "I was a minister, and came as a friend to them. Some were disposed to violence, I not." Parker explained that he "had stood between them and violence once - I would not promise to do it again," and that it would be best if they left town. The slave hunters took Parker's advice and fled without their captives.⁸¹

While the Crafts were in hiding, they were married by Parker, as slave marriages were not legally recognized. After the ceremony, Parker gave William a lecture about his duty to

⁷⁹ Editors Preface, in Theodore Parker, *The Rights of Man in America*. (pages not numbered).

⁸⁰ Parker, "Journal, November 1, 1850," in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 99.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

protect his wife, and according to Parker's journal, he gave him a Bible and "told him the use of it." Parker then put a knife, which he often referred to as a sword, into "his right hand and told him if the worst came to the worst to use that to save his wife's liberty, or her life, if he could effect it no other way."⁸²

This lecture on courage might have seemed unnecessary to a couple who had risked their lives on a daring escape from Georgia. Parker, however, felt strongly enough about his action that he wrote a letter to President Millard Fillmore about it as a way of expressing his disapproval of the Fugitive Slave Act, which Fillmore had signed. He identified himself to the President as a Boston minister who had an "ill name and am one of the most odious men in this State," and who led a "large religious society" which had several escaped slaves among its members. Parker reminded the president that these fugitives had "committed no wrong," and had "the same 'unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' that you have." He described the marriage of William and Ellen Craft, and wrote that following the ceremony he had "put a Bible and then a sword into William's hands, and told him the use of each." After effectively telling the president that he was a radical preacher who had deliberately committed a felony by violating a federal statute and was arming escaped slaves, Parker described his grandfather's muskets from the revolution and told the president that he would continue to disobey the Fugitive Slave Act because "We must keep the law of God."⁸³

The Crafts and their supporters feared that another attempt would be made to capture them, so they fled first to Canada and then to England. Parker wrote a letter of introduction to some English abolitionist friends, the Martineaus, in which he conveyed the

⁸² Ibid., 99-100.

⁸³ Parker to President Millard Fillmore, Boston, November 21, 1850, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Library, bMS 101/18; Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 100-102.

circumstances of the Craft's escape, first from slavery to Boston, and then their flight from Boston to England. He described the Crafts as "sober and industrious people" who were members of his congregation, and said that by meeting the Craft's "you may see what sort of men and women we make slaves of in 'the Model Republic'" He closed on an ironic note by recounting that he kept his grandfather's muskets from the Battle of Lexington in his study, "but now I am obliged to look to 'the British' for protection for the liberty of two of my own parishioners who have committed no wrong."⁸⁴

Parker's activities on behalf of fugitive slaves were roundly condemned by members of Boston's conservative judiciary, especially Associate Supreme Court Justice, and United States Circuit Court Judge for New England, Benjamin Curtis. The conflict between the two men was complicated and was partially rooted in a class conflict. Both men were from old New England families and were raised in modest conditions. While Parker had excelled at Harvard Divinity School, Curtis had been a star student at Harvard Law School. Curtis was a member of King's Chapel, the most conservative Unitarian congregation in Boston. As a member of King's Chapel and as a respected member of the Boston Bar, he identified with the elite upper class and looked askance at Parker's large and largely middle class congregation of political and theological radicals. Curtis believed that respect for the law was the root of social order and that Parker's obedience to a higher power instead of man's law would lead to anarchy. In addition, Curtis was dismayed that Parker also taught that a jury should not only decide the facts of a case, but also the legitimacy of the law.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ "Parker to Rev. J. Martineau, Boston, November 11, 1850, *Theodore Parker Papers*", Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm Vol. 8, 324.

⁸⁵ Dean Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston."

In a letter to his younger brother, Federal Commissioner George Curtis, he expressed his disgust that so many Bostonians would attend Parker's church and listen to a man "who avows himself to be devoted to the destruction of his country."⁸⁶ On the other hand, the entire Curtis family was reviled by abolitionists for their efforts in supporting and enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act and often referred to them as the "Curtii" or "Curtisocracy." At a "Constitution and Union" meeting, organized by the Curtis family and held at Faneuil Hall in November of 1850, Curtis condemned the positions of "the reverend preacher" and accused Parker of advocating perjury. A sensation in the audience occurred when Parker, who unknown to Curtis was sitting in the gallery, rose to publicly confront Curtis. Order was restored and the meeting concluded, but the antipathy between them was apparent. The two men loathed each other.⁸⁷

The strong, sometimes violent reaction of some Bostonians to slave hunters and federal officials was illustrated by the rescue of another fugitive slave, Shadrach Minkins. In February of 1851 a mob burst into the courtroom of Federal Commissioner George Curtis, forcibly freed Minkins, and rushed him to safety in Canada. Parker was not directly involved in the rescue, but wrote in his journal that it was "the most noble deed done in Boston since the destruction of the tea in 1773. I thank God for it."⁸⁸ George Curtis was humiliated and outraged by the event and understandably had a different opinion. In contrast to Parker's description of the rescue as a "noble deed," Curtis wrote that it was comparable to waging war against the United States and was the equivalent of treason.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Benjamin R. Curtis to George Ticknor Curtis, Feb. 6, 1855, in Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston," 4.

⁸⁷ Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston."

⁸⁸ Parker "Journal, February 16, 1851," in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 103.

⁸⁹ Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston."

Shortly after the Minkins rescue another fugitive slave, Thomas Simms, was arrested.

Fearing a repeat of the Shadrach incident, federal authorities took stronger precautions, and despite the efforts of the Vigilance Committee, rescue attempts were unsuccessful. Surrounded by militia troops, Sims was put on a ship and sent back to Savannah, Georgia. According to Weiss, Simms was the first slave returned to bondage from Massachusetts since the Revolution.⁹⁰ After enduring over a decade in bondage, Simms once more managed to escape from slavery. During the Civil War, he managed to re-gain his freedom by crossing the Union lines and returned to Boston a free man. In 1877, the Federal Marshall who had led his rendition, Charles Devens, became U. S. Attorney-General, and in an apparent attempt to atone for his guilt, made Simms an employee of the Justice Department.⁹¹

On April 12, 1852, one year after Simm's return to slavery, the Vigilance Committee held a meeting at the Melodeon to commemorate the rendition of Simms to bondage. At the event, Parker condemned the citizens and the leaders of Boston for forgetting their revolutionary heritage and reminded them that the day that Simms landed in Savannah, April 19, was the anniversary of the Battle of Lexington where "some noble men stood up there against the army of England." "Now," he said, "this faithful city [has] become a harlot." Parker, never afraid to speak truth to power, condemned the political leaders of Massachusetts, especially Daniel Webster, for supporting the Compromise of 1850, and he condemned Boston businessmen for their greed and complicity in the slave trade. "Boston Capitalists do not hesitate to own Southern plantations, and buy and sell men," he said, "Boston merchants do not scruple

⁹⁰ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 107.

⁹¹ Leonard W. Levy, "Sims' Case: The Fugitive Slave Law in Boston in 1851," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (January, 1850), 74.

to let their ships for the domestic slave-trade, and carry the child from his mother in Baltimore, to sell him to a planter in Louisiana or Alabama." To remind his audience that there would be consequences for those who disobeyed God's law he concluded: "After the death the judgment!"

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Parker's opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act brought him into conflict with his Unitarian ministerial colleagues. Despite the fact that he was considered a theological heretic by most Unitarian clergy, Parker maintained his ministerial membership in the American Unitarian Association and continued to attend its meetings. At the 1851 meeting, the subject of a minister's duty in regard to the Fugitive Slave Act was discussed. According to Sanborn's report of the meeting, Dr. Ezra Gannett of the prestigious Federal Street Church, spoke in favor of complying with the law, arguing that disobedience of this law would lead to the violation of all laws, and that it needed to be obeyed in order to preserve the union. His position may have been influenced by the fact that Federal Commissioner George T. Curtis was a prominent member of his congregation, who, according to Gannett, had the "most honorable motives for attempting to execute the law."⁹³ Parker rose to rebut Gannett's contention. The Fugitive Slave Law "violates the noblest instincts of humanity," he declared. "It asks us to trample on the law of God."⁹⁴ He further rebuked Gannett for "calling on his church members to kidnap mine and sell them into bondage forever."⁹⁵ Sanborn did not record the response to Parker's denunciation by Gannett or by any of the other ministers present.

