

The Image of God and Immediate Emancipation: David Walker's Theological Foundation of Equality and the Rejection of White Supremacy*

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■ Abstract

In the 1820s it was predominantly Black abolitionists who opposed gradualist abolitionism and the concept of colonization, while, in general, White abolitionists opposed slavery, viewing it as seductive or as sin in itself, but did not want full emancipation for Blacks. Therefore, David Walker's *Appeal* from 1829 is a central document in that it calls for immediate and full emancipation as well as opposition to racism and White supremacy. This article argues that the shift in political aim of Black radical abolitionists correlates with an innovation in theological foundation. Walker grounds his quest for immediate and full emancipation in an egalitarian concept of *imago Dei*. It is this theological foundation that became influential in radical abolitionist discourse and was employed by Maria M. Stewart as well as William Lloyd Garrison. As a result of research on Walker's theological innovation, it comes to the fore that he most likely was influenced by Black Freemasonry, especially Prince Hall.

■ Keywords

abolitionism, David Walker, *imago Dei*, image of God, Black theology, Prince Hall Masons, *Walker's Appeal*, emancipation

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■ Introduction

After the First Emancipation, the growing communities of free Blacks in the North were confronted with the denial of their constitutional rights, increasing racism, the danger of kidnapping, and the threat of forced emigration to Africa.¹ As slavery in the North declined, segregation increased.² Most White abolitionist organizations did not accept Blacks as members. After the legal termination of the slave trade in 1807³ and the Missouri Compromise (1820), most White abolitionists supported gradualism or even colonization.⁴ Thus, Black abolitionists had to find other venues to fight slavery and White supremacy.⁵ These Black activists worked in the 1820s for abolition and full emancipation for all people of African descent by self-organization, pamphleteering, meetings, and lectures. Recent research gives ample evidence that these Black activists triggered the second wave of abolition and claimed immediatism before it became popular in the Garrisonian movement.⁶

Black abolitionists were attacking the underlying racism and the concept of White supremacy implicit in many concepts of gradualism and colonization in this period and were demanding full and equal rights for all Americans, paving the way for Garrisonian immediatism. While White abolitionists primarily addressed the White elites, Black abolitionists aimed at a broader public.⁷

As late as the second half of the eighteenth century, Christians, especially Quakers, initially objected to slave trade, condemning violence and the destruction of families as unjust and morally wrong. In addition, enslavement was seen by

¹ For the early abolitionist movement, see Paul J. Polgar, *Standard-Bearers of Equality: America's First Abolition Movement* (Williamsburg, VA: Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). For the impact of the Revolutionary War and American independence on abolitionist movements on both sides of the Atlantic, see Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Williamsburg, VA: Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

² See Donald M. Jacobs: "David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison: Racial Cooperation and the Shaping of Boston Abolition," in *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (ed. idem; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 1–20, at 6.

³ While the end of revolutionary abolition and the Atlantic slave trade led to a decline of abolitionist zeal in the US, it fueled the abolitionist fervor in the UK and especially contributed to the emergence of an international human rights regime; Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ Ben Wright interprets the discourse on slavery and abolition in the context of the emergence of national denominational organizations as a theological conflict about the primacy of purification or conversion. This is a helpful framework for understanding the developments delineated in this article. See Ben Wright, *Bonds of Salvation: How Christianity Inspired and Limited American Abolitionism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

⁵ For the understanding of Black abolitionism as opposed not only to slavery but also to White supremacy, see Beverly Eileen Mitchell: *Black Abolitionism: A Quest for Human Dignity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005) 101–21.

⁶ See Richard S. Newman: *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 86–106.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 86ff., 89ff. Joanna Brooks shows that the structure for this Black counterpublic already emerged at the end of the 18th cent.; see Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005) 67–92.

White Christian abolitionists as violating the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12), as leading to idleness and other moral wrongs, and seductive to sin.⁸ It was a decisive step, as Molly Oshatz has elaborated, that, in correlation with the emergence of evangelical and liberal theology, slavery itself was identified with sin.⁹ If slavery as such is sin, this would provoke the wrath of God against the slaveholders as well as the whole nation, which was ignorant and passive in regard to this blatant wrong. The goal was still not necessarily full equality of enslaved people of African descent, but rather, saving the souls of slaveholders and their entangled compatriots: “The friends of freedom were not always the friends of equality,” writes Ira Berlin.¹⁰ Oshatz further argues that the theological innovative potential of identifying slavery with sin had been long overlooked. In this article, I will argue that in the process of the radicalization of Black abolitionism in the 1820s, another theological concept, the metaphor of *imago Dei*, emerged as a fundamental egalitarian theological foundation for the equal humanity and political rights of all human beings. This, in turn, influenced radical immediatist abolitionism. This transformation of the theological discourse has been overlooked thus far—both in the work on abolitionism and in the development of theology during the nineteenth century.

For further argumentation, it is important to differentiate between five distinct paradigmatic understandings of the concept of *imago Dei*. The most widespread theological position is probably the Augustinian tradition that God’s image was lost or damaged by original sin. Despite differences in details, this unites Roman Catholic teaching with Martin Luther and John Calvin and their followers. It is obvious that in this perspective, the *imago Dei* could not be understood as grounding the equal dignity and rights of all human beings. The problem with this traditional view is that in the biblical account of Genesis there is no mention of the image of God being destroyed or damaged; actually, in Gen 9:6 the *imago Dei* is used as the foundation for the proscription of murder. Since this is much later than the account of the so-called fall of humankind in Gen 3, and also later than the narration of the flood, the argument that “original sin” affected the image is not sustainable.¹¹

The second position is the dynamic or perfectionist model. Here, the image is not understood as something definitely given in creation but as something that has

⁸ One classic and influential source for this argument is Anthony Benezet, *Observations on the enslaving, importing and purchasing of Negroes with some advice thereon extracted from [sic] the Yearly Meeting epistle of London for the present year. Also some remarks on the absolute necessity of self-denial, renouncing the world, and true charity for all such as sincerely desire to be our blessed Saviour’s disciples* (Germantown: Christopher Sower, 1759). See Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657–1761* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁹ Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Ira Berlin: *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018) 107. See also Mitchell, *Black Abolitionism*, 123.

¹¹ For the current *magnus consensus* in Old Testament exegesis, see Rainer Kessler, *Der Weg zum Leben. Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017) 118–21.

to be achieved through moral perfection or the emulation of Christ. Regarding this interpretation, it is important to note that the Genesis account is interpreted in the light of New Testament traditions where Christ is understood as the image of God and humans have to strive to become in his likeness.¹² There are severe problems with this concept. It alters the meaning of the Genesis account in order to accommodate the New Testament perspectives. Although it is necessary in Christian theology to integrate those different concepts systematically, it seems hermeneutically problematic to appropriate the meaning of the Jewish Holy Book and adjust it to New Testament theology. Rather, one has to deal with the fact that we are confronted with different theological models. Furthermore, in this model, only Christians are able to claim being created in God's image. Though this model is often used to support spiritual equality, it normally does not entail temporal or political equality.

