

AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT  
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 2: The Colonial Era – Equality and Status

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*John Saffin, A Brief and Candid Answer (1701)*<sup>1</sup>

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*John Saffin immigrated to the Massachusetts colony with his family as a child in the early seventeenth century. He primarily lived in Boston, where he became a prominent merchant and politician. His commercial activities included slave trading in Virginia, and he kept indentured servants in his own household. A legal dispute over the status of one of his indentured servants named Adam provoked Samuel Sewall to write an antislavery tract, *The Selling of Joseph*, which argued that the slave trade was contrary to the egalitarian tenets of Christianity. Saffin responded the next year with a short pamphlet of his own, in which he mounted a biblically based defense of the practice, contending that the Bible sanctioned holding heathen as slaves and more generally accepted social and political hierarchies that arrayed men from kings to servants.*

That honorable and learned gentleman, the author of a sheet, entitled, *The Selling of Joseph*, A Memorial, seems from thence to draw this conclusion, that because the sons of *Jacob* did very ill in selling their brother *Joseph* to the *Ishmaelites*, who were heathens, therefore it is utterly unlawful to buy and sell negroes, though among Christians; which conclusion I presume is not well drawn from the premises, nor is the case parallel; for it is unlawful for the *Israelites* to sell their brethren upon any account, or pretense whatsoever during life. But it was not unlawful for the seed of *Abraham* to have bond men, and bond women either born in their house, or bought with their money, as it is written of *Abraham*, *Gen. 14:14* and *21:10*, *Exod. 21:16*, *Levit. 25:44, 45, 46*. . . .

To speak a little to the gentleman's first assertion: *That none ought to part with their liberty themselves, or deprive others of it but upon mature consideration*; a prudent exception, in which he grants, that upon some consideration a man may be deprived of his liberty. And then presently in his next position or assertion he denies it, viz.: *It is most certain, that all men as they are the sons of Adam are coheirs, and have equal right to liberty, and all other comforts of life*, which he would prove out of *Psalms 115:16*. *The Earth hath he given to the Children of Men*. True, but what is all this to the principle, to prove that all men have equal right to liberty, and all outward comforts of lie; which position seems to invert the order that God has set in the world, who has ordained different degrees and orders of men, some to be high and honorable, some to be low and despicable; some to be monarchs, kings, princes, and governors, masters and commanders, others to be subjects, and to be commanded; servants of sundry sorts and degrees, bound to obey; yea, some to be born slaves, and so to remain during their lives, as has been proved. Otherwise there would be a mere parity among men, contrary to that of the Apostle *1 Cor. 12 from the 13 to the 26 verse*, where he sets forth (by way of comparison) the different sorts and offices of the members of the body, indicating that they are all of use, but not equal, and of like dignity. So God has set different orders and degrees of men in the world, both in church and

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt taken from "Judge Saffin's Reply to Judge Sewall, 1701," "A Brief and Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet, Entitled, *The Selling of Joseph*," in George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 251.

commonweal. Now, if this position of parity should be true, it would then follow that the ordinary course of divine providence of God in the world should be wrong, and unjust (which we must not dare to think, much less to affirm) and all the sacred rules, precepts and commands of the Almighty which he has given the son of men to observe and keep in their respective places, orders and degrees, would be to no purpose; which unaccountably derogate from the divine wisdom of the most high, who has made nothing in vain, but has holy ends in all his dispensations to the children of men.

In the next place, this worthy gentleman makes a large discourse concerning the utility and convenience to keep the one, and inconvenience of the other; respecting white and black servants, which conduces most to the welfare and benefit of this province: which he concludes to be white men, who are in many respects to be preferred before blacks; who doubts that? Does it therefore follow, that it is altogether unlawful for Christians to buy and keep negro servants (for this is the thesis) but that those that have them ought in conscience to set them free, and so lose all the money they cost (for we must not live in any known sin) this seems to be his opinion; but it is a question whether it ever was the gentleman's practice? But if he could persuade the General Assembly to make an act, that all that have negroes, and do set them free, shall be reimbursed out of the public treasure, and that there shall be no more negroes brought into the country; 'tis probable that there would be more of his opinion; yet he would find it a hard talk to bring the country to consent thereto; for then the negroes must all be sent out of the country, or else the remedy would be worse than the disease; and it is to be feared that those negroes that are free, if there be not some strict course taken with them by authority, they will be a plague to this country.

*Again*, if it should be unlawful to deprive them that are lawful captives, or bondmen of their liberty for life being heathens; it seems to be more unlawful to deprive our brethren, of our own or other Christian nations of the liberty (though but for a time) by binding them to serve some seven, ten, fifteen, and some twenty years, which oft times proves for their whole life, as many have been; which in effect is the same in nature, though different in the time, yet this was allowed among the *Jews* by the law of God; and is the constant practice of our own and other Christian nations in the world: the which our author by his dogmatic assertions does condemn as irreligious; which is diametrically contrary to the rules and precepts which God has given the diversity of men to observe in their respective stations, callings, and conditions of life, as has been observed.

And to illustrate his assertion our author brings in by way of comparison the law of God against man stealing, on pain of death: intimating thereby, that buying and selling of negroes is a breach of that law, and so deserves death: a severe sentence: but herein he begs the question with a *caveat emptor*. For, in that very chapter there is a dispensation to the people of *Israel*, to have bond men, women and children, even of their own nation in some cases; and rules given therein to be observed concerning them; Verse the 4<sup>th</sup>. And in the before cited place, *Levit.* 25:44, 45, 46. Though the Israelites were forbidden (ordinarily) to make bond men and women of their own nation, but of strangers they might: the words run thus, verse 44. *Both thy Bond men, and they Bond maids which thou shalt have shall be of the Heathen, that are round about you: of them shall you Buy Bond men and Bond maids*, etc. See also, *1 Cor.* 12, 13. Whether we be bond or free, which shows in the times of the New Testament, there were bond men also, etc.