⁹² Parker, *The Boston Kidnapping: a Discourse to Commemorate The Rendition of Thomas Simms*, " (Repr., 1852, New York, Arno Press & The N. Y. Times, 1969), 46, 50, 52, 62.

⁹³ Editor's note, in Parker, "The Fugitive Slave Law," in *The Rights of Man in America*, 144.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

Parker's defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act eventually brought him into legal conflict with Judge Curtis. Anthony Burns, a young, itinerant Baptist preacher and fugitive slave who had escaped from Virginia two months earlier, was arrested on May 24, 1854 and brought before Federal Commissioner, and Curtis kinsman, Edward G. Loring. Parker and the Vigilance Committee learned of the proceedings and mobilized. They provided Burns with counsel and demanded a full hearing. A mass meeting was held the following night at Faneuil Hall with another rally planned for the following morning at the court house. At the second meeting, with a large body of people to support them, the committee planned to overawe the marshals and conduct a Shadrach-type rescue.⁹⁶

At the evening meeting, the hall was filled to overflowing as speaker after speaker exhorted the crowd to stop the kidnapping. Parker spoke at the end of the program. He reminded the audience of their proud revolutionary heritage and that God's law was superior to man's law. "There is one law - slave law; it is everywhere," he said, "there is another law, which also is a finality; and that law is in your hands and your arms, and you can put it into execution just when you see fit."⁹⁷ Clearly Parker was issuing a call to action, but he intended it for the planned rally the next day. However, unknown to the speakers, another group of abolitionists decided to attack the court house that night while the meeting was going on. Word of their action reached the hall as Parker was speaking, and the crowd rushed out to support it. The attempt failed, and in the confusion one of the marshals was shot and killed. Federal troops were called in overnight to restore order, and on June 2, Burns was escorted by an armed guard to a ship that took him back to slavery. Anthony Burns' story actually ended on a positive note.

⁹⁶ Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston;" Weiss, Vol. 2.

⁹⁷ Parker, "Address at Faneuil Hall, May 26, 1854," in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 131.

After his return, his owner decided to accept money that had been raised to purchase his freedom because, as Weiss recounted, "a bird in the hand was better than one who might take to the bush, with a whole flock behind him."⁹⁸ Burns entered Oberlin College and became an ordained minister.⁹⁹

Although Parker was not at the failed rescue attempt and actually tried to calm the crowd, Curtis had him, along with seven others, arrested for obstructing federal officers. He did not indict them under the Fugitive Slave Act. Realizing that a conviction for treason would be legally and politically difficult to obtain, he instead used a broader 1790 statute that made the obstruction of a federal legal process a misdemeanor. Parker took his arrest to be a badge of honor and saw himself in the same role as his revolutionary ancestors. Shortly after his arrest he wrote to his friend and fellow abolitionist Samuel J. May about his upcoming trial. At first he made light of it, recounting that he had been arrested the day before Thanksgiving and brought "before the Fugitive Slave Bill Commissioners." In the next paragraph he turned more serious. "But joking aside - I think it quite a serious affair," he wrote. "I stand now in as important a position as my Hon[ored] Grandfather at the Battle of Lexington, 1775. It is the Freedom of Speech which is assailed through me."¹⁰⁰

Before Parker's case came to trial, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act on May 30, 1854. Sponsored by Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, this bill carved a separate territory of Kansas out of the vast Nebraska territory, creating two new potential slave states. Under the pretext of popular sovereignty, it permitted the citizens of each region to determine whether or not to allow slavery. This act violated the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by allowing

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁹⁹ Grodzins, "Slave Law versus Lynch Law in Boston;" Weiss, Vol. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Parker to Samuel J. May, Boston," December 1, 1854, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 5, Frame 207.

the possibility of slavery in northern territories that had been part of the Louisiana Purchase, and it was feared that it would allow slavery to spread to other western territories. As Parker's friend, F. B. Sanborn wrote, this act and the "movement to protect Kansas from the curse of slavery" helped move Parker into an even more militant phase of his abolitionist career.¹⁰¹ As the debate raged, abolitionists mobilized to oppose the bill's passage, and Parker preached a major sermon on "The Nebraska Question" at the Music Hall.

In addition to expressing his opposition to the bill, Parker also illustrated the way he used race to explain the course of history, in this case the history of slavery in America. He began by declaring that the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon settlers to America was "one of the most important events which has taken place in the last thousand years." He noted that the Spanish had arrived earlier, but they were members of a deteriorating lesser race who "brought the proud but thin and sickly blood of a decaying tribe." Parker also differentiated the Northern Anglo-Saxon colonist from those who settled the South. According to Parker, the Northern colonists were pious people who came to establish religious colonies, while in the South they "came as adventurers, seeking their fortune; not as pilgrims, to found the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth." Since they had less religious morals, the Southern colonists allowed themselves to be tainted with the sin of slavery, which the Spanish had originally brought to the New World. In 1620 "the old sin of Egypt . . . rediscovered by the Spaniards," Parker claimed, "was brought north, adopted by the Anglo-Saxons of the South, and set a going at Jamestown." However, Parker did not hold the North blameless. "Wealth is the great object of American desire. Covetousness is the American passion," admonished Parker, "in the American Church, Money is God." He rebuked the North for acquiescing to Southern demands. "As soon as the North awakes to its

¹⁰¹ Editors preface, in Theodore Parker, *The Rights of Man in America*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., pages unnumbered.

ideas, and uses its vast strength of money, its vast strength of numbers, and still more gigantic strength of educated intellect," Parker asserted, "we shall tread this monster underneath our feet."¹⁰²

This sermon reflected another shift in Parker's growing militant abolitionism. He was now moving from urging passive resistance to issuing a call for direct action to resist slavery. He issued a similar call a few months later, saying that there were two ways to resist unjust laws. "First there is passive disobedience, non obedience," he said, "second, there is active disobedience, which is resistance."¹⁰³

As he was calling for stronger antislavery efforts, Parker also began to speak out against not only slavery, but the unfair treatment of the free blacks living in Boston and other free states. Parker noted that the free homesteads given in the western territories were for white men only and that black children were not allowed to attend the Boston public schools. "His father helps pay for the public school," Parker wrote, but "the son and daughter must not come in."¹⁰⁴ These remarks were made as Parker's friend and congregant black historian William Cooper Nell, along with other leaders of Boston's black community, were pushing to integrate Boston's public schools. While Parker did not take an official role in this movement, he was clearly supporting Nell's efforts, which came to fruition when Boston's schools were desegregated in 1855.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Parker, "The Nebraska Question, Preached at the Music Hall, Boston, Sunday, February 12, 1854," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 245,246, 247, 259, 252, 264, 265, 296.

¹⁰³ Parker, "The Law of God and the Statutes of Men, June 18, 1854," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 236.

¹⁰⁴ Parker, "An Address on the Condition of America, May 12, 1854," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Teed, "Racial Nationalism and its Challengers," 145.

Parker's indictment for his part in the failed rescue attempt of Anthony Burns came to trial on April 3, 1855. However as the trial began, Justice Curtis, perhaps fearing that Parker would use his courtroom as a pulpit and create a public spectacle, dismissed the charges against all defendants on a technicality. His fears were well founded. Before the trial, Parker had decided that he, not his attorneys, would make the closing argument. Upset that he was denied his chance to state his case in court, Parker published *The Trial of Theodore Parker with Defence*. This book was more than a legal defense, but rather a detailed condemnation of slavery, the federal courts, and specifically Justice Curtis and the Curtis family. In the preliminary statements he reminded the jury that it was not he who was on trial but it was the "unalienable Rights of Humanity . . . your verdict is to vindicate Religion with Freedom of Speech, and condemn the stealing of men; or else to confirm Kidnapping and condemn Religion with Freedom of Speech." He began his attack on "the Hon. Justice Curtis . . . his kinsfolk and friends," by reminding the jury that "their chief title to distinction rests on their devotion to the fugitive slave bill."¹⁰⁶

Parker gave a detailed history of the English courts and compared Curtis to the infamous English judges who had been appointed by the English monarchs to enforce their will. He began with the reign of the Catholic Queen "Bloody Mary," but focused on the Stuarts, especially Catholic James II. He noted that "one State-secret Lay at the bottom of the Stuart's plans, - to appoint base men for judges . . . what names they offer us - Kelyng, Finch, Saunders, Wright, Jefferies, Scroggs! infamous creatures, but admirable instruments to . . . devise means for the annihilation of the liberties of the people." The comparison between these infamous English judges and the Curtis family would not have been lost on Parker's nineteenth century