The third model is even more exclusive. It denies that whole groups of humans are fully in the image of God. In church history, it was predominantly women who were excluded, but also excluded were people of color, on racist grounds, or people with disabilities.¹³ This is especially disturbing since Gen 1:27 explicitly includes women as bearers of the image. Both models two and three contradict the universality of Gen 1 and Gen 9. It is critical that in Gen 9, God's covenant is with all of humankind, and all human beings are created in the image of God.¹⁴

The fourth concept understands the creation in God's image as founding the universal equality and dignity of all human beings. This concept, also called functional understanding, assumes that the concept of the image of God must be understood in the context of ancient Near Eastern culture and religion. Based on such archaeological evidence as inscriptions on sculptures, it becomes clear that the kings (or sometimes priests) were perceived as the image of God represented on earth. Thus, the image of God does not refer to an ontological or qualitative likeness of human beings to God, but it is their function as representatives of God on earth. This is closely related to the *dominium terrae* and responsibility for stewardship.¹⁵ The decisive point of the Genesis account is that all human beings, explicitly men and women, are installed as the representatives of God. Thus, all are equal and all are equally bestowed with the dignity of kings. And this equality and dignity of all human beings, since they are given by God, cannot be lost or damaged, even though their bearers can be put into wretched circumstances.¹⁶

¹² John Frederic Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

¹³ See *ibid.*, 17–37.

¹⁴ Kessler, *Der Weg zum Leben*, 120ff.

¹⁵ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 199–210.

¹⁶ See Kessler, *Der Weg zum Leben*, 93–102; Michael Haspel, *Sozialethik in der globalen Gesellschaft. Grundlagen und Orientierung in protestantischer Perspektive* (Ethik—Grundlagen und Handlungsfelder 5; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011) 78–86. For a very condensed yet precise account of the exegetical insights, see Hendrik Bosman, "Humankind as Being Created in the 'Image of

The fifth model builds on the fourth. It interprets the *imago Dei* in a further step as the foundation of equal political rights.

I will argue (in section 1) that it is this fifth understanding of the concept of *imago Dei* that David Walker draws on as a theological foundation of universal equality and rights. In the second section, I will reconstruct the usage of the concept of *imago Dei* as an egalitarian concept in the immediatist abolitionist discourse after Walker, with special attention given to Maria W. Stewart and William Lloyd Garrison. When this genealogy has been established, I will address, in the third section, the question of the sources for Walker's employment of the metaphor of image of God; the surprising result of this investigation is that Walker most likely was influenced by Black Freemasonry, especially Prince Hall.¹⁷ In the concluding section, I will summarize the impact of this transformation of theological foundation on the development of radical abolitionism. In addition, I will show that Walker introduces the concept of *imago Dei* as the foundation of equality and (human) rights nearly a century and a half before this became prominent in European and North American mainstream theology.

■ *Walker's Appeal*, the Concept of *Imago Dei*, and the Quest for "Entire Emancipation"

Walker's Appeal of 1829–1830¹⁸ stands paradigmatically for Black abolitionism at this time. In a preamble and four articles, the Boston Black abolitionist David Walker not only provides a historical, political, and economic analysis of the system of enslavement, but he attacks it sharply on moral, political, and religious grounds. His *Appeal* became the most controversial and influential pamphlet pleading for immediate and full emancipation, including resistance, of the enslaved Blacks of the time, influencing the abolitionist discourse until Emancipation. However, due

God' in the Old Testament: Possible Implications for the Theological Debate on Human Dignity," *Scriptura* 105 (2010) 561–71.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, Dan McKanan's book *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) is not helpful in this endeavor. He uses the metaphor as an umbrella term for all kinds of positive anthropological concepts of 19th-cent. liberal theology. In many cases where he talks of the image of God, it is not detectable in the referenced sources. In the whole book he actually indicates only twelve passages where *imago Dei* and its derivatives and synonyms occur. In addition, he seems not to be aware of the usage by Walker and other early Black abolitionists. However, at least five of the twelve examples are from African Americans.

¹⁸ David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Boston: D. Walker, 1829; 3rd repr. ed. 1830; repr., ed. Peter P. Hinks; 6th impr.; University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2012). The 1st ed. was published in 1829, and by 1830 two more had followed. Quotations are from the 3rd ed., if not indicated otherwise. Page numbers are taken from the 6th impr. The exact date of publication is not known. Even though *Walker's Appeal* is dated September 28, 1829, it is not exactly clear when it was first available to the public. Since the said date is Walker's birthday, it might also have been an attribution and neither the date of production nor publication. In the *Appeal*, Walker cites a newspaper report from September 8, thus a publication in October is very likely, given the state of print technology available for an abolitionist pamphlet at this time.

to Walker's untimely death in 1830 and Garrison's increasing prominence, Walker somehow fell into oblivion and only more recent research has rediscovered his importance and impact. Even though the emphasis of my argument will be on the fourth article, it is necessary to reconstruct the argument in its entirety in order to understand the systematic significance of Walker's innovative use of the concept of *imago Dei*.

Already the title of the *Appeal* has to be read carefully: *Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but In Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*.¹⁹ It states explicitly that African Americans are, according to the claim of the Declaration of Independence, actually citizens, even though the majority of them are deprived of this status. In addition, Walker claims that all Blacks and people of color have human rights, and thus civil rights, as citizens in their respective political communities.²⁰ With this title Walker purports, contra-factually, universal equality of all human beings and their endowment with equal rights. Thus, the title epitomizes the central message: Blacks are equal to Whites and should object to and resist oppression.

In the preamble, Walker contextualizes the racially based American system of chattel slavery as more oppressive and exploitative than any other form of enslavement in history. He delineates economic avarice as the sole motivation for the enslavement of Black people. Therefore, the condition of enslaved Black people is the worst conceivable. Walker contrasts this "inhuman system of slavery" (5; italics in original) with the self-understanding of White slaveholders, "this enlightened and Christian nation" (3) and citizens of "this *Republican Land of Liberty*" (5; italics in original).²¹

¹⁹ *Walker's Appeal*, 1, which reproduces the cover of the 3rd ed.

²⁰ Corey Walker convincingly argues that African American Freemasons developed a *supranational* concept of citizenship. This is exactly what David Walker is drawing on with the full title of the *Appeal*. See Corey D. B. Walker, "Nation and Oration: The Political Language of African American Freemasonry in the Early Republic," in *All Men Free and Brethren: Essays on the History of African American Freemasonry* (ed. Peter P. Hinks and Stephen Kantrowitz; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013) 84–95. See also Melvin L. Rogers, "David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal," *Political Theory* 43 (2015) 208–33, who seems not to be aware of this Masonic concept. For the international dimension of Black abolitionism, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University, 2016) 339–47.

²¹ Katherine Gerbner argues convincingly that what Walker evaluates as hypocrisy actually is a systematic concept from the perspective of the White Christians enslaving Black people. Originally, the difference between Christians and non-Christians functions as justification for enslavement and, in turn, conversions were rejected. In the wake of missionary activities and revivalist Evangelicalism, the ideology had to be adjusted. Thus, theories of "Christian slavery" as justifications for enslaving converted enslaved Black people were developed. "Race" instead of religion became the defining feature, and attempts were made to justify slavery on biblical grounds. Thus, the ideology of Christian/Protestant supremacy preceded the concept of White supremacy. See Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

Although he mentions the Exodus motif in the foreword (2) and twice in the preamble (3, 6), the predominant theological concept is that God is a God of justice. God will ultimately redeem the enslaved and punish the oppressors (5–8). With regard to the further composition of the *Appeal*, the rhetorical question, “Is not God a God of justice to *all his creatures?*” (7; italics in original), is important to note.²² In addition to the common identity as American citizens, Walker claims a common Christian identity for the people of African descent, who have a very different ethnic background. Christianity serves to foster a common identity, which would be the presupposition for collective action.²³

The *Appeal*'s first article picks up the motifs introduced in the preamble and expands upon them more rigorously. The headline states the main thesis: Black people are not in a wretched situation because they are allegedly inferior but because the system of enslavement produces and preserves the disadvantaged position of enslaved Blacks. In addition, Walker makes clear that the whole system of North American slavery is based on racist assumptions. He argues that all other national and ethnic groups are “called *men*”²⁴ (9; italics in original), yet people of color are not seen as human beings. He further sustains this argument by historical comparison with the situation of enslaved people in Egypt, Greece (Sparta), and the Roman Empire to demonstrate that the status of enslaved people as human beings was not questioned (10).²⁵

He contrasts these practices with the racist assumptions that even Thomas Jefferson employed in his notorious *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It is Walker's central intention to convince his “brethren” that not only slavery but also the racist discourse sustaining the power structure of the institution and White supremacy themselves must be opposed. He directly addresses his “brethren,” asking for their confirmation of their full equality as human beings and urging them to unite and take action. In addition to the historical argument, he refers to religious justifications. God is a God of justice. Christ is the only master. By this token, he interweaves the political argument with Christian exhortation and is able to address the cultural

²² That the *Appeal* is composed with a rhetorical strategy is emphasized also by Rogers. However, his reflections on the form of an appeal do not seem to me to be equally helpful (Rogers, “David Walker,” 210, 215–21).

