

# *An Instance of Felicity*

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“ It is with a heart overflowing with love and humble hope in my God and Redeemer...charity and good will to all mankind that I address you at this (to me, and not only to me but to all mankind)...a time when I am on the verge of eternity.”<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Abraham Johnstone a former slave who was executed Saturday July 8 1797, in Gloucester New Jersey. His guilt was founded on complete presumption and while in jail he wrote two letters: one to his wife and the other to mankind. Johnstone wanted his last words to be more than his proclamation of innocence. He wanted to expose the devastating affects that slavery produced. He wanted his concerns to be known regarding political views expressed in the Declaration of Independence. And ultimately, he wanted his letter to provide relentless inspiration to future generations among all human civilizations.

His letter was printed after his execution in Philadelphia for the public so that future jurors might take more caution when evidence on conjecture is admitted. For Johnstone, racial inequality expanded beyond juries and courts. Johnstone reflected on society as a whole and society as a whole became more and more adrift as independence was only for a few. The Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776, yet for all the tyrannical evidence the white colonists had against the King of Britain, they failed to look inside their own walls and at their own tyrannical tendencies toward their black neighbors, Thus, failed to mention the exploitation of African slaves within the emerging

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Johnstone, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone, a Black man, Who Was Hanged at Woodbury, in the County of Gloucester, and State of New Jersey, on Saturday the the [sic] 8<sup>th</sup> Day of July Last; To the People of Colour. To which Is Added His Dying Confession of Declaration, Also, a Copy of a letter to His Wife, Written the Day Previous to His Execution* [essay on-line] (Philadelphia: Printed For The Purchasers, 1797, accessed 16 February 2006) available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/johnstone/johnstone.html>; Internet 3

New World. Living in America as an African slave, Johnstone experienced first hand this hypocritical display of patriotism. But as patriotism developed much more after the American Revolution ended and the Treaty of Paris ratified in 1784, culminating in the new Constitution of the United States in 1787, slavery started to wane in the North and expanded in the South. Johnstone was very clear in his thoughts. He declared himself a “devoted victim” to the “just resentment”<sup>2</sup> of the laws of his country. His words fell at a time of great unsettlement in the New World, and he wrote with religious fever for mankind to end what he calls, “enemies of our color, and of freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

Johnstone’s self-proclaimed “devoted victim” to the “just resentment” of the laws established during his time, are a result of his life as a slave, culminating to his guilty verdict ambiguously reached at his trial. He was born a slave. His real name is Benjamin Johnstone, although he uses Abraham throughout his letter, he changed it like many slaves to avoid past troubles. He eventually was sold to John Grey, a blacksmith. There he learned the blacksmith business, and then was sold after some time to Edward Callaghan. And as Johnstone commented, “him I did not like.”<sup>4</sup> He insisted on having another master, and because he was a skilled, hardworking slave, his demands were met. James Craig became his new owner, and Johnstone soon gained his new master’s confidence. In fact, according to Johnstone, his master’s sister had a slave who was “extremely insolent and rude to her.”<sup>5</sup> His master confronted the slave, and Johnstone, who happened to be standing nearby, and knowing the slave to be the “stoutest man in all

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

that country”<sup>6</sup> saw the slave with a knife behind his back, and instantaneously confronted the slave, eventually overpowering him.

From that point on, Johnstone’s master acknowledged his debt and granted after some time, his freedom. During his time of freedom, he was gone a whole year, spending most of his time with a woman, living a life hitherto denied to him. Unfortunately, he was picked up as a run away slave and thrown into a Baltimore Jail. He attempted to contact his former master, but after being transferred to Dover Jail, Johnstone discovered his former master drank himself to death. Following this, Mr. James Clements, a merchant, paid for Johnstones release from jail, allowing him to work as a means of repayment. Johnstone stated he fulfilled this time “to his utmost respect.”<sup>7</sup>

Problematically, the executors of his former master wanted him as a slave. The executors came with two Georgia men, overpowered him, but according to Johnstone that night he escaped and fled to Mr. Clements. He wrote, “...as I was lying down I cut the cords I was bound with, and having waited until they were asleep I stole away.”<sup>8</sup> Mr. Clement, the merchant who paid for his release, advised him to apply to Warner Mifflin Esq., but knowing the executors were upset at his escape including the Georgia men, Johnstone fled. He stated, “To avoid trouble I came to New-Jersey, and changed my name for I well knew that my poor colour had but few friends in that country, where slavery is so very general.”<sup>9</sup> Johnstone also expressed how few friends’ people of his color had within American politics, particularly those who claimed we are all created equal.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

