

African American Clergy on Slavery

In the antebellum era, religious leaders often spoke out against slavery, both in their sermons and as they participated in church governance. Some of the most powerful religious voices were those of the African American ministers who were directly affected by slavery and the system of white supremacy that dominated all aspects of American life. Absalom Jones, James Pennington, and Henry Highland Garnet were highly respected Protestant ministers who condemned chattel slavery both from the pulpit and through their work as church leaders, teachers, community organizers, and activists.

Absalom Jones delivered a sermon of “Thanksgiving” after the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves took effect in 1808. Though he condemned slavery and the terrible suffering of enslaved people, he did not go as far as to advocate directly for abolition. Forty-five years later, as tension between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions was increasing dramatically, James Pennington delivered a sermon to the Third Presbytery of New York on the topic of Christian zeal. In his sermon, Pennington pointed out that Presbyterians owned 80,000 enslaved people, but he stopped short of overtly criticizing the Presbyterian Church for its weak support of anti-slavery principles. In 1865, just before the end of the Civil War, Henry Highland Garnet spoke before the House of Representatives in honor of the newly passed Thirteenth Amendment. Garnet’s sermon presented a stirring condemnation of the slave system as well as a remarkably forward-looking description of what full equality for African Americans would look like. Lest anyone think the work was done after the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, Garnet eloquently told them otherwise.

All three men had been born into slavery. Pennington and Garnet escaped to freedom—Garnet as a young teenager with his family, and Pennington on his own, as an adult—and Jones was manumitted by his owner when he was nearly 40. The experience of enslavement informed each man’s approach to his ministry, and to his work to end slavery and help support fellow African Americans, both free and enslaved.

Other African American ministers were not born into slavery, but nonetheless worked tirelessly for abolition and social and economic uplift for African Americans. Reverend Peter Williams, Jr. was a ground-breaking Episcopalian minister, the first African American Episcopal minister serving a New York City congregation. In addition to his ministry, Williams co-founded the first black-owned and operated newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*. The first senior editor of *Freedom’s Journal* was Reverend Samuel Cornish, a Presbyterian minister and gifted journalist and editor. Cornish was instrumental in changing public opinion about the colonization movement through his writing and his ministry.

Document 1: Jones Thanksgiving Sermon

Jones, Absalom. *A Thanksgiving Sermon, Preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas's, or the African Episcopal Church, Philadelphia: on Account of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, on That Day, by the Congress of the United States.*

Philadelphia, PA: Fry & Kammerer, 1808.

PHS Call number: PAM E 185.18 .J66 1808

**See especially pages 10-20.*

Source notes: Absalom Jones (1746-1818) was born to enslaved parents in Delaware and became the first African American ordained Episcopal priest at age 56. Jones taught himself to read at a young age and was manumitted when he was nearly 40. After gaining his freedom, Jones and his friend Richard Allen both served as lay ministers at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia until the church decided to segregate its African American and white churchgoers, demanding that African Americans sit further away from the minister in the upper balconies. As a result, Jones and Allen led a walkout of all the African Americans in the congregation. A year later, in 1792, Jones and Allen co-founded First African Church in Philadelphia and applied for its acceptance into the Episcopal Church, on the condition that Jones would serve as its minister and that it would have control over its internal affairs. Jones and Allen's church was accepted into the Episcopal Church and was renamed the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Jones delivered this sermon on the first day of 1808 in honor of the end of the African slave trade in the United States.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the intended audience of this source? When was the source written, and what was the historical context?
2. How does Jones describe slavery in North America (pages 11-13)? What effect does this description of slavery at the beginning have on the rest of the sermon?
3. For what political victories against slavery does Jones express gratitude in this sermon (pages 13, 14)?
4. Jones proposes a reason why God may have allowed Africans to be captured and sold into slavery (page 18). What is the reason? Is it likely Jones's congregation would agree with this idea?
5. Why does Jones compare his fellow African Americans to the Jews whom God ordered "never to forget their humble origin" (page 17)? What conduct does Jones expect from African Americans as a result of this humility (pages 17, 18)?
6. Though Jones expresses gratitude to the states that have already abolished slavery (page 15), why does he not promote the nation-wide abolition of slavery in this sermon?

Document 2: Debate at Lane Seminary

American Anti-Slavery Society. *Debate at the Lane Seminary, Cincinnati: Speech of James A. Thome, of Kentucky, Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Anti Slavery Society, May 6, 1834; Letter of the Rev. Dr. Samuel H. Cox, against the American Colonization Society.* Boston: Garrison & Knapp, 1834.

PHS Call number: PAM E 449 .D25 1834

**See especially Samuel H. Cox's letter (pages 11-16).*

Source note: This document comprises a letter within a letter within a published debate transcript. Rev. Samuel H. Cox (1793-1880) was a Presbyterian minister and abolitionist. He took a leadership role in the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1834 and was also involved in the temperance movement. Cox's letter in this debate transcript includes a letter from Rev. Samuel E. Cornish and excerpts from writings by Rev. Peter Williams, Jr. (1786-1840), African American rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in New York, about colonization and slavery. Samuel Cornish (1795-1858) was one of the first African American Presbyterian ministers, was senior editor of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black-owned and operated newspaper in America, and was a co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Reading questions:

1. Who is Rev. Cox, and what is his perspective on the American Colonization Society? How did his perception of the society change over time, and what was the main factor behind this change (page 12)?
2. What was Rev. Samuel Cornish's position on colonization (page 12)? How did Rev. Cornish likely become a spokesperson for all African Americans on this subject?
3. When did Rev. Williams preach the sermon enclosed in Cornish's letter (page 13)? What was the historical context?
4. What, according to Williams, is the "principle motive for supporting" the American Colonization Society for many of its supporters and promoters (page 13)?
5. What rebuttals does Cox offer (quoting Williams) in response to colonization advocates who warned that African Americans faced intractable prejudice in the United States, and would probably mix socially with whites if they stayed in this country after emancipation (page 14)?