²³ See Norbert Finzsch, “David Walker and the Fight against Slavery,” *Zetesis* 13 (2014) 1–21; Makungu M. Akinyela, “Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos,” *JBS* 33 (2003) 255–80.

²⁴ In my understanding, in Walker's *Appeal*, “men” can denote “males” as well as “human beings” in a generic sense. In this case and context, I would translate it as “human beings.” On other occasions, especially in the context of the concept of “manhood,” the meaning of maleness is important. Cf. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, “The Affirmation of Manhood: Black Garrisonians in Antebellum Boston,” in *Courage and Conscience* (ed. Jacobs), 127–53, at 133–38.

²⁵ For Walker's sources of his historical accounts throughout the *Appeal*, see Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) 181–93. Cf. Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Responsibility: David Walker and Ethical Prophecy* (Voices of the African Diaspora; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003) 75–128.

background of larger Black audiences, in order to confirm “that we are MEN, as well as other people” (18).²⁶ He finishes this article with the conclusion that “whites have always been unjust” (19) and that he hopes and prays that God will transform them.²⁷

“Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance” is both the title and the main theme of the second article. Walker expounds on the fact that it is the system of enslavement that limits the access to education for the enslaved, and not their supposed inferiority, as racists argue.

In the wake of several examples, he introduces two very important insights to his readers: The first is “that your full glory and happiness, shall never be fully consummated, but with the *entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world*” (32; italics in original). It is the first occurrence of the concept of “entire emancipation” in the *Appeal*. Walker was not arguing against slavery as an evil (among others), but, rather, trying to establish the foundation for the full equality of all human beings. Thus, the mission is not merely to end slavery but to emancipate the enslaved and free Black people with full civil or human rights, respectively, all over the world. This is what Garrison then would popularize using the slogan of “immediate and full emancipation.”

The second important thesis is that enslaved and free Blacks must themselves take action in order to urge “entire emancipation.” This is theologically grounded in terms of the Arminian²⁸ understanding of the cooperation of human beings with God with regard to salvation and redemption: “But O my brethren! I say unto you again, you must go to work and prepare the way of the Lord” (32). While the earlier dominant position was that God will finally redeem the enslaved Blacks and reward them in “heaven,” but that they would have to endure the oppression until then (“otherworldliness”), the spread of evangelical Protestantism during the Second Great Awakening among Black people enabled a more active stance and

²⁶ In this context with the reference to “other people,” it seems clear that “men” here denotes “human beings.” The importance of Walker’s claim of equal humanness is even evident in his typography; see Marcy J. Dinius, “Look!! Look!!! at This!!!!”: The Radical Typography of David Walker’s *Appeal*,” *PMLA* 126 (2011) 55–72.

²⁷ Here and throughout the *Appeal*, it is obvious that, for Walker, the separation of conversion from purification is obsolete. In his Arminian perspective, purification is necessarily interwoven with salvation. He explicitly rejects the conversionist project for Africa (39). In the words of William L. Andrews: “At best, conversion sacralizes the slave’s yoke”; William L. Andrews, “Daniel Coker, David Walker, and the Politics of Dialogue with Whites in Early Nineteenth-Century African American Literature,” in *African American Literature in Transition, 1800–1830* (ed. Jasmine Nichole Cobb; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2021) 44–70, at 63. See Wright, *Bonds of Salvation*, 135–37.

²⁸ See Ava Chamberlain, “The Theology of Cruelty: A New Look at the Rise of Arminianism in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *HTR* 85 (1992) 335–56; Roger Anstey, “Slavery and The Protestant Ethic,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 6 (1979) 157–72; Anne C. Loveland, “Evangelicalism and ‘Immediate Emancipation’ in American Antislavery Thought,” *The Journal of Southern History* 32 (1966) 172–88. It is striking that in these accounts no attention is paid to contributions by Blacks themselves to the cause of abolition. See also Mitchell, *Black Abolitionism*, 128–30.

the biblical justification of various kinds of resistance. Walker provides nothing less: a biblical foundation for the resistance to enslavement and the justification for full equality of all human beings against White supremacy, which is expressed in Walker's repeated assertion: "We are Men!"

Walker's central thesis in the third article states that European Christians falsified the Gospel by kidnapping and enslaving African people in the Americas (37–38).²⁹ Especially in North America, they withheld the Gospel from Black people³⁰ and brutally suppressed the religious and spiritual practices of enslaved people, while at the same time fostering foreign missions (39).

Against this background, he rejects the teachings of White clergy, who justify enslavement and preach to the enslaved people that they should be submissive to their masters. Quoting from Acts 10:35, he proclaims, "But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (39). In addition, he refers to the Golden Rule and reiterates that God is a "God of armies and justice" (40).

Even though he does not once signify slavery as a sin, it is clear that he understands it to be so evil that God will finally intervene and punish the wrongdoers. By evoking apocalyptic imagery from the book of Revelation, he exclaims: "But Oh Americans! Americans!! I warn you in the name of the Lord, (whether you will hear, or forbear,) to repent and reform, or you are ruined!!!" (42). It is important to note that Walker obviously addresses White Americans here. His intended readers, however, are African Americans. By using direct speech and addressing the oppressors in the second person, the message is much more emotional and captivating.³¹

Then he resumes the topic of the biblical foundation of (spiritual) equality by quoting the Great Commission in Matt 28, whereby "all nations" are supposed to receive the Gospel. Walker argues that there is not the "slightest degree of distinction" (44). The theological argument reaches the climax with his rhetorical question: "Did not God make us all as it seemed best of himself?" (45). In this way, he already hints at the concept of *imago Dei*, which he introduces later.

In the fourth article Walker addresses the concept of colonization. He argues that forced expatriation of free Blacks is a scheme to preserve and even intensify the exploitation of the enslaved Blacks.

In addition to the theological argument that God is just and will deliver the oppressed Black people, Walker introduces the concept that Black people cannot belong to a White master because all Christians belong to the Holy Ghost (51). It is clear that in this last article, Walker intensifies his arguments. In previous

²⁹ Though Walker's account is historically not totally accurate, his argument is still convincing. See *Walker's Appeal*, 51 ed. n., 119–20.

³⁰ Also, Walker's claim that Judaism is a proselyting religion is not accurate (39).

³¹ This is one of the passages where it is most obvious that the style of the *Appeal* strongly resembles Black preaching culture. See Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 193–95.

sections he argued that God *will* redeem the Blacks. Now he states “that God has *commenced* a course of exposition among the Americans, and the glorious and heavenly work will continue to progress until they learn to do justice” (57; italics added). Now it is made clear to his readers that redemption will not be a distant eschatological event but is imminent.