He expressed much frustration with the philanthropic exclamation embedded within the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. More particularly, he pointed to the authors themselves. He illustrated, “Even the patriotic who stood forth the champions of liberty, and in asserting the natural rights of all mankind...the most powerful rhetoric...the rich treasury of words could afford...at night would be cruel rigid tyrants.”<sup>10</sup> His reference to Thomas Jefferson’s “unalienable rights” is a clear indication of his intellectual grasp concerning current events put forth during his time. Johnstone had hope that after independence from Britain, slavery would end. He wrote:

And the United States of America were *delared* sovereign free and independent...It was then that the prospect of total emancipation from slavery which now brightens upon us had birth...and expanded the heart with every thing great noble and beneficent...but still my brethen we were forgotten, or we were not conceived worthy their regard or attention, being looked on as a different species.<sup>11</sup>

Johnstone saw his hope diminish as the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution both failed to protect or even mention black slaves or black colonists. Slavery though, as an economic and social institution had not up until the transatlantic slave trade, constituted such a distinct racial divide.

The word ‘slave’ was begot during the time many Germans would supply the slave markets with captured Slavs.<sup>12</sup> Slavery hit a peak while the ancient Greeks, followed by the Romans flourished. In fact, Fifth Century BC Athens found itself with more slaves than free citizens. Rome trained slaves as a means of entertainment, with

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> New Internationalist, “A brief history of Slavery”; available from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0JQP/is\\_2001\\_August/ai\\_77712006](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JQP/is_2001_August/ai_77712006); Internet; accessed 2 April 2006.

gladiators forced to defend their life.<sup>13</sup> The ancients of Rome and Athens justified slavery as a law of nature, which differed from American slavery.

Early in Colonial development, indentured servitude was an incentive for immigrants to come to North America. Indentured servants worked with no pay but were given in exchange, shelter and food. Indentured servants were only subject to this for a certain amount of time and throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth century this form of servitude was not racially divided. Whites and blacks worked lower level jobs together, yet many were treated like slaves. Although far from complete racial utopia, the racial divide between blacks and whites was not as defined compared to the latter years when indentured servitude became sparingly inefficient.

As indentured servitude became economically inefficient, due to a higher demand of labor brought about from an increase of British industry, slavery became more efficient and very profitable. Since this profit depended on slavery, there needed to be a constant supply of slaves. Africans' began to live longer in the Colonies and their children were more easily segregated and oppressed than white servants.<sup>14</sup> The justification of slavery became "natural" because people were born black, and would die black. Blacks were born with black skin due the processes of Mother Nature. The Romans and Athenians saw skin color not as a sign of inferiority, but rather considered inferiority endowed among the weaker humans regardless of race.

Suitably, Johnstone expressed a frustration that echoed the civil rights movement. He emphatically stated:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, "The Roots of racism".

And why our color because happens to be black? Are we not a living animated part of the creation? Are we not flesh and blood? Do we not as well as they know what sorrow means? ...Shall one being be created...solely for the use of another? Lord what is man? Or rather what are not brutes?<sup>15</sup>

His words expressed his understanding that racism, not slavery, was the root cause for the oppression people of his color faced. He dealt with this issue all his life. Therefore, he saw himself as a true victim, one who has lived under institutional racism and one whose “resentment” for society’s laws are justified. He was not some petty criminal who had no respect for law and order. In contrast, he was one who respected law and order. It was law and order that had betrayed his respect for society’s rules.

As the blacks exodus to slavery continued, the white colonists began preparations to liberate themselves from the British. Logically, the majority of blacks felt no patriotic duty for either side; as a result, thousands would flock to the British and only a handful siding with the colonists. According to Johnstone, the promise of freedom meant the destruction of two enemies.

He spoke of “enemies of our color, and of freedom”<sup>16</sup> which coincided with the Revolutionary War. Most blacks that fought for either side were fighting for the identical goal—freedom. White colonists were also fighting for freedom, yet racial freedom was a fight only the blacks understood. Blacks were up against racial discriminating and the lack of true patriotism among this nation. He observed in his letter:

How preposterously absurd must an impartial observer think the man whom he sees one moment declaring with a most incredible volubility in favor of natural rights and general freedom, and the next moment with his own hands for some very trivial offence inflicting the cruel and ignominious stripes of slavery, and riveting it’s shackles—surely in the

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<sup>15</sup> Johnstone, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

eyes of any man of sense such conduct must be irreconcilable and just reason to doubt the soundness of his principles as a patriot and a lover of freedom.<sup>17</sup>

We discover the enemy of freedom is the hypocritical patriot: the patriot who believes one thing and does another. The South primarily displayed this hypocritical attitude with the “slaveocracy”<sup>18</sup> a wealthy group of white elites who exploited black slaves. The slavocracy wanted independence but wanted