Document 3: Pennington's Christian Zeal

Pennington, James W. C. *Christian Zeal: A Sermon Preached before the Third Presbytery of New-York, in Thirteenth-St. Presbyterian Church, July 3, 1853.*
New York: Printed by Zuille & Leonard, 1854.
PHS Call number: PAM HT 917 .P7 P4 1854

**See especially pages 13-15.*

Source note: James W.C. Pennington (1807-1870) was a minister, abolitionist, author, orator, and the first African American to attend Yale University. Born James Pembroke to enslaved parents in Maryland, Pennington trained as a blacksmith at his master's bidding. At age 19, Pennington made a harrowing escape from slavery, living first with one and then another Quaker family until he made his way eventually to New York City. When Pennington gave this sermon as moderator of the Third Presbytery of New York, he had just gained his freedom two years before. In this sermon, Pennington talks about the need to help the growing population of poor New Yorkers moving into the lower wards that had previously housed the middle and upper classes. He also addresses the question of slavery, pointing out that American Presbyterians were thought to own as many as 80,000 slaves altogether. He does not condemn his own denomination outright, perhaps because he did not want to seem ungrateful after being honored with the position of moderator, and some abolitionists felt he was too lenient towards his fellow Presbyterians regarding their general tolerance of slavery and slaveholding church members.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? What is the historical context in which it was written?
2. Why might Pennington urge the Presbyterian churches of the slaveholding states to reveal information about the number of slaves held by Presbyterians (page 13)? How might Pennington's listeners react to his claim that nowhere else in the world is slavery justified by referring to the Bible (page 14)? Why might Pennington choose to make this point?
3. How does Pennington's treatment of the slavery question fit into the historical context in which he was writing it?
4. What is Pennington's perspective on the Presbyterian church's relationship to slavery, by the end of his sermon (page 14)? What action, if any, does he urge the church to take?

Document 4: Garnet’s Memorial Discourse

Garnet, Henry Highland. *A Memorial Discourse, Delivered in the Hall of the House of Representatives, Washington City, D.C. on Sabbath, February 12, 1865. With an Introduction, by James McCune Smith, M.D.* Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1865.

PHS does not hold a copy of this speech. It can be found online at <https://tinyurl.com/yx986365>

**See especially pages 69-91.*

Source note: Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882) escaped from slavery in 1824 and became a Presbyterian minister and leading abolitionist. As a young man, Garnet was active in the American Anti-Slavery Society and vigorously opposed colonization. Later in life, Garnet came to think that emigration to Africa would address many of the problems facing African Americans after emancipation. Garnet himself moved to Liberia in 1881 to serve as a minister, but died soon after arriving. At the time Garnet delivered this discourse, General Sherman’s union army had captured Savannah and had just left for the Carolinas, having completed their “March to the Sea.” Garnet was invited to preach this sermon before the House of Representatives to celebrate the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment on January 31st, 1865.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written, and what was the historical context?
2. Garnet opens his discourse with a description of the “Scribes and Pharisees” of the New Testament who “hated and wronged a portion of their fellow-men” (page 70). Who are the contemporary Scribes and Pharisees, according to Garnet (pages 71, 72)?
3. Why does Garnet point out that the slave traders were not Muslims or Hindus, but Christians (page 75)? How does this evidence add to his argument about American slavery?
4. Garnet employs the words of leaders, poets, philosophers, and other notable historical figures to condemn the practice of slavery (pages 80-83). What does this accomplish in his sermon? What are some of the most impactful statements against slavery on these pages?
5. Garnet said, “it is often asked when and where will the demands of the reformers of this and coming ages end” (page 85). What is his answer to this question (pages 85-87)?
6. What is the tone of Garnet’s sermon? What was Garnet’s purpose in writing and delivering it?

Document 5: Swift Secondary source

Swift, David Everett. *Black prophets of justice: activist clergy before the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Call number: BR 563 .N4 S97 1989

**See especially the passages on Samuel Cox (pages 54-55, 66-68, 73), Samuel Cornish (pages 1-6, 24-27, 59-66), Peter Williams (pages 60-69), James Pennington (pages 204-210, 267, 268), and Henry Highland Garnet (pages 113-117, 332-335). For information on Absalom Jones, you may refer to Gary B. Nash's Forging Freedom (1988), pages 111-119 and pages 188-190.*

Source note: David E. Swift (1914-2001) was a professor of religion at Wesleyan University for almost 30 years, and also taught briefly at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the first degree-granting historically black college in the United States. Swift, who was white, was a conscientious objector during World War II and joined Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Freedom Riders in 1961 to protest racial segregation on interstate transportation. Swift's *Black Prophets of Justice* follows six African American clergymen who fought for emancipation and equality for African Americans, both from the pulpit and through community organizing efforts.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? Is it a reliable source? Why or why not? What was Samuel Cox's connection to Samuel Cornish (page 55)?
2. What reason did Samuel Cox give for rescinding his support for the American Colonization Society in 1834 (page 66)? What effect did this public rejection have on the colonization movement?
3. What was Samuel Cornish's rebuttal to pro-colonization arguments (page 27)? What effect did his writing have on public opinion?
4. Why did James Pennington write an autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (pages 204, 205)? What effect did this book have on public opinion about slavery?
5. Why did Pennington not take the Presbyterian Church to task for its involvement in the slave system (pages 267, 268)?
6. What central message did Garnet convey in his 1865 sermon after passage of the Thirteenth Amendment (pages 332, 333)?