Even though he concedes that Canada or Haiti could be viable options for emigration, he insists on the fact that African Americans are Americans (58).³²

Walker digresses from his own argument and inserts excerpts from a letter from Bishop Richard Allen as proof of his own position on colonization. Interestingly, Allen does not provide specific theological arguments. Walker draws on Allen’s ecclesiastical authority, not only among Methodists, and on his reputation as a Black civic leader far beyond Philadelphia, but not necessarily on his theological critique of the enslavement.

This is striking since Walker then delineates biblical arguments against the alleged inferiority of people of color. His main point is that, according to biblical tradition, all human beings are descendants of Noah (Gen 6–9), and thus Blacks cannot have a different status than Whites (59–63).

All this leads up to the theological and rhetorical climax. Walker grounds the “sameness” of all human beings theologically in the concept of *imago Dei*:

Man, in all ages and all nations of the earth, is the same. Man is a peculiar creature—he is the image of his God, though he may be subjected to the most wretched condition upon earth, yet the spirit and feeling which constitute the creature, man, can never be entirely erased from his breast,³³ because the God who made him after his own image, planted it in his heart; he cannot get rid of it. The whites knowing this, they do not know what to do. (64)³⁴

As we have seen, Walker’s emphasis is on the equality and dignity of African Americans as human beings. Thus, he does not denounce slavery as sin,³⁵ but in

³² This conviction seems to explain why Walker addresses his *Appeal* to the “coloured citizens of the world.” As we will see shortly, he assumes that all human beings have human rights, which entitle them to citizenship and civil rights. See Rogers, “David Walker,” 208–33.

³³ It is interesting to note that Walker attributes the danger of the erasure of the image to the impact of enslavement and not, as in orthodox Protestantism, to original sin.

³⁴ Thomas Poole identifies the same passage as central for Walker, though without addressing the *imago Dei* concept; see Thomas G. Poole, “What Country Have I? Nineteenth-Century African-American Theological Critiques of the Nation’s Birth and Destiny,” *JR* 72 (1992) 533–48, at 537. Also, Hinks (*Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 215) quotes this passage without addressing the theological significance. Likewise, Beverly Mitchell cites exactly this passage without paying attention to the *imago Dei* concept (*Black Abolitionism*, 61).

³⁵ It is most significant that Walker does not use the term “sin” once, given that this, along with the Golden Rule, was the theological locus classicus in the abolitionist discourse of the time. Walker mentions the Golden Rule, I assume, because it presupposes reciprocity. It is interesting to note that, for Maria W. Stewart, who was close to Walker and heavily draws on his argumentation in her own oratory and writing, sin was a central theological theme. Notwithstanding, Hinks, in his groundbreaking book on Walker and the *Appeal*, seems to suggest that Walker uses the concept of sin, which is, as we have just stated, not accurate. Where Hinks uses “sin” —with regard to the

his argument, enslavement of any human beings is wrong since it violates their freedom, equality, and rights.

In addition, this seems to be a theological substantiation for the “all men are created equal” of the Declaration of Independence. Against the background of religious revival, Walker offers proof of the equality and dignity of all human beings, which cannot be ignored by Whites: “The whites knowing this. . . .” In his annotation of the second edition of the *Appeal*, he makes explicitly clear that the image of God implies dignity: “But glory, honour and praise to Heaven’s King that the sons and daughters of Africa, will in spite of all the opposition of their enemies, stand forth in all the dignity and glory that is granted by the Lord to his creature man” (64).³⁶ By the same token, all human beings are endowed with “rights as men” (inter alia 65).

It is not just the first—and only—passage in the *Appeal* in which the concept of *imago Dei* is employed, but it is also, to my knowledge, the first occurrence in the whole of American abolitionist literature of the early nineteenth century where the concept of the image of God is used not only as the foundation of equality and dignity but also of political rights (as outlined in model 5 above)³⁷—at least in the most prominent printed documents that are available to us.³⁸

wrongdoing of Whites—one would actually expect Walker to employ it, but he does not. See Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 226. Hinks also uses the concept “children of God” to describe Walker’s position (225). Here again, Walker does not use this term once in the *Appeal*.

³⁶ *Walker’s Appeal*, annotation, added in the 2nd ed. See “Editor’s Note: The Three Editions of the *Appeal*,” in *Walkers’s Appeal*, xlvii. Here again, it is obvious that “man” comprises male and female (“sons and daughters”). Even though this is his only explicit employment of the term “dignity” in the appeal, it is connoted in Walker’s concept of “being men” as humanness.

³⁷ Although, the phrase “image of God” is frequently used by William Ellery Channing, he does so in a strictly perfectionist and not an egalitarian sense (as in the second usage introduced above). See, inter alia, William Ellery Channing, “A Discourse at the Ordination of the Rev. Frederick A. Farley (‘Likeness to God’),” in *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.* (ed. Michael Warner; New York: Library of America, 1999) 551–71. Even in his abolitionist writings, Channing purports racist and White supremacist positions; see Channing, *Slavery* (Boston: James Munroe, 1835). The same applies to Jonathan Edwards, who even supported slavery and was a slave owner.

³⁸ As always, we cannot know if the concept of *imago Dei* was used in oratory or even in print of which we do not have knowledge. In spite of extensive research for this project, I am far from claiming that I checked all possible sources. I found one interesting parallel to Walker. The Scottish abolitionist theologian Andrew Mitchell Thomson uses the concept of *imago Dei* once, also in 1829, to ground the universal equality of all human beings (Andrew M. Thomson, *Slavery, Not Sanctioned, but Condemned, by Christianity* [England, 1829] 8). Since we did not find any reference to Thomson either in *Freedom’s Journal* or in *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, it seems very unlikely that Walker was aware of this text. It is, rather, proof that British and American abolitionism radicalized in the same period. I found two texts in which the concept of *imago Dei* is employed against slavery, but not connected with the claim for equal rights and immediate emancipation (model 4): see David Rice, *Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy* (Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1792). Though there were at least two more editions, it seems that this aspect of his argument was not perceived in the debates following 1807; John Caldwell, “Address: Of the Committee Appointed by the Tenth Annual Convention of the Manumission Society of Tennessee, to the Different Judicatures of the Church of Christ,” *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* V/5, (Whole No. 48), February 1825,

It is explicitly a theistic argument. This could be seen as an addition, or maybe an explication, of the partly deistic and liberal language of the Declaration of Independence and so appeal to a revivalist cultural context. Walker thus interweaves the spiritual egalitarianism of evangelical Protestantism and the political egalitarianism of the Declaration of Independence and natural rights tradition. If Blacks bear the image of God, they are equal before God; in turn, they must be equal before the law.³⁹ In addition, Walker combines this foundation of equality with the appeal to oppressed Black people for resistance.⁴⁰ The singular aspects of this *mélange* are not Walker's invention, and he might have encountered them in the abolitionist discourse,⁴¹ yet the combination and the argumentative and rhetorical vitality, as well as its reception, make the *Appeal* an outstanding text.

It is important to note that, for Walker, Blacks and Whites do not have to be enemies: "We are all in the world together!!" (64).⁴² His ideal would be a society in which Blacks and Whites could live with mutual respect.⁴³ Yet, both Whites and Blacks have to change, Whites by ceasing to oppress their fellow Christians and citizens, and Blacks by giving up submission and by resisting and improving themselves.⁴⁴

The *Appeal* could end at this point (67). The climax was reached with Walker's theological and political foundation of full equality and the consequent quest for entire emancipation. Yet, he continues with an "addition" (68–82) in which he not only epitomizes the four articles but intensifies them rhetorically in a specific form of an African American Jeremiad combining prophetic and deliberative elements: "Walker's text uses the prophetic form to enlighten his audience, but it is tilted in a democratic direction."⁴⁵ The second, more emotional climax is when he cites first a

73–76, at 75, <https://archive.org/details/geniusofuniversa48balt/page/n1/mode/2up>.