¹⁰⁶ Parker, *The Trial of Theodore Parker with Defence*, (1855; repr., Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 3, 7.

readers. He reminded the jury that the case was not between the government and Parker, but rather "between the Fugitive Slave Bill and Humanity. You know the Functions of the Court - the manner of the Judges' appointment - the services they are expected to render in cases like this, the services they have already rendered."¹⁰⁷

Following his litany of corrupt English judges, Parker compared them to Justice Curtis and the Curtis family, naming individual members and their involvement sending alleged escaped slaves back into bondage. "Gentlemen of the Jury," he said, "I have shown you how, in Britain, the Government, seeking to oppress the people and to crush down freedom of speech, put into judicial offices such men as were ready to go to all lengths in support of profitable wickedness." Speaking of Curtis he declared, "No lawyer in New England had laid down such southern 'principles' . . . none had rendered such service to the Slave Power." He concluded by referring, as he frequently did, to the Battle of Lexington where "Hancock and Adams, the Moses and Aaron of that Great Deliverance, were both at Lexington, they also had 'obstructed an officer' and British troops were sent to capture them." He then recounted the battle between the Lexington militia and the British Regulars and quoted the inscription on the monument to that battle: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."¹⁰⁸ It is no wonder that Justice Curtis had second thoughts about bringing Parker to trial.

As political events began to increasingly inflame the slavery issue, Parker started to shift his attention to national politics. Members of the abolitionist movement were divided over whether to get involved in the political process. The radical faction led by William Lloyd Garrison, who attended Parker's services, saw abolitionism as a moral effort and focused their efforts using "moral suasion" to change the public's attitude about slavery. Others advocated involvement in

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 50, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 167, 221.

the political process and some, such as James Birney, formed the Liberty Party. The radical faction opposed the formation of a separate political party, fearing that it would make abolition a political instead of a moral issue. They believed that ending slavery without changing the public's attitudes about race would be a hollow victory and would hinder efforts to build a more egalitarian society. Parker tried to bridge the gap between the two factions when he spoke at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in 1848, saying "Some men will try political action. . . . I see not why men need quarrel about that. Let not him that voteth, condemn him that voteth not; nor let him that voteth not, condemn him that voteth, but let every man be faithful to his convictions."¹⁰⁹

Originally a Whig, Parker became disillusioned after many of the Northern party leaders, including Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, supported the Fugitive Slave Act. His allegiance then gravitated towards the newly formed Republican Party. Parker's often repeated description of democracy as "government of all, by all, and for all" is credited by scholars with inspiring the close of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."¹¹⁰ Parker's influence on Lincoln was extensive and went beyond this one famous phrase. His writings were widely published and disseminated throughout the country. He was a sought after speaker at conventions and lyceums, and he made several speaking tours of the mid-West. Parker and Lincoln likely never met, but

¹⁰⁹ Parker, "Speech at Faneuil Hall Before the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, May 31, 1848," in *Speeches, Addresses, and Occasional Sermons*, Vol. 2, 333; Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics of Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850*, (New York, Pantheon Books); James Brewer Stewart, *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

¹¹⁰ Grodzins, *American Heretic*: 498; Grodzins; "Theodore Parker," *Dictionary of*

Parker maintained an active correspondence with Lincoln's friend and law partner, William Herndon. One early letter to Herndon dated January 15, 1855 was a reply to Herndon thanking him for an invitation to speak at Springfield, but that his "trial takes place in March, and I make no arrangements after that, for who knows where I will be."¹¹¹

Parker gave Herndon his political advice and opinions on slavery, race and other matters. In an 1856 letter to Herndon, Parker blamed the spread of slavery on the natural instinct of the Anglo-Saxon race to expand. "The strong passion of the Saxon is lust of land," he wrote, "it is so with the British Saxon, so with the American."¹¹² In December 1856 he wrote that the "great bulk of the people are opposed to slavery in Kansas, always excepting the Irish – they are by instinct friendly to slavery." He described them as the "Niggers of the South!"

In the same letter he offered his prediction of how the slavery question might end. "The South may conquer the North ... the North may conquer the South," he predicted, or "the two may separate without a fight."¹¹³ This sentiment, which Parker had written about previously, is similar to Lincoln's famous "A House Divided Speech" in which he declared, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe that this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free."¹¹⁴ According to Sanborn, Lincoln was greatly influenced by Parker's published sermons and writings as well as by Parker's letters to Herndon; "The 'house divided against itself'

¹¹¹ Parker to Herndon, January 15, 1855, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 174.

¹¹² Parker to Herndon, December 31, 1856, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 178-183.

¹¹³ Parker to Herndon, December 31, 1856, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 178-183.

¹¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "'A House Divided, Speech at Springfield Illinois, June 16, 1858," in Robert Louis Gates, ed., *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 104.

came out of Parker's published words, long before Lincoln adopted that strong figure and gave it universal currency."¹¹⁵

Sometimes Parker's political predictions were faulty, and while he admired Lincoln and detested Douglas, he also felt free to criticize Lincoln. In September of 1858 as the famous Lincoln – Douglas debates were under way, Parker wrote Herndon that he was following them with interest. He also offered that he had "no doubt that Douglas will be beaten," but criticized Lincoln for equivocating on some questions, "Lincoln Dodged them, that is not the way to fight the battle of freedom."¹¹⁶ In another letter he predicted that William Seward would be nominated and elected President in 1860.¹¹⁷

The 1850s was an increasingly frustrating decade for the abolitionist movement as the pro-slavery political forces made steady progress in their goal of spreading slavery beyond the Southern states. Americans had been moving Westward since colonial times, and the nation's geographical reach was once again greatly expanded by the 1848 treaty with Mexico. While Texas had entered the Union as a slave state in 1845, the treaty ceded a vast swath of the Southwest, including California, to the United States. Despite the fact that the annexation of Mexico had previously been opposed by some leading pro-slavery spokesmen because of their fear of assimilating the "inferior" Mexican race, other slavery advocates began again to eye the tropical regions of Mexico, Latin American and the Caribbean islands as places to expand slavery. To justify their reasoning they turned to science.

¹¹⁵ Sanborn, "Preface," *The Rights of Man in America*.

¹¹⁶ Parker to Herndon, September 4, 1858, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 186-188.

¹¹⁷ Parker to Herndon, August 28, 1858, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 185-186.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many scientists became preoccupied with efforts to explain racial differences, and their work led to the development of the discipline of Ethnology. The credentials of some of these racial researchers, such as Dr. Josiah Nott of Mobile, Alabama, and his associate George R. Gliddon, were questionable. Others however, such as Louis Agassiz and Samuel George Morton were legitimate scientists.¹¹⁸

Early scientific works on race stressed the importance of environmental factors as causes of racial differences. In 1787 Samuel Stanhope Smith, president of what is now Princeton University, wrote his *Essay on the Causes and the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*. Smith supported the "monogenesis" theory that all races were descended from the same ancient ancestors, and he believed that the differences among the races were caused by environmental effects like climate or by the conditions in which they lived, such as living in "savagery" or being exposed to "civilization." According to Smith, Caucasians were the superior race from which other races had degenerated and the standard to which all other races should be compared. Since Caucasians were the dominant race, he maintained that after emancipation the environment of America would eliminate racial differences.¹¹⁹ In effect, the Africans would become white, a theory that Parker accepted.

By the 1840s and 1850s, the environmental school, and its belief that racial differences could be changed, was supplanted by the biological school that held that racial characteristics were inherent and permanent. Count Joseph de Gobineau, considered by many to be the father of modern racism, asserted that "Negros had an absolutely fixed and unchangeable set of

¹¹⁸ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*; Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giboux, 2001).

¹¹⁹ Samuel Stanhope Smith, *Essay on the Causes and the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, in Fredrickson, 72.

undesirable traits."¹²⁰ Science began to be used to prove the permanent inferiority of the African race and to justify slavery. Despite this scientific trend, Parker held onto the environmental school's belief that racial traits were not permanent and that racial change and growth was possible.

