An Examination of Albert Barnes' Handling of the Bible in the Debate on Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America

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Abstract
Albert Barnes was an influential leader among New School Presbyterians in mid-nineteenth-century America. As a beloved pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and as a biblical scholar whose commentaries are still widely used today, Barnes undertook an exhaustive study of the Bible to address the foremost social issue of his day—slavery. After considering most passages in the Bible being used in the discussion, he realized that a conclusive argument could not be made, which was based exclusively on proof-texts. Barnes challenged those involved in the discussion not to ignore the Bible or its ability to provide answers to life’s difficult questions—an error made all too quickly in modern America—but to find an objective way to measure the validity of proposed applications of those proof-texts directly addressing slavery. Barnes’ chief contribution to the American slavery discussion was not merely his exhaustive study of the biblical texts directly addressing slavery. His hermeneutical method brought the discussion beyond the texts directly addressing slavery to a principle-driven approach as a necessary supplement to proof-text ethics. By suggesting that the application of proof-texts be measured against the primary principles of scripture, he found one means by which scripture could be objectively applied to the slavery discussion. In the end, Barnes would conclude that the practices essential to the perpetuation of the institution of slavery so greatly conflict with the primary principles of scripture (such as the “golden rule,” equality, the brotherhood of God’s family, spiritual growth, and God’s abhorrence of oppression), that if the sinful practices were to cease, all that would be left would be a toned-down form of employment. Barnes was convinced that if masters only knew and were sensitive to these primary principles of scripture, they would naturally emancipate their slaves. In the conclusion section, suggestions are made for further study on how the Bible can be used as an authoritative source of morality in modern discussions on civil rights and ethical issues such as racism, homosexuality, abortion, and human cloning.

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By the mid-19th century, America's westward expansion and the abolition movement provoked a great debate over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody Civil War. Though the Union victory freed the nation's four million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued to influence American history, from the Reconstruction era to the civil rights movement that emerged a century after emancipation. When Did Slavery Start? Slavery in America started in 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 African slaves ashore in the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. Throughout the 17th century, European s Although some prominent American writers were advocating the gradual abolition of slavery much earlier in the eighteenth century, the abolitionist movement in the U.S. was largely an outgrowth of the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century, which encouraged Northern Protestantism—especially those among the emerging middle classes—to assume a more active role in both religious and civic affairs. In 1705, Bishop William Fleetwood published in The Relative Duties of Parents and Children, Husbands and Wives, Masters and Servants, in which he cited St Paul's "slaves, be obedient to your masters" (Ephesians 6:8). He later preached that the liberty Albert of Prussia, whose wife was Danish and who was a member of the Polish.  The 17th century was at once the high era of Protestant systematic orthodoxy and the age when the first signs of its dissolution appeared. The axioms of the Reformation were worked out in a great and systematic body of doctrine, based on the notion that the Christian faith was best defined by its doctrines. While a student at Leipzig, he engaged in group Bible study and was one of the organizers of a collegium philobiblicum (assembly of Bible lovers), which was dedicated largely to the scholarly rather than devotional approach to the Scriptures.