³⁹ See Burrow, *God and Human Responsibility*, 120–28. Burrow emphasizes the significance of Walker's usage of the image of God. Yet, he seems to interpolate more of his own concept of personhood and *imago Dei* into Walker than can be found in the *Appeal*. Nevertheless, Burrow's emphasis on the importance of the *imago Dei* concept in the *Appeal* is totally in line with my analysis and argumentation.

⁴⁰ See Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 196–99.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, 173–95.

⁴² See also *Walker's Appeal*, 73: "Treat us then like men, and we will be your friends."

⁴³ Thus, I agree with Peter Hinks, that the tendency to Black nationalism in Walker is overemphasized; Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 249. See also Kristin Waters, who labels Walker's (and Maria Stewart's) position "Black Revolutionary Liberalism"; Kristin Waters, "Crying Out for Liberty: Maria W. Stewart and David Walker's Black Revolutionary Liberalism," *Philosophia Africana* 15 (2013) 35–60, at 36.

⁴⁴ See Andrews, "Daniel Coker," 56–61.

⁴⁵ Rogers, "David Walker," 226. However, Rogers seems to perceive a tension between the form of the Jeremiad and political deliberation, which I would not necessarily agree with. There are some similarities to Martin Luther King's applications of the form of Jeremiad. Cf. David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990; rev. and exp. ed., 2005). For Walker, see also Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 193–95; Finzsch, "David Walker," 11.

prayer and then the Declaration of Independence at length, followed by quotations from popular prayer books. By proving that freedom and equality is what the biblical tradition intends, Walker tries to convince the addressees of the *Appeal*, his brethren and sisters, that their political claims are legitimate. He thus conflates the gospel of political liberalism with the gospel of evangelical Protestantism and justifies Black resistance biblically.⁴⁶ This approach will prove decisive for the so-called second wave of abolitionism.⁴⁷ We will see that the transformation of the political approach of abolitionism coincides with changes in the theological discourse.

■ Maria W. Stewart, William Lloyd Garrison, the *Imago Dei*, and the Quest for Immediate and Full Emancipation in Black and White Abolitionism

It is noteworthy that Maria Stewart, who lived for some time in the same house in Boston as David Walker and who was well acquainted with Walker's work, used the metaphor of *imago Dei* as the theological foundation of dignity (honor), equality, and freedom in 1831:

Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect. He hath made you to have dominion over the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, and the fish of the sea. He hath crowned you with glory and honor; hath made you but a little lower than the angels; and, according to the Constitution of these United States, he hath made all men free and equal.⁴⁸

The function of the theological argument is clear. It starts with the statement that God has created all human beings, including those with a "sable hue," in

⁴⁶ For the tradition of biblical justification of Black resistance, see Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 47–50. Both the emotionalism and the biblical language are even more striking if one compares the *Appeal* with the address Walker delivered to the Massachusetts General Colored Association in 1828. Though the content of his argumentation is nearly identical, the language and rhetoric are quite different ("David Walker Addresses the Massachusetts General Colored Association 1828," in *Walker's Appeal*, 85–89).

⁴⁷ Even though Walker draws on arguments and insights that were circulated in the Black abolitionist discourse in the 1820s, a comparison with the Ethiopian Manifesto, which was published the same year, shows the uniqueness of Walker's work; Robert Alexander Young, "Ethiopian Manifesto," in *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790–1860* (ed. Richard Newman et al.; New York: Routledge, 2001) 85–89.

⁴⁸ Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality. The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build. Productions From the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart [sic], Widow of the Late James W. Stewart [sic]," in *Early Negro Writing 1760–1837* (ed. Dorothy Porter; Boston: Beacon, 1971) 460–71, at 461. See also Maria W. Stewart, "Meditations, Mediation X, Prayer," in *Spiritual Narratives* (ed. Sue E. Houchins; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 23–63, at 42, where she uses the term but not with an egalitarian meaning. Kristin Waters explicitly recognizes the use of the concept of *imago Dei*, yet seems unaware of its significance; Waters, "Crying Out for Liberty," 42.

God's image. Thus, all human beings are bestowed with reason and intellect and have dominion over creation. This theological argument for universal equality is then connected with the guarantee of rights in the Declaration of Independence.⁴⁹ By this token, the theological argument of *imago Dei* explicates the "all men are created equal" of the Declaration, making clear that *all* beings with a human face are bestowed with equal rights. The argument is aimed not only against the enslavement of Black people but also against racist oppression of free Blacks, and against racism and White supremacy in general.

As in Walker's work, the concept of *imago Dei*, with this strong egalitarian meaning, was only employed once in Stewart's published oeuvre. However, this text was advertised in *The Liberator*⁵⁰ and was printed as a pamphlet and in Stewart's collection of works. As the first American woman speaking to mixed audiences of women and men, Blacks and Whites, and as the first African American woman addressing the issue of women's rights, her work—and more specifically her vital rhetoric, rich with biblical metaphors, which merged biblical foundations and political argument—was very influential, especially on African American women preachers and orators.⁵¹

After Walker's death, Maria Stewart became a close associate of William Lloyd Garrison. Thus, it is striking that, at the time of his conversion from gradualism and colonization to immediatism, Garrison commences using the theological concept of *imago Dei* to express full equality and to sustain the quest for immediate and full emancipation.

In his famous "Address at Park Street Church" of 1829,⁵² Garrison, though already demanding equal rights for all (5/81), favors gradualism and even calls for support or establishment of auxiliary colonization societies (10/86).⁵³ His main

⁴⁹ The wording indicates that Stewart refers to the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution of the United States. See Waters, "Crying Out for Liberty," 42.

⁵⁰ See Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principle of Morality," in *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer; Essays and Speeches* (ed. Marilyn Richardson; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 28–42.

⁵¹ See Marilyn Richardson, "'What If I am a Woman?' Maria W. Stewart's Defense of Black Women's Political Activism," in *Courage and Conscience* (ed. Jacobs), 191–206. How the usage of the concept of the image of God impacted her stand for women's rights would have to be studied in more detail. See Waters, "Crying Out for Liberty," 42. For the intersection of "race," class, and gender as a challenge for Black women abolitionists, see Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992; repr. 1993) 1–11. For the history of the conflict about women's role in the abolitionist movement and the emerging women's rights movement, see Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 266–98.

⁵² William Lloyd Garrison, "Garrison's First Anti-slavery Address in Boston: Address at Park Street Church, Boston, July 4, 1829, in *Old South Leaflets* 180 (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1907) 1–12/77–88. Interestingly enough, Garrison dates the Park Street address in his *Thoughts on African Colonization* to 1828! Since the book appeared in 1832, it seems rather unlikely that he was not able to remember it correctly. See William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832) 3.

⁵³ For Garrison's gradualist and colonization views at this time, see Hinks's introduction to *Walker's Appeal*, xliii; Jacobs, "David Walker," 9. Though Mayer convincingly states in his biography

argument for abolition is the promise of the Declaration of Independence that all human beings are created equal and are endowed with human rights. In addition, he employs the theological argument of the Golden Rule, from which he deduces “the right of the free States to demand a gradual abolition of slavery” (6/82).⁵⁴ Though he still accepts gradualism and colonization at this time, his opposition to slavery is already firm: “Slavery is strictly a national sin” (10/86). Furthermore, he sustains the claim for freedom with reference to the biblical motif of Exodus.