Instead of the monogenesis theory that all races had a common ancestor, some scientists, led by Dr. Samuel George Morton, began to promote the "polygenesis" theory that each race was descended from a different set of ancestors. By studying skulls, Morton deduced that the races were created separately and were distinct species, not varieties of the same species.¹²¹ His theory allowed slavery supporters to claim that Africans were subhuman and therefore the statement in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" with "inalienable right" did not apply to them.

Polygenesis received a boost with the arrival of Louis Agassiz to the United States. Born in Switzerland in 1807, Agassiz was an esteemed scientist whose early claim to fame was as one of the discoverers of the Ice Age. He believed that God had created life on Earth many times, and that after each creation a natural disaster such as the Ice Age had destroyed all life. Following the extinction of all life, God then created new and better species. He reassured his readers that since man was the ultimate form of life, there would be no more extinction-causing catastrophes.¹²²

In 1846 Agassiz came to Boston to deliver a series of scientific lectures. The response was overwhelming, and large crowds turned out to hear him. The intelligentsia of Boston were so taken with him that Harvard established the Lawrence Scientific School to entice

¹²⁰ Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of the Races*, in Fredrickson, 69.

¹²¹ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 74-75.

¹²² Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*; Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*.

him to stay and to accept a Harvard professorship. He readily accepted, partly because his estranged wife was waiting for him in Europe. After she died of tuberculosis in 1848 he married Elizabeth Cabot Cary, which further established his place in Boston society. Besides being a member of the prominent Cabot family, Elizabeth Cary was a woman of accomplishment in her own right. She was a pioneering educator who later became the first president of Radcliffe College. It is illustrative of Agassiz's stature among Bostonians that the literary and dining club known as the Saturday Club which included such luminaries as Emerson, Longfellow and Hawthorne was frequently referred to as "Agassiz's Club."¹²³ Parker was less impressed with Agassiz whom he once derided as a "Swiss dissector of mud-turtles."¹²⁴

Originally Agassiz was an adherent of the monogenesis concept of human creation, but was converted to polygenesis after becoming friends with Samuel Morton. Morton's theories on race were consistent with Agassiz's pre-Darwinian belief that each species was created separately by supernatural design. Agassiz also found Morton's theory that each race was created and designed to live in the region where it was originally located, compatible with his belief that plants and animals were created in specific regions and had not migrated or mutated over time.¹²⁵

Agassiz also supported and contributed to the work of Dr. Josiah Knott who became the leading proponent of polygenesis after the death of Morton in 1851. Through the work of Knott and Gliddon, polygenesis became known as the American School of Anthropology. Knott was an unapologetic supporter of slavery, who often referred to his work

¹²³ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 97-99.

¹²⁴ Parker to Peter Lesley, Boston, November 15, 1857, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 193.

¹²⁵ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*; Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*.

as "the nigger business" or "niggerology."¹²⁶ Despite his support of Knott and Gliddon's work, Agassiz disapproved of slavery and "considered it a most injudicious proceeding to attempt to force the peculiarities of our white civilization of the nineteenth century upon all nations of the world."¹²⁷ According to literary scholar Louis Menand, Agassiz believed that polygenesis did not give whites the right to dominate other races, but rather he was a firm believer in racial separation. His theory that "the boundaries within which the different natural combinations of animals are known to be circumscribed upon the surface of the earth, coincide with the natural ranges of distinct types of man" meant that different races were meant to live apart in different temperate regions.¹²⁸ As much as he deplored slavery, Agassiz dreaded the prospect of race mixing and racial equality more.¹²⁹

The work of Knott, Gliddon and Agassiz gave pro-slavery advocates a scientific foundation for their arguments for expanding American slavery into the tropics. One of the leading promoters of this tropical expansion was Dr. John H. Van Evrie of New York, who wrote in *De Bow's Review*, the leading Southern business journal, that the Northern tier of slave states would eventually become free as the increasing European immigration into the United States would create an influx of free white labor. According to Van Evrie's vision, the South would need an outlet for its slave population that would be best provided by expansion into the American tropics, a natural habitat of the Africans. Since, according to Van Evrie, blacks would not work without the discipline of slavery, he envisioned a Caribbean slave empire where whites would live in the highlands with black slaves living and toiling in the low coastal areas. While

¹²⁶ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 75-78.

¹²⁷ Louis Agassiz, "The Diversity of the Human Races," in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 113.

¹²⁸ Agassiz, "Sketch of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and Their Relation to the Different Types of man," in Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 137.

¹²⁹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 97 – 116.

whites could not live in the low-lying areas, they could visit often enough to provide the needed supervision and guidance. The acquisition of additional territory from Mexico and the annexation Cuba were key components of Van Evrie's scheme.¹³⁰

Although Parker's racial attitudes were heavily influenced by contemporary scientific opinions, he had little regard for Agassiz, Knott and Gliddon. He rejected their polygenesis theory because it conflicted with his Transcendentalist belief that everyone, including slaves, had an "inner light" that gave them human dignity and the ability to perceive religious truth. This led him to hold onto the environmental school of racial thought, which permitted him to foresee the possibility of racial growth and development. In an 1854 letter to his friend and favorite scientific correspondent, Swiss geologist Eduard Desor, Parker described Knott and Gliddon's major book, *Types of Mankind*, in which they expounded on their polygenesis theory, as "a curious passage of sense and nonsense," and he noted that "Agassiz has contributed a good deal."¹³¹ Despite his rejection of polygenesis, Parker accepted the theory that the black race was naturally best suited to live in the warm tropics. Speaking of fugitive slaves forced to flee Boston because of the Fugitive Slave Act, Parker lamented that they were forced to escape "into the winter of Canada, which to the African what our rude climate is to the Goldfinch and to the Canary-bird."¹³²

Parker's adherence to the environmental school of racial theory is shown in an 1854 letter he wrote to Desor while on a speaking trip to the mid-West. Parker felt that the western climate was detrimental to the mental and physical character of the normally vibrant Anglo-Saxons. He wrote that he had seen no rosy-cheeked children. Furthermore, "the women

¹³⁰ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 138-140.

¹³¹ Parker to Desor, April 30, 1854, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, bMS 101/18.

¹³² Parker, *The Boston Kidnapping*, 21.

have no bosoms,” he observed, “they are tall and boney; their hair lank, their faces thin and flatly cheeked. What effect is this western climate to have on the human race? It must check the intensity of the Anglo-Saxon character.”¹³³ He felt that because of their environment the Western Anglo-Saxons were losing the vigor and vitality that had made their race great. Parker not only believed that, whether black African or white Anglo-Saxon, climate and environmental conditions had a direct effect on racial characteristics, but also change could happen rapidly, within a few generations.

Parker's racial pride was shown in an 1854 sermon, "Some Thoughts on the Progress of America," when he wrote that "the Anglo-Saxon colonists brought with them the vigorous bodies and sturdy intellect of their race," and praised their "strong love of individual freedom," and "love of law and order."¹³⁴ However, despite his racial pride, he also found fault and room for improvement. "We are the most aggressive, invasive, and exclusive people on the Earth," he lamented.¹³⁵ While Parker often spoke with pride of the strength and courage of his race and criticized Africans for their presumed meekness and unwillingness to fight, he would often point out that the traits that he felt made the Anglo-Saxons great also led them to excesses, like their embrace of the sin of slavery.

While most Americans looked upon race mixing with horror, Parker, reflecting Herder's belief that each race had unique and special characteristics, suggested racial amalgamation as a way to temper the overly aggressive tendencies of Anglo-Saxons. He noted that statistics already showed a "remarkable mingling of the Caucasian and the Ethiopian races

¹³³ Parker to Desor, Indianapolis, Oct. 18, 1854, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Library, bMS101/18.

¹³⁴ Parker, "Some Thoughts on the Progress of America, and the Influence of her Diverse Institutions, May 31, 1854," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 14, 3.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4,5.

going on. The Africans are rapidly 'bleaching' under the influence of democratic chemistry."¹³⁶ Parker believe that after emancipation a new composite breed would evolve in the American continent. "There is a new continent now for the first time married to the civilized world," he predicted, "various races of men mingle their blood - Indians, Africans, Caucasians; various tribes - Celtic Irish, Welsh, Scotch, Anglo-Saxon, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, German, Polish, Swiss French, Spanish; all these are here. Each will contribute its best to the general stock."¹³⁷

He re-emphasized the point in another speech that he delivered the same year to the New York Anti-Slavery Society. He noted that the nation had twenty-four million men with "strong, real, Anglo-Saxon blood" in their veins, but who could benefit from the presence of "eight millions and a half more of other families and races, just enough to temper the Anglo-Saxon blood, to furnish a new composite tribe, far better I trust than the old."¹³⁸ His vision was that the new breed would be an improved version of Anglo-Saxons with some of their excesses tempered by the positive traits of the other races.