*In fine*, the sum of this long harangue, is no other, than to compare the buying and selling of negroes unto to the stealing of men, and the selling of *Joseph* by his brethren, which bears no proportion therewith, nor is there any congruity therein, as appears by the foregoing texts.

Our author does further proceed to answer some objections of his own framing, which he supposes some might raise.

Objection 1. *That these Blackamores are of the posterity of Cham, and therefore under the curse of slavery. Gen. 9:25, 26, 27.* The which the gentleman seems to deny, saying, *they were the seed of Canaan that were cursed, etc.*

*Answer.* Whether they were so or not, we shall not dispute: this may suffice, that not only the seed of *Cham* or *Canaan*, but any lawful captives of other heathen nations may be made bond men as has been proved.

Objection 2. *That the negroes are bought out of pagan countries into places where the gospel is preached.* To which he replies, *that we must not do evil that good may come of it.*

*Answer.* To which we answer, that it is no evil thing to bring them out of their own heathenish country, where they may have the knowledge of the true God, be converted and eternally saved.

Objection 3. *The Africans have wars one with another; our ships bring lawful captives taken in those wars.*

To which our author answers conjecturally, and doubtfully, *for ought we know*, that which may or may not be; which is insignificant, and proves nothing. He also compares the negro wars, one nation with another, with the wars between *Joseph* and his brethren. But where does he read of any such war? We read indeed of a domestic quarrel they had with him, they envied and hated *Joseph*; but by what is recorded, he was merely passive and meek as a lamb. The gentleman further adds, *That there is not any war but is unjust on one side, etc.* Be it so, what does that signify: We read of lawful captives taken in the wars, and lawful to be bought and sold without contracting the guilt of the *aggressors*; for which we have the example of *Abraham* before quoted; but if we must say while both parties warring are in the right, there would be no lawful captives at all to be bought; which seems to be ridiculous to imagine, and contrary to the tenor of Scripture, and all human histories on that subject.

Objection 4. *Abraham had servants bought with his money, and born in his house. Gen. 14:14.* To which our author answers, *until the circumstances of Abraham's purchase be recorded, no argument can be drawn from it.*

*Answer.* To which we reply, this is also dogmatic, and proves nothing. He further adds, *in the meantime charity obliges us to conclude, that he knew it was lawful and good.* Here the gentleman yields the case; for if we are in charity bound to believe *Abraham's* practice, in buying and keeping *slaves* in his house to be lawful and good: then it follows, that our imitation of him in this his moral action, is as warrantable as that of his faith; *who is the father of all them that believe. Rom. 4:16.*

In the close of all, our author quotes two more places of Scripture, *viz; Levit. 25:46 and Jer. 34, from the 8 to the 22 v.* To prove that the people of Israel were strictly forbidden the buying and selling one another for *slaves*: who questions that? And what is that to the case in hand? What a strange piece of logic is this? 'Tis unlawful for Christians to buy and sell one another for slaves. *Ergo*, it is unlawful to buy and sell negroes that are lawful captured heathens.

And after a serious exhortation to us all to love one another according to the command of Christ. *Math. 5:43, 44.* This worthy gentleman concludes with this assertion, *that these Ethiopians as black as they are, seeing they are the sons and daughters of the first Adam; the brethren and sisters of the second Adam, and the offspring of God; we ought to treat them with a respect agreeable.*

*Answer.* We grant it for a certain and undeniable verity, that all mankind are the sons and daughters of *Adam*, and the creatures of God: But it does not therefore follow that we are bound to love and respect all men alike; this under favor we must take leave to deny; we ought in charity, if we see our neighbor in want, to relieve them in a regular way, but we are not bound to give them so much of our estates, as to make them equal with ourselves, because they are our brethren the sons of *Adam*, no, not our own natural kinsmen: We are exhorted *to do good unto all, but especially to them who are of the household of faith, Gal. 6:10* And we are to love, honor and respect all men according to the gift of God that is in them: I may love my servant well, but my son better; charity begins at home, it would be a violation of common prudence, and a breach of good manners, to treat a prince like a peasant. And this worthy gentleman would deem himself much neglected, if we should show him no more deference than to an ordinary porter: and therefore these florid expressions, the sons and daughters of the first *Adam*, the brethren and sisters of the second *Adam*, and the offspring of God, seem to be misapplied to import

and insinuate, that we ought to tender pagan negroes with all love, kindness, and equal respect as to the best of men.

By all which it does evidently appear both by Scripture and reason, the practice of the people of God in all ages, both before and after the giving of the law, and in the times of the Gospel, that there were bond men, women and children commonly kept by holy and good men, and improved in service; and therefore by the command of God, *Lev. 25:44*, and their venerable example, we may keep bond men, and use them in our service still; yet with all condor, moderation and Christian prudence, according to their state and condition consonant to the word of God.

#### The Negro's Character

Cowardly and cruel are those blacks innate,  
Prone to revenge, imp of inveterate hate.  
He that exasperates them, soon espies  
Mischief and murder in their very eyes.  
Libidinous, deceitful, false and rude,  
The spume issue of ingratitude.  
The premises considered, all may tell,  
How near good Joseph they are parallel.