During that summer, in the wake of his fourth of July address, Garrison became more critical of gradualism and colonization. It is crystal clear that the Black abolitionist position greatly influenced Garrison. Boston’s Black abolitionists challenged him after his fourth of July speech. Even though he never met Walker, he probably was familiar with the arguments in this context, which resembled the position Walker would publish only weeks later. In his editorial statement “To the Public” on September 2, 1829, Garrison revoked his position on gradualism and colonization and henceforth, in the monthly periodical *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, supported immediatism—differing from its editor, Benjamin Lundy.⁵⁵ In the first issue of *The Liberator*, Garrison declares a “full and unequivocal recantation” of his position on gradualism, which he had held in the Park Street Church address, then in full knowledge of Walker’s *Appeal*, which he reviewed critically a week later, distancing himself from violent means but not denouncing Walker.⁵⁶

Thenceforth, Garrison fully opposed colonization as a collective concept and threw his full weight behind immediate emancipation and full rights for all African Americans. It has been argued that this conversion might have been facilitated by the need to secure support from the Black community for his abolitionist newspaper project, *The Liberator*. Garrison was, without doubt, influenced by Walker’s perspective, and he echoed Walker’s words in the early phase of *The Liberator*, even though he was troubled by Walker’s supposedly aggressive language. Though

of Garrison that Garrison based his quest for abolition on equal rights, Garrison seems to downplay his support for gradualism and colonization in this address. Cf. Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998; repr. New York: Norton, 2008) 60–68. Page numbers from the reprinted edition. Manisha Sinha emphatically calls Garrison’s address an “abolitionist jeremiad,” but confirms that his principled rejection of colonization had still to be developed (Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 215).

⁵⁴ See also Garrison, “Garrison’s First Anti-slavery Address,” 9/85.

⁵⁵ Elisabeth Heyrick’s pamphlet *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition*, originally from 1824 and reprinted several times, influenced Garrison. He adopted the term “immediatism” from her. See Mayer, *All on Fire*, 70; Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 179–82.

⁵⁶ *The Liberator* 1.2 (8 January 1831) 6. Newman suggests that Garrison read *Walker’s Appeal* in 1830 when he returned to Boston (*Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 114). I find it most unlikely that someone like Garrison did not have access to the *Appeal* immediately after its first publication. Yet Jacobs reports that Garrison read the *Appeal* in Baltimore in 1830 before returning to Boston (Jacobs, “David Walker,” 14).

Walker's name disappeared from *The Liberator* after May 1831, the influence of his argument continued.⁵⁷

In June 1831, Garrison toured several cities giving an important speech to promote immediate and full emancipation. He printed the essence of this talk in the same year, and the pamphlet was widely distributed. The theological argument in 1831 is significantly different from the Park Street Church address. Garrison organizes his 1831 talk into nine sections. The first section provides the theological foundation for the claims of immediate emancipation and equal rights for African Americans:

A man should value himself at a high price—not because he happens to be of this or that color, or rich, or accomplished, or popular, or physically powerful—but because he is created in the image of God; because he stands but a little lower than the angels; because he has a spiritual essence, which is destined to live forever; because he is capable of exerting a moral power, which is infinitely superior to animal strength; and because he lives in a world of trial and temptation, and needs the sympathy and aid of his fellow men.⁵⁸

In this talk, Garrison begins with the biblical foundation rather than with the Declaration of Independence. It seems that the move from gradualism and the scheme of colonization to immediate and full emancipation required other arguments. While the Declaration might be understood in merely deistic terms, the theological argument of slavery as sin and the reference to the Golden Rule were mostly associated with the quest for gradual abolition but not necessarily with the endowment of full and equal rights. The egalitarian *imago Dei* concept emerges in a time when, on the one hand, racist oppression and the infringement on the rights of free Black people increased, and, on the other hand, free Black people, especially in the North, not only struggled for equal rights for themselves but also demanded immediate and full emancipation. The image of God metaphor gives the “all men are created equal” of the Declaration of Independence an inclusive and universal interpretation. Since the Constitution and the political and legal culture of the United States accepted that there are human beings who are not seen as “men,” based on racist assumptions, the *imago Dei* concept sustains the biblical understanding that all human beings are equally images of God and thus endowed with dignity and rights. Maybe one can enslave God's creatures, but one cannot oppress human beings bearing God's image.

Even though Garrison uses the phrase “image of God” here in the context of encouraging self-respect, he employs it with an egalitarian meaning. It is the only occurrence in this text, and while Garrison does not use it very frequently, it is striking that it appears for the first time, and very prominently, in Garrison's

⁵⁷ See, inter alia, Jacobs, “David Walker,” 13–17.

⁵⁸ William Lloyd Garrison, *An address, delivered before the free people of color, in Philadelphia, New-York, and other cities, during the month of June, 1831* (Boston: Stephen Foster, 1831; 2nd repr. 1831) 5. Cf. Mayer, *All on Fire*, 116f.

published work at this point and is used rarely but continuously during the following years.

Thus, the claim made here is more qualitative than quantitative. The metaphor of *imago Dei* is a strictly egalitarian, nonracist, theological concept establishing the dignity and equal rights of all human beings. It begins to be used in the late 1820s by Black abolitionists, most prominently by David Walker to sustain the quest for immediate and full emancipation of and equal rights for Black people. In the 1830s, it occurs more often in the immediatist discourse also employed by White activists, starting with Garrison.

Garrison identifies, not the difference between gradualism and immediatism, but rather (as Henry Mayer convincingly analyzes⁵⁹), the difference between racism and egalitarianism as the core of the conflict between colonization (as promoted by the leadership of the American Colonization Society [ACS] at this time)⁶⁰ and radical abolitionism. This is the context in which the image of God metaphor is prominently used.⁶¹

From the early 1830s on, the concept of *imago Dei* occurs more often and can be traced throughout the abolitionist movement up to the 1860s. An anonymous writer,⁶² a “Freeman of Colour in Charleston,”⁶³ George Thompson,⁶⁴ Sarah M. Grimké,⁶⁵ as well as Angelina E. Grimké⁶⁶ and, later, Alexander Crummell,⁶⁷ and many more in the meantime had used it frequently as the foundation of universal equality and (human) rights. The metaphor of the image of God was also included

⁵⁹ See Mayer, *All on Fire*, 141.

⁶⁰ For the somewhat different concepts of and motivation for emigration/colonization, see Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and Wright, *Bonds of Salvation*, 86–171.

⁶¹ However, Garrison does not include the concept of *imago Dei* in the *Declaration and Sentiments of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (AASS, 1833), which he drafted. Interestingly enough, the *Declaration and Sentiments* states: “Our fathers were never slaves,” alluding to the American Revolution against perceived British oppression. Yet, several African Americans were present, whose forbearers and some themselves endured enslavement. In addition, it is especially surprising, since Garrison’s maternal grandparents came as indentured servants to America. See Mayer, *All on Fire*, 3, 173–77.

⁶² “To the People of Color,” *The Liberator* 1.7 (12 February 1831) 25–28, at 25.

⁶³ *Opinions of a Freeman of Colour in Charleston, 1832*, in *Early Negro Writing* (ed. Porter), 303–7, at 305.

⁶⁴ George Thompson, “The Substance of a Speech, 13.08.1832,” in *Lectures of George Thompson* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1836) 37–73, at 73; idem, “The Substance of a Lecture, 20.09.1832,” in *Lectures*, 153–72, at 162.

⁶⁵ Sarah M. Grimké, *An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States* (New York, 1836).

⁶⁶ Angelina E. Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836) 3, 25.