Parker's attitude about the supposed unwillingness of Africans to fight was evolving. In 1856 he cautioned that if the slaves were kept in bondage and not allowed to develop their humanity, they would naturally turn to violence. "If America keeps the slave from developing the noblest quality of his nature, then he falls back on his lowest," he said, "the power of wrath never fades out of human bones." Speaking of the slave revolt in Haiti he warned,

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 11, 43.

¹³⁸ Theodore Parker, "An Anti-Slavery Address delivered before the New York Anti-Slavery Society," (1854), in *The Rights of Man in America*, 153-154.

"unless we amend, one day there will be a St. Domingo in America."¹³⁹ In the same sermon he foresaw that civil war was the only way to end slavery. "Once I thought it might end peacefully," he said, [but] "now I think it must fall as so many another wickedness, in violence and blood."¹⁴⁰ Parker's abolitionism was entering a more militant phase where he was envisioning slaves taking up arms in a slave rebellion with the possibility of wanton violence.

4 CHAPTER 3: INCREASED MILITANCY, DRED SCOTT AND JOHN BROWN

Following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, violence broke out among bands of pro- and antislavery partisans in what came to be called "Bleeding Kansas." Parker became an ardent supporter of the antislavery fighters, especially the most famous and radical of them all, John Brown. The deeply religious Brown had a checkered past of failed businesses and unpaid debts when he approached wealthy New York land owner Gerrit Smith in 1848, asking for a grant of land in the colony of freed blacks, which Smith had founded at North Elba, New York. Brown offered to move his large family to the struggling settlement in order to "show my colored neighbors how much work should be done; will give them work as I have occasion, look after them in all needful ways, and be a kind of father to them."¹⁴¹ Smith, apparently unaware of Brown's troubled economic state, agreed to sell him the land at the bargain price of \$1 per acre

¹³⁹ Parker, "The Effects of Slavery on the American People," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, 146.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁴¹ Edward J. Renehan, jr., *The Secret Six: the True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 19.

on credit and, most importantly to Brown, did not set a re-payment due date. His relationship with Brown would eventually cost Smith much more than the unpaid bill for the land.¹⁴²

When the fighting began in Kansas, Brown, along with his sons and other followers, moved to Kansas and became one of the most violent of the anti-slavery fighters. He gained notoriety for his raid on the settlement at Potawatomie Creek where, using broadswords, he killed and mutilated the bodies of pro-slavery settlers. The "Pottawatomie Massacre" horrified the moderate anti-slavery leaders who were hoping for a peaceful resolution to the situation. According to historian Edward Renehan, newly appointed Territorial Governor John Geary cracked down on the partisans on both sides and gradually brought an end to the fighting, creating an uneasy peace. Brown, who had a price on his head, decided to return East to raise funds for his next great anti-slavery battle. He was a very charismatic and persuasive person, and despite his violent history, became a cause de célèbre among Boston abolitionists, including Parker, who were impressed by Brown's exploits and willingness to take direct action against the slave owners.¹⁴³

When he arrived in Boston in January of 1857, Brown first met the twenty-six-year-old Sanborn who was the secretary of the Massachusetts State Kansas committee, an organization formed to supply weapons and supplies to anti-slavery settlers from Massachusetts. By this time Parker's militancy had increased to the point that he actively supported armed rebellion to resist slavery. In his journal entry of April 2, 1856, Parker recounted seeing a party of Massachusetts settlers off on their journey to Kansas in which he referred to their Sharp's rifles as "twenty copies of 'Sharp's Rights of the People' . . . of the new and improved edition, and divers [sic] Colt's six-shooters also." Parker lamented "what a comment were the weapons of that company

¹⁴² Renehan, *The Secret Six*.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

on the boasted democracy of America! These rifles and pistols were to defend their soil from the American Government, which wishes to plant slavery in Kansas!"¹⁴⁴

Sanborn introduced Brown to Parker who organized a reception for Brown in his home, where Brown was able to meet and enchant other potential financial supporters. Not all abolitionists were enthralled by Brown. Wendell Phillips was troubled by Brown's massacre at Pottawatomie, and Brown's violence was in direct conflict with the nonresistance beliefs of William Lloyd Garrison. Others, like Parker, found Brown a compelling and heroic figure who was prepared to take the fight directly to slavery supporters. The first donations that Brown received were intended to provide arms to support his efforts in Kansas, but Parker and other abolitionists were soon drawn into Brown's plan to deal a decisive blow to slavery, not in Kansas but in the slave-holding Southern states.¹⁴⁵ Before that occurred however, the Supreme Court dealt the anti-slavery movement another blow that increased the abolitionist's sense of urgency and moved the country closer to sectional conflict.

On March 6, 1857 the Supreme Court announced its infamous Dred Scott decision. Scott was the slave of an army doctor who took Scott with him when assigned to posts in free states and territories. Scott sued for his freedom, claiming that he was free due to his residence in the non-slave areas. In the decision written by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, the court ruled that no descendant of a slave could be a citizen of the United States or a citizen of an individual state, and denied Scott's request for freedom. Taney also ruled that Congress did not have the authority to regulate or prohibit slavery in the territories, thus the Missouri Compromise, which had restricted the spread of slavery, was deemed unconstitutional. Northern abolitionists feared

¹⁴⁴ Parker, "Journal, April 2, 1856," in *Weiss, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, Vol. 2, 160.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

that the decision would lead to the spread of slavery into the Western territories as well legalizing slavery nationally. The decision also undermined the already precarious position of the free blacks in the Northern states, and many people, including Parker, feared that it would eventually lead to the resumption of the African slave trade. In a letter to Herndon Parker condemned the Democratic Party for supporting the decision and predicted that "the Supreme Court will decide that it is unconstitutional to prohibit the importation of slaves, and the Democrats will endorse the decision."¹⁴⁶

In an odd twist of history, Parker's old nemesis Benjamin Curtis, sitting as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, was one of two justices to dissent. Curtis' dissent did not mean that he had suddenly become an abolitionist, but rather it was based on conservative legal reasoning and on his belief in the rule of law. He believed that Taney's decision misconstrued the Constitution and undermined intent of Congress. A few months after the decision, Curtis resigned from the court in a dispute with Chief Justice Taney over the way Taney treated his dissent.¹⁴⁷ In a speech the following year, Parker recognized Curtis' courage and integrity, albeit somewhat grudgingly. "I remember his former conduct with indignation and with shame," Parker declared, "but no blackness of the old record shall prevent me from turning over a new leaf, and with golden letters writing there - *In the Supreme Court* JUDGE CURTIS DEFENDED ONCE THE HIGHER LAW OF RIGHT."¹⁴⁸ (Parker's emphasis)

On March 5, 1858, a year after the decision was announced, a protest meeting was held in historic Faneuil Hall. It was organized by black historian and leader William Cooper Nell, who

¹⁴⁶ Parker to Herndon, August 9, 1857, *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 2, Vol. 6, Frame 183-184.

¹⁴⁷ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Slavery, Law and Politics: The Dred Scott Case in Historical Perspective*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 151-243.

¹⁴⁸ Parker, "The Present Aspect of Slavery in America, and the Immediate Duty of the North, January 29, 1858," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 298.

was also a member of Parker's congregation. The intent was to protest the decision by focusing on the black Boston Massacre martyr Crispus Attucks and on the black patriots who had fought in the Revolution. Nell had written about African patriots in an effort to counter the image of Africans as unwilling or unable to fight. While Parker frequently criticized African's for their alleged reluctance to fight, he supported Nell's work.

Although the meeting was a success, it took a different direction than Nell expected. Preceding Parker on the stage was Dr. John Rock who took Parker to task for his comments about African docility and their supposed unwillingness fight for their own freedom. Although not well known today, in his time Rock was a prominent and respected black abolitionist. Born free, he was trained in dentistry and also held a medical degree from the American Medical College in Philadelphia. In addition to his medical career, in 1861 he became the first black admitted to the Massachusetts Bar. In 1865 he crossed another color barrier and was sworn into the Bar of the United States Supreme Court. He was one of several black intellectuals including James Pennington, James McCune Smith, Martin Delany and Fredrick Douglas, who explored the science of ethnology to develop a counter narrative to dispute the theories of white ethnologists such as Josiah Knott, George Gliddon and others.¹⁴⁹ The work of these black intellectuals also clashed with the romantic racialist notions of African inferiority held by their Northern abolitionist allies like Parker. Rock had been offended by comments that Parker had made in a speech in January of 1858, just a few months prior to the Faneuil Hall meeting, in which Parker, as he had done frequently, criticized Africans' supposed lack of fighting spirit.