⁶⁷ Alexander Crummell, “Rising with Christ,” in idem, *The Greatness of Christ and Other Sermons* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1882) 71–85, at 73, 84–85.

in documents of antislavery organizations.⁶⁸ In particular, Frederick Douglass⁶⁹ used the concept over the long span of his activism.

■ Sources of Walker's Theological Approach: Evangelical Black Freemasonry and the Concept of *Imago Dei*

If one looks for possible sources of Walker's transformation of theological discourse on enslavement and abolition,⁷⁰ one might think of his early encounter with Denmark Vesey's movement, or his exposure to Richard Allen's Methodism in Philadelphia, or perhaps of William Ellery Channing, who preached at the Federal Street Church during Walker's years in Boston.⁷¹ Yet, it is unlikely that Walker was influenced by Channing, since the latter opposed immediate and full emancipation—as mentioned above—based on racist assumptions.

A much more likely source is Bishop Richard Allen. Walker not only quoted him in the *Appeal* and was himself affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but he most likely came in contact with Allen's activism in Philadelphia. There is no indication, however, that the use of the *imago Dei* concept in the *Appeal* is inspired specifically by Allen, since neither in Allen's famous *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours* nor in other material reviewed is there a single mention of the concept of *imago Dei* as the foundation of the equality of all human beings and as the bedrock for the critique of slavery.⁷²

⁶⁸ "Proceedings of a General Meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society, 15.05.1830," *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* 3.13 (June 1830) 243; "Declaration of Sentiments," in *Proceedings of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Convention: Held at Putnam, on the Twenty-Second, Twenty-Third, and Twenty-Fourth of April, 1835* (Ohio: Meaumont and Wallace, 1835) 5–8, at 6; "Declaration of Sentiments of the State Anti-Slavery Convention at Utica," *Proceedings of the New York Anti-Slavery Convention, Held at Utica, October 21, and New York Anti-Slavery State Society, Held at Peterboro, October 22, 1835* (Utica, NY, 1835) 11–13, at 11; *Fourth Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1837) at 11, 43.

⁶⁹ Between just 1847 and 1859, there are at least 16 occurrences in his printed works. See Daniel A. Morris, "Liberated from the Liberator: Frederick Douglass and Garrisonian Political Theology," *Political Theology* 18 (2017) 423–40.

⁷⁰ Though theologians like Gregory of Nyssa already argued in the 4th cent. that enslavement was against the will of God, since all human beings are created in the image of God, this position did not prevail in church history. See Gregory of Nyssa, "4th Homily," in *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* (ed. Stuart G. Hall; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993) 72–84.

⁷¹ Hinks mentions several publications preceding Walker, in which themes and topics were addressed that also are part of the *Appeal*. Yet, in most of them the concept of *imago Dei* is not employed. See Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 173–92.

⁷² Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833). In addition, Richard Newman does not refer to either of the concepts in his currently authoritative study on Allen: Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). Since Allen is the most influential Black theologian of his time, one could conclude that the concept was not common

Denmark Vesey is regularly mentioned with respect to the theological and political background of David Walker. Both lived at the same time in Charleston, with a strong, free Black population, and most likely they belonged to the same church.⁷³ Even though there are some aspects that might resemble the biblical motifs presumably employed by Vesey, these are not related to questions of dignity and equality, as is the *imago Dei* concept. For Vesey, biblical accounts of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan were central.⁷⁴ He identified the people of African descent in the United States not only with the children of Israel who finally were delivered from slavery by God, but also with the violent appropriation of the land of the Canaanites.⁷⁵ In typological correspondence Vesey concluded that slavery should not only be abolished but that the people of African descent should have the divine mandate to kill the White inhabitants and take over the land, as did the Hebrews, according to the biblical account of their arrival in the promised land.

Thus, one has to go further back, to the so-called first wave of abolitionism in the postrevolutionary period. There is one interesting discovery. Already in 1792, the abolitionist, civil rights activist, and Black Freemason Prince Hall uses the concept of the image of God to ground the Masonic principle of love to all humankind:

The next thing is love and benevolence to all the whole family of mankind, as God's make and creation, therefore we ought to love them all, for love or hatred is of the whole kind, for if I love a man for the sake of the image of God which is on him, I must love all, for he made all, and upholds all, and we are dependant [*sic*] upon him for all we do enjoy and expect to enjoy in this world and that which is to come.—Therefore he will help and assist all his fellow-men in distress, let them be of what colour or nation they may, yea even our very enemies, much more a brother Mason.⁷⁶

for the foundation of dignity and equality before 1830.

⁷³ See, inter alia, Hinks, *Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 22–62.

⁷⁴ The analogical interpretation of Exodus is already present in the early sermons of African American clergy. Absalom Jones draws on this motif in his 1808 Thanksgiving sermon on the occasion of the end of the transatlantic slave trade (Absalom Jones, “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,” in *Early Negro Writing* [ed. Proctor], 335–42).

⁷⁵ Since Denmark Vesey did not leave any written account, the reconstruction of his theological argumentation is dependent on secondary sources. See Jeremy Schipper, *Denmark Vesey’s Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022). For the respective documents, see *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History* (ed. Douglas R. Egerton and Robert L. Paquette; Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2017).

⁷⁶ Prince Hall, “A Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge, 1792,” in *Early Negro Writing* (ed. Proctor), 63–69, at 64. One of the earliest usages of the concept of *imago Dei* in the context of (Black) abolitionism actually occurs in a text of Jupiter Hammon, which was written in 1786 and published in 1787. However, Hammon interprets the image of God in traditional theological terms. The emphasis is on the assertion that the *imago Dei* was lost because of the “fall,” the original sin attributed to Adam and Eve (Jupiter Hammon, “An Address to the Negroes, 1787,” in *Early Negro Writing* [ed. Proctor], 313–23, at 320).

It is clear that Prince Hall understands the *imago Dei* as the foundation of the equality of all human beings, expressly mentioning differences of “colour” and “nations.” In his “Charge” five years later, he uses the concept with the identical meaning again.⁷⁷ Thus, we can conclude that his usage of *imago Dei* was not accidental but an intentional expression of the value of universal brotherhood as promoted by African American Freemasonry.⁷⁸ Yet, Prince Hall does not use the concept of image of God as the foundation of rights.⁷⁹ With origins back to 1775, the African Lodge in Boston was chartered in 1787, and Prince Hall became the provincial grand master in 1791.⁸⁰ In this postrevolutionary period, the African Masonic Lodge No. 459 became the institutional backbone of the elite of the free Black community in Boston. Since most Black Freemasons were also evangelical Christians, there was no contradiction or tension between the evolving Black churches and the Black lodges. Prominent church leaders such as Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were Freemasons. So were David Walker and his close associates in Boston, John Telemachus Hilton and the Rev. Thomas Paul.⁸¹ In his 1828 address

⁷⁷ See Prince Hall, “A Charge Delivered to the African Lodge, 1797,” in *Early Negro Writing* (ed. Proctor), 70–78, at 70. Corey Walker cites this passage, but does not pay attention to the *imago Dei* concept; Walker, “Nation and Oration,” 84–95, at 87.

⁷⁸ See Peter P. Hinks and Stephen Kantrowitz, “Introduction: The Revolution in Freemasonry,” in *All Men Free* (ed. Hinks and Kantrowitz), 1–20, at 2.

⁷⁹ Thus, his usage would fit model 4. There is also no evidence that the *imago Dei* concept was used in the petitions of Black activists, including Hall, in this period. Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (American Abolitionism and Antislavery; Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014) 50–69. Cameron emphasizes the impact of Hall’s texts on the emerging Black public and Walker, in particular; see 91, 119.