¹⁴⁹ Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Paul Teed, "Racial Nationalism and its Challengers, 142-160.

In his speech Rock ridiculed the courage of Anglo-Saxons and their treatment of slaves. "Mr. Parker makes a very low estimate of the courage of his race," Rock said, "if he means that one, two or three millions of the ignorant and cowardly black slaves could, without means, have brought to their knees five, ten or twenty millions of intelligent brave white men, backed up by a rich oligarchy."¹⁵⁰ Foreseeing the courage of black troops in the Civil War, Rock predicted that "sooner or later the clashing of arms will be heard in this country . . . and the black man's services will be needed. 150,000 freemen capable of bearing arms . . . will be a power that white men will be 'bound to respect.' Will the blacks fight? Of course they will."¹⁵¹

Parker, accustomed to being treated with deference by Boston's African community, was no doubt taken aback by Rock's criticism. He offered an apology of sorts. "I assent most heartily to almost all he said," Parker said of Rock's comments, "and if I cannot agree with the strictures he was pleased to make on some remarks that fell from my lips the other day, I am only sorry. I was not speaking of the African's future – only his past."¹⁵²

After reiterating his belief that Africans were "the most pacific race of men on the face of the earth" Parker repeated that he "spoke of the past, not the future." Parker apparently felt compelled to agree with Rock's prediction that blacks would fight. "I make no doubt he will fight," he said, "slavery will not be extinguished with one blow; it will take many blows, and I hope the black man will do his part."¹⁵³ Parker and Rock did not resolve their difference that night, but Parker's remarks show that, despite his firm belief that Anglo-Saxons were inherently

¹⁵⁰ "Speech of Dr. Rock," in *William Cooper Nell: Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, Historian, Integrationist, Selected Writings 1832-1874*, Dorothy Porter Wesley and Constance Porter Uzelac, ed., (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002), 503.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 504; for more on Rock's conflict with Parker, see Paul Teed, "Racial Nationalism and its Challengers: Theodore Parker, John Rock, and the Anti-slavery Movement," *Civil War History*, Vol. 41, No. 2, (June, 1995), 142-160.

¹⁵² "Remarks of Rev. Theodore Parker," in *William Cooper Nell*, 505.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 505-506.

better warriors, he was hopeful that Africans might develop the fighting spirit that Parker felt was instinctive to Anglo-Saxons, and that one day Africans would fight for their freedom. That day would come soon.

In the confrontation with Rock, Parker seemed surprised that his racist remarks were offensive to African-Americans. He often made similar comments regardless of who was in the audience or who shared the podium with him. At the January speech that angered Rock, one of the speakers that followed Parker was Charles Lenox Remond. Like Rock, Remond is not well known today, but in his time he was a respected and outspoken African abolitionist leader. As he opened his speech, Parker acknowledged Remond by saying, "I shall not hold you long tonight, there are others to speak after me who have better claims to your attention - the one (Mr. Remond) for his race, the other (Mr. Phillips) for the personal attributes of eloquence."¹⁵⁴ In his speech, Parker compared the African with the supposedly more warlike American-Indian, who, according to Parker preferred to face extinction rather than submit to slavery. "Our fathers tried to enslave the ferocious and unprogressive Indian," Parker said, "he would not work . . . he would fight. He would not be enslaved - he could not help being killed."¹⁵⁵ In contrast to the warlike native Indians, "the African," Parker claimed, "is the most docile and pliant of all the races of men . . . no race is so strong in the affectional instinct which attaches man to man by tender ties, none so easy, indolent, confiding, so little warlike. Hence is it that the white men have kidnapped the black and made him their prey."¹⁵⁶

This was not the first time that Parker shared a stage with Remond and made similar disparaging remarks. In a speech to the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York in May of

¹⁵⁴ Parker, "The Present Aspect of Slavery and the Immediate Duty of the North," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 286.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.

1856, after being introduced by William Lloyd Garrison, Parker acknowledged Remond's presence on the program by noting that he was "under great disadvantages; for I follow one whose colour is more that the logic which his cause did not need."¹⁵⁷ In this speech, he discussed two possible strategies to end slavery. The first was "to arouse a sense of humanity in the whites, which should lead us to abolish this wickedness," and another "would be to arouse a sense of indignation in the person who has suffered the wrong - in the slave, - and to urge him, of himself, to put a stop to bearing this wickedness."¹⁵⁸ Parker then offered two explanations why this had not happened, one that questioned the tactics of his host, Garrison, and the other that questioned the courage of Remond's race. "First some of the anti-slavery leaders were non-resistant," according to Parker. "They said that it was wrong for the black man to break the arm of the oppressor, and we will pray only that God to break it."¹⁵⁹ The second reason was that "the slaves themselves were Africans, - men not very good with the sword . . . for while the African is not very good with the sword, the Anglo-Saxon is something of a master with that ugly weapon; at any rate, he knows how to use it."¹⁶⁰ Apparently Remond did not confront Parker at either event, but it is easy to see why Rock would be offended.

It is possible that Parker's upbraiding by Rock had an impact on his perception of Africans' fighting spirit and ability. A few days after the meeting, Parker wrote to historian George Bancroft praising both Nell and his book on African fighters in the Revolution, saying that "my friend, Wm. C. Nell, a colored man of this city, helps me to the facts. He has written a quite valuable book on 'The Colored Patriots of the Revolution.'" Parker praised the ability of

¹⁵⁷ Parker, "The Present Aspect of the Anti-Slavery Enterprise, and of the Various Forces Which Work Therein," in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 215.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 216, 216-217.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

the black revolutionary fighters, "many Northern blacks were excellent soldiers, but Southern troops could not brook an equality with negroes."¹⁶¹ Also, soon after his clash with Rock, Parker would find himself, along with fellow abolitionists F.B. Sanborn, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, Gerrit Smith and George Luther Starns, part of the "Secret Six" financial supporters of Brown's ill-fated raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia on October 16, 1859.¹⁶² Brown's intent was to create a slave insurrection that depended on the willingness and ability of Africans' to fight.

Like other abolitionists, Parker saw the Dred Scott Decision as opening the door to the nationalization of slavery. While slavery was most dominant in the plantation regions of the South, not all slaves toiled for wealthy plantation owners. Even small- and mid-sized farmers could own a few slaves, and as Scott's situation illustrated, a slave could be owned by someone, in his case an army doctor, who had little or no connection to agriculture. The court's decision opened the door to slaves being legally brought into free, non-slave states, fulfilling Parker's prediction that one goal of the "slave Power" was to re-establish slavery in all the states and territories. The Dred Scott Decision, the increasing violence in Kansas, and the general fear that the slave interests were winning in their efforts to spread slavery across the nation, drove Parker, along with other abolitionists, into an ever more militant abolitionism and to support radicals like John Brown.

Brown was an elusive and erratic figure. As a wanted man, he often wrote to his supporters using assumed names, and his plans frequently changed. According to Weiss, "Capt. Brown would not pledge himself to carry out any special plans. He wanted to be left free to

¹⁶¹ Parker to George Bancroft, Boston, March 16, 1858," in *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 1, Vol. 3, Frame 286.

¹⁶² Renehan, *The Secret Six*.

make his own plan, at the time and in the direction which might seem to him most promising."¹⁶³ Brown's requests for funds were often vague, and his lack of results caused consternation among his backers who were impatient for results. His vagueness was illustrated by a letter written to Parker in September, 1857 stating that he was "in immediate want of some Five Hundred or One Thousand dollars, for a secret service, and no questions asked."¹⁶⁴ Brown saw Parker not only as a potential donor but also as someone who could use his influence to convince others to contribute funds. In the same letter he asked Parker to "bring this matter before your congregation or exert your influence in some way to have it or some part of it raised."¹⁶⁵ Parker seemed agreeable to this arrangement. According to Weiss, Parker told him that "I have friends who will give me money, without asking any questions, trusting that I will see it properly applied."¹⁶⁶ Apparently not enough money was forthcoming from this request because in February, 1858 Brown again wrote Parker that he had "nearly perfected arrangements for carrying out an important measure, in which the world has a deep interest, as well as Kansas, and only lack \$500 to \$1,000 to enable me to do so. The same object for which I asked for secret service money last Fall."¹⁶⁷

Brown was referring to his planned raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia where he planned to strike a decisive blow to slavery by using the captured arms from the arsenal to start a slave revolt in the South. With a project of this scope, it was necessary for him to lower his veil of secrecy and to let his most trusted supporters in on his plans. Brown first disclosed

¹⁶³ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 162.

¹⁶⁴ Brown to Parker, September 11, 1857, in *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 3, Vol. 9, Frame 290.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 161.

¹⁶⁷ Brown to Parker, February 2, 1858, in *Theodore Parker Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm, Reel 3, Vol. 9, Frame 285-286.

the details of his plan to Sanborn and Gerrit Smith. Sanborn then informed Higginson, Parker and Howe. Brown informed Luther Stearns directly. Parker suggested that Brown come to Boston for a meeting to discuss the plan further. The conspirators met in Brown's room at Boston's American House Hotel in early March, 1858 to culminate their plans. Like Parker's letter to Bancroft, the meeting with Brown and the other conspirators took place soon after Parker's conflict with Rock in Faneuil Hall.¹⁶⁸

Another abolitionist whose support Brown wanted, but failed to get, was Fredrick Douglass. Douglass was a friend of Brown's and had supported his efforts in Kansas. Brown wanted Douglass to accompany him on the raid to help lead the slaves that he expected to rally to his banner. "When I strike," he told Douglass, "the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them."¹⁶⁹ However, Douglass declined to go feeling that the raid would be counterproductive to ongoing efforts to aid escaped slaves and that his friend "was going into a perfect steel trap, and that once in he would never get out alive."¹⁷⁰ Douglass' words were prophetic. Brown launched his raid on October 16, 1859 and was quickly routed. He and a handful of his men were captured, and the rest were killed except for a few who managed to escape. Despite having attacked a federal facility, Brown was tried in a Virginia state court and was hanged on December 2, 1859, becoming a martyr to the abolitionist cause.

After the failure of the raid and the capture of Brown, the "Secret Six" feared being implicated and began to panic. Gerrit Smith pled insanity and had himself committed to an asylum. Except for Higginson, the others fled to Canada at various times as Congress established a special committee to investigate the raid and to ferret out Brown's supporters. The

¹⁶⁸ Renehan, 145.

¹⁶⁹ John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*, (Cambridge; Harvard University Press), 249.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

conduct of his fellow conspirators upset Higginson who later commanded black troops in the Civil War. In 1909, on the fiftieth anniversary of the raid, he complained in an interview that "although there was no Judas among us, there were six Peters, all who denied John Brown at least once before the cock crowed."¹⁷¹

Parker avoided the possibility of arrest because he was out of the country when the raid occurred. He had been in failing health with tuberculosis for several years, the same disease that had afflicted his mother and much of his family. As his condition worsened, his doctors suggested that a change of climate might help his condition. In February of 1859 he left cold Boston for the warmth of the Caribbean, after which he went on to England, Switzerland and finally Italy in a futile attempt to recover.

Shortly after leaving Boston he wrote a long epistle to his congregation, in which he apologized for having to leave them and detailed what he had attempted to accomplish in his ministry. In addition to combating slavery and preserving democracy, he wrote that he had promoted temperance to counter "the monstrous evil of drunkenness, the material and moral ruin it works so widely," and he preached against "covetousness - the abnormal desire of accumulating property," and the "tyranny of the rich over the thriving and the poor."¹⁷² Reflecting on his early experiences as a school teacher, he lamented that "our education is almost entirely intellectual, not also moral, affectional, and religious."¹⁷³

Parker noted that he had "preached much on the condition of women" and that "it seems clear that woman is man's equal, individually and socially entitled to the same rights." However, while he supported women's suffrage, he did not expect them to take an active role in the

¹⁷¹ Renehan, 5.

¹⁷² Parker, "Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister," Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 318, 321.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 321.

political sphere. He wrote that he had "found no philosophic or historic argument for thinking she will ever incline much to the rough works of man, or take any considerable part in Republican politics."¹⁷⁴

Parker was very proud of the American experiment in democratic government and reminded his congregants that they were "making one of the most important experiments ever attempted on earth, endeavouring to establish an industrial democracy, with the principle that all men are created equal in their natural rights . . . [where] the great body of the people is the source of all political power, the maker of all laws, the ultimate arbiter of all laws."¹⁷⁵ He went on to say that he had "preached against war, showing its enormous cost in money and men, and the havoc it makes of public and private virtue," and that he had preached against slavery more than any other sin because it was "the sum of all villainies."¹⁷⁶ Lastly, he reminded everyone of his roots as a religious reformer when he wrote that he had "preached against the errors of ecclesiastic theology more than any other form of wrong for they are the most fatal mischiefs in the land."¹⁷⁷

Parker's lifelong scientific curiosity was piqued by the exotic birds, animals, plants and people that he encountered on the Caribbean portion of his trip. While in St. Thomas he wrote to his relative and physician Dr. Cabot and gave a detailed account of his observations. He reported that in addition to having studied the plant life of the island, he had also studied "the negroes, and could give a lecture on their physiology, phrenology, and psychology, before the Natural

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 323, 324-325.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 325.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 329.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 332.

History Society."¹⁷⁸ It is interesting that he considered studying "the negros" in the same vein as he studied exotic tropical plants.

He found the pace of life in the tropics and the mannerism of the people that he encountered, white, black and creole, to be both confusing and frustrating. Of St. Thomas, he told Dr. Cabot that "there is no spiritual Hygiene here . . . nobody has any appreciation of science or literature except the few Danes."¹⁷⁹ Parker was excited however with the prospect of seeing his favorite scientific correspondent, Eduard Desor, while on the European part of the trip. He wrote Dr. Cabot that he hoped to meet Desor in Antwerp and visit Scandinavia together. After Scandinavia, Parker hoped to spend the summer with Desor in Switzerland where he hoped they would "study the sub-aquatic remains of the Celts in the Swiss Lakes . . . In the Winter I want him to go with me to Egypt."¹⁸⁰

After leaving the Caribbean, he visited friends in London before going on to see Desor. While in London he was excited to receive a visit from Ellen Craft. He recounted the visit in a letter to his friend, Edna D. Cheney. "One of the last persons who came to visit us the night before we went away was - Ellen Craft!" he wrote. "I count that an honor."¹⁸¹ After leaving London, he enjoyed time with Desor in Switzerland, but he was unable to make the trips to Scandinavia and Egypt.

Despite his failing body, his mind was alert, and he kept up an active correspondence with friends both at home and in Europe. While he was in Europe, the continent was experiencing a period of turmoil and revolution. From Switzerland he wrote to his congregation

¹⁷⁸ Parker to Dr. Cabot, St. Thomas, May 12, 1859, in *Weiss*, Vol. 2, 281-282.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁸¹ Parker to E.D. Cheney, June 28, 1859, *Parker Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society*. Microfilm, Reel 1, Vol. 3, Frame 102; *Weiss, Life and Correspondence*, Vol. 2, 234-235.

to remind them that they too faced the probability of civil war. "You and I may be thankful that our land is not trodden by the hoof of war - not yet, I mean," he wrote, "but the day will come when we also must write our charter of liberty in blood. No nation in Europe has so difficult a problem to solve as America, none has so great a contradiction in the national consciousness."¹⁸² After visiting Desor in Switzerland, he went to Italy for what turned out to be the last leg of his journey.

Parker remained an admirer of Brown until the end and believed that Brown's death would have a lasting effect on the abolitionist cause. In a long letter written from Rome to his friend Francis Jackson, he wrote that "Brown will die, I think, like a martyr, and also like a saint . . . none of the Christian Martyrs died in vain."¹⁸³ Completely abandoning his previous belief that there were kind and humane slave owners, Parker reiterated his conviction that the slaves had the right and duty to kill their oppressors, and that they needed to develop the willingness and ability to defend their rights. "A man held against his will as a slave has a natural right to kill everyone who seeks to prevent his enjoyment of liberty," he wrote. "It may be a natural duty of the slave to develop this natural right in a practical manner, and actually kill all those who seek to prevent his enjoyment of liberty."¹⁸⁴

While he believed that blacks were "greatly inferior to the Caucasian in general intellectual power, and also in that instinct for liberty which is so strong in the Teutonic family," his belief in the timidity of the African race had evolved. "It is not merely white men who will fight for the liberty of Americans," he declared, "the negroes will take their defence into their own

¹⁸² Parker to the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society, June 25, 1859, in *Weiss, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, Vol. 2, 301.