⁸⁰ Hinks and Kantrowitz assume that Prince Hall, in these orations, was influenced by the Rev. John Marrant. Cf. Hinks and Kantrowitz, “The Revolution in Freemasonry,” 4; Peter P. Hinks, “John Marrant and the Meaning of Early Black Freemasonry,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64 (2007) 105–16. There is, however, no indication that Marrant used the concept of *imago Dei* on this or other occasions. See John Marrant, *A sermon preached on the 24th day of June 1789, being the festival of St. John the Baptist, at the request of the Right Worshipful the Grand Master Prince Hall, and the rest of the brethren of the African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons in Boston. By the Reverend Brother Marrant, Chaplain* (Boston: Thomas and John Fleet, 1789). See further, John Saillant, “‘Wipe away All Tears from Their Eyes’: John Marrant’s Theology in the Black Atlantic, 1785–1808,” *Journal of Millennial Studies* 1 (1999), <http://www.mille.org/publications/winter98/saillant.PDF>, above n. 12. Christine Levecq assumes that in fact Hall helped Marrant write his sermon; see Christine Levecq, *Slavery and Sentiment: The Politics of Feeling in Black Atlantic Antislavery Writing 1770–1850* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008) 165. Probably, Hall (and Marrant) used *The Constitution, History, Laws, Charges, Orders, Regulations, and Usages of the Right Worshipful Fraternity of Accepted Free-Masons* (ed. James Anderson; London, 1723; repr., ed. Benjamin Franklin; Philadelphia, 1734), especially for the history of Masonry. There is one occurrence of the image of God (*ibid.*, 7), which, however, is not used in an egalitarian sense.

⁸¹ Later, Black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass opposed Freemasonry. See Hinks and Kantrowitz, “The Revolution in Freemasonry,” 11.

to the Boston Masonic Lodge, Hilton emphasized that the goal was “combining Masonry and Christianity together.”⁸²

Thus, from the 1820s on, the “triple cord of Masonry, Church fellowship, and Anti-Slavery association” unfolded.⁸³ Actually, a coevolution of the expansion of Black Masonry and the emergence of Black antislavery activism existed in the context of the establishment of an independent Black public related to the founding of *Freedom’s Journal*. Many Masons were the newspaper’s subscribers, agents, and contributors.⁸⁴

It seems that the concept of *imago Dei* did not feature prominently as a theological argument for the abolition of slavery during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. While there were very few unsystematic occurrences during the 1820s in abolitionist tracts and newspapers, the first prominent application of *imago Dei* as a foundation of equality and rights, with explicitly immediatist abolitionist intention, occurs in Walker’s *Appeal*.⁸⁵

■ Conclusions

Within the abolitionist discourse of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the immorality of slavery and the danger of seduction to sin, as well as the Golden Rule, were the central Christian arguments against enslavement and the slave trade. The goals were predominantly the abolition of the slave trade and the amelioration of enslavement. In the wake of the Second Great Awakening and emerging liberal theology, slavery itself was increasingly seen as sin, and thus the abolition of slavery as an institution came into focus. However, in most cases the quest for abolition did not imply the call for full equality for African Americans and was more concerned with the salvation of the souls of slaveholders and slaveholding societies, respectively.

Concepts of universal equality surfaced in connection with the emergence of radical Black abolitionism in the 1820s. The emerging theological concepts of

⁸² John Telemachus Hilton, *Address Delivered Before the African Grand Lodge, Boston, No. 459, June 24, 1828* (Boston: David Hooton, 1828) 14. Cf. Peter P. Hinks, “To Commence a New Era in the Moral World: John Telemachus Hilton, Abolitionism, and the Expansion of Black Freemasonry, 1784–1860,” in *All Men Free* (ed. Hinks and Kantrowitz), 40–62, at 41.

⁸³ *The Liberator*, 25 March 1864; quoted in Hinks, “Commence a New Era,” 57.

⁸⁴ See Hinks, “Commence a New Era,” 50.

⁸⁵ The emerging racist literature, arguing that people of African descent would not resemble the image of God and thus were supposedly inferior, seems to confirm the importance of the *imago Dei* concept in founding equality. See H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, but . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972). It was, ironically, Channing’s book on slavery from 1835 that did not endorse immediate and full emancipation, which triggered the critique of the usage of image of God (137–43). This seems to be a clear reaction to the growing importance of the concept. In addition, in the context of the reception of so-called scientific racism, the egalitarian understanding of *imago Dei* was criticized (152–66). These racist arguments, however, did not end with slavery. See Charles Carroll, “*The Negro a Beast*” or “*In the Image of God*” (St. Louis: American Book and Bible House, 1900).

“children of God,” “God has made of one blood all nations,” and especially *imago Dei* emphasized full equality and dignity of all human beings and in turn grounded equal rights. Walker’s *Appeal* served as a central document for this argument and movement. It is striking that the author uses the concept of *imago Dei* only once, but he does so in a decisive function to theologically ground the claim for dignity, equality, and rights against the concept of White supremacy.

The transformation of the theological discourse correlates with the development of the goals and policy of what was to be labeled immediatist or radical abolitionism. This development has several implications. It shows the importance of religious discourse not only as a source of mobilization but especially as a foundation of equality, dignity, and rights. With the egalitarian concept of *imago Dei*, theological discourse provides for intertwining evangelical theology and spirituality with the natural rights discourse of the Declaration of Independence in a more convincing way than other theological concepts. This in turn contributes to Walker’s approach of mass resistance. The concept of *imago Dei* also addresses economic differences (class), as is detectable throughout the *Appeal*.⁸⁶

As we have seen above, this innovation of theological discourse influenced immediatism from the very beginning and affected especially Black abolitionists until the end of the nineteenth century. It seems that this particular innovation was lost over the turn of the century, since it is not used by the New Abolition—the civil rights activism in the generation before Martin Luther King, Jr. It might be that the dominance of White liberal abolitionist theologians such as Theodore Parker, who used the image of God with a perfectionist meaning, obscured this achievement of Walker and Black abolitionists. In addition, between the reconstruction and World War I, Black churches tended toward more traditional, nonradical theological concepts and pietistic spirituality.

We have identified Black Freemasonry as a likely source of Walker’s innovative contribution to abolitionist theological discourse. This is surprising in at least two regards. As far as I can see, no attention has been paid to the theological contribution early Black masons made to abolitionism, though there is considerable research on the organizational role of Black lodges and their entanglement with Black churches and abolitionist organizations. In addition, it is almost ironic that the *Appeal*, which decisively triggered radical abolitionism, is deeply influenced by Masonic discourse, whereas many Garrisonians and the benevolent industry in general were part of anti-Masonic activism. Yet, Walker combined the egalitarianism of African American Freemasonry with reinterpretation of biblical tradition and enriched it with a concept of active resistance and mass mobilization.

Furthermore, with his interpretation of the *imago Dei* as a foundation of equality, dignity, and rights, Walker anticipates not only the insights of biblical theology of the second half of the twentieth century but also a development in systematic theology, which did not take place before the late 1960s and 1970s in the mainstream

⁸⁶ It is also applicable to gender. See the commentary above on Maria W. Stewart.

churches. For Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant theology, the concept of the image of God has been the standard theological argument for the dignity and personhood of human beings in ethical discourse for at least the past four decades. This seems closely connected to the emergence of bioethical and medical ethical challenges. Thus, Walker and other (Black) abolitionists provide an example of the necessity for decolonizing European and North American academic and church theology, since this contribution was ignored in theological literature.

Finally, with the egalitarian understanding of *imago Dei*, Walker provides a source for a theology of equality, dignity, and human rights, which opposes racism as well as any kind of group-related misanthropy, and which challenges White supremacy as well as any other form of unjustified dominance. This is as important today as it was in 1829.