¹⁸³ Parker, John Brown's Expedition Reviewed in a Letter to Francis Jackson, November 24, 1859, in Cobbe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 176.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

hands, especially if they can find white men to lead them."¹⁸⁵ He acknowledged that slaves had already fought for their freedom and thrown off slavery in Haiti, noting that "there is a limit even to the negroes forbearance. Santo Domingo is not a great way off."¹⁸⁶ While Parker held onto his belief that Anglo-Saxons were a superior race, he now had come to believe that slaves would eventually fight for their freedom, but he still believed that they would need white men, like John Brown, to lead and inspire them.

Parker continued to view people through a racial lens and was not impressed with the Italians who were going through a period of civil unrest during his visit. In a letter to Senator Charles Sumner in June, 1859 Parker gave his thoughts on the Italian situation, saying, "I have little hope of any good for Italy. Effete nationalities cannot be rejuvenated . . . The Piedmontese seem the best portion of the race."¹⁸⁷ He reiterated this opinion in a letter to Desor in December of that year. He had "no hope for the people of Italy," he wrote, "[e]specially none for the Romans! These are a miserable people out of whom all virtue seems to have perished utterly."¹⁸⁸

He followed events surrounding Brown's capture and the inquiry into his supporters with concern. "Friends of mine have been made to fly from their country," he wrote to Desor, "attempts are made to implicate many prominent men at the North and there will be a deal of trouble. I should not be surprised to see Dr. Howe in Rome this winter."¹⁸⁹ Howe did flee to Canada for a time, but did not feel the need to go to Rome.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 171.

¹⁸⁷ Parker, Letter to Honorable Charles Sumner, London, June 7, 1859 in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, Vol. 2, 291.

¹⁸⁸ Parker to Desor, December 7, 1859, in *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Library, bMS101/18.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

Even in failing health, Parker maintained his interest in science and made one last criticism of Louis Agassiz. He wrote to Desor that he had learned of "Mr. Darwin's work on 'Principles of Selection in Natural History.'" Parker felt that it was an important scientific work and noted that Darwin "does not believe in Agassiz's foolish notion of an interposition of God when a new form of lizard makes its appearance on the earth. Indeed, a God who only works by fits and starts is no God at all. Science wants a God that is a constant force and a constant intelligence immanent in every particle of matter."¹⁹⁰

He was happy to report to Desor that the congressional investigation of Brown's raid had proved inconclusive and that he and his co-conspirators had not been implicated. In a postscript to another letter, he added that he believed that "my friends are out all out of trouble from the Senate committee who undertook to investigate the affair at Harper's Ferry and John Brown's doings. Nothing has been found which was not known before, and the most important part of the matter still remains a mystery. Nobody knows where J.B. got his money."¹⁹¹

Parker's health continued to decline, and he died in Florence on May 10, 1860, where he is still buried. In his will he bequeathed his grandfather's muskets, which he prized so much and which he wrote about so often, to the State of Massachusetts to be "placed in the Senate Chamber of this Commonwealth, and there sacredly kept in *perpetuam rei memoriam*."¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Parker to Desor, Rome, February 27, 1860, in *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Library, bMS101/18.

¹⁹¹ Parker to Desor, Rome, March 27, 1860, in *Theodore Parker Papers*, Andover-Harvard Library, bMS101/18.

¹⁹² "Copy of the Will of Theodore Parker," in *Weiss, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, Vol. 2, Appendix, 443.

5 CONCLUSION AND LEGACY

Our twenty-first century views and expectations of race cannot be used to explain Parker's racialism. These modern viewpoints lead us to see contradictions and negativity that Parker simply would not comprehend. In the same way that he was surprised by John Rock's criticism, he would not understand why we would deem his remarks offensive. Parker was deeply religious, and his religious faith was central to his life. His Transcendentalist beliefs taught him that all races were able to experience religious and spiritual revelation. Since even the most primitive races were able to feel religious emotion, they also had human dignity. Because slavery stripped them of their humanity, it was the worst of all sins.

At the same time, his faith taught him to believe in the use of logic, intuition and reason, which led him to accept many of the scientific racial theories of his time. These theories purported to prove the hierarchy of racial superiority and reinforced his conviction that race was the driving force behind human achievements. Parker saw racial characteristics as the way to explain human progress and achievements. Science and his own observations convinced him that his own Anglo-Saxon tribe was the most advanced and was at the forefront of human progress. As the leaders in human progress, Anglo-Saxons were destined to bring the advantages of civilization to the American continent which he described as an "Industrial Democracy" where men would be judged by their abilities instead of by inherited rank or social position.

Furthermore, Parker's belief that members of all races were part of the human race, led him to reject scientific theories that denied their inherent worth and dignity. Thus he rejected the claim that racial differences were permanent and irrevocable, and he maintained his belief in the environmental school of racial thought that held that racial differences and abilities could evolve. Parker believed that slavery was preventing the African slaves from realizing their humanity and

their God given "unalienable rights." Once the oppressive effects of slavery were lifted, he believed that they would be able to reach their human potential. However, here again, Parker's science led to complications.

Despite his rejection of the biological school of racial science, he did accept that Africans were by nature best suited to live in the tropics. Thus, after the threat of bondage ended, they would either voluntarily migrant to warmer climates or assimilate into the Caucasian race. Using Herder's philosophy that all races had unique and positive traits, Parker believed that after emancipation a new and improved composite breed would develop and that America, with its populations of many different races, would be the place to create a new strain. However, his concept was that since Anglo-Saxons were the naturally superior race, this new breed would be a reinvigorated Anglo-Saxon strain.

As Parker's abolitionism became increasingly militant, his opinion of the capabilities of Africans also evolved. As political and legal events like the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott Decision appeared to be shifting political power to the advantage of the "Slave Power," Parker came to realize that the only way to end slavery was through direct violent action and that Africans would be called upon to fight. While he had often criticized blacks for being meek and for failing to defend themselves from their oppressors, he now began to exhort them to defend their natural rights and to kill anyone who tried to subjugate them. Thus Parker could tell John Rock that when he made derogatory remarks about Africans, he "spoke of the past, not the future,"¹⁹³ and he was able to believe that John Brown's plan to start an insurrection that depended on the slaves' willingness to take up arms might succeed.

While he had genuine affection and concern for the fugitive slaves in Boston, Parker seemed to hold the Irish in constant disdain. He enjoyed speaking to African audiences, but

¹⁹³ "Remarks of Rev. Theodore Parker," in *William Cooper Nell*, 506.

there does not seem to be any records of him speaking to an Irish or Catholic gathering. One reason for his disdain for them was their attachment to the Catholic religion, which Parker considered oppressive and supportive of slavery. Another reason was the increasing influx of Irish immigrants pouring into Boston in the mid-nineteenth century, which was changing the demographics of New England. This caused a quandary for Parker. His concept of democracy as a government "by all, for all and from all" meant that once they became citizens, as Caucasians, the Irish would have the right to vote. Their voting strength would threaten the political position of both the upper class elite and of middle-class Anglo-Saxons. Parker used their Celtic race to create a social barrier in order to brand the Irish as a lower class in order to preserve the social position of the Anglo-Saxons.

Parker did not oppose slavery only because he was concerned for the moral well-being of the white race as Fellman and Albrecht contended. He believed that slavery was a national moral sin and a blot on American society. However, his opposition to slavery went much deeper. He considered slavery a sin because it violated his religious convictions, and because it prevented its victims from enjoying their "inalienable rights" of life and liberty, and from experiencing their humanity. While he never wavered from his conviction that his Anglo-Saxon branch was the superior race, it is not true that he was not concerned for social justice. He believed that slavery stripped the slaves of their humanity, which to Parker, was the worst social injustice and sin of all. Despite his human flaws, Parker was a man of great vision with the courage of his convictions. His early death at the peak of his intellectual output prevented future generations from experiencing what other contributions he would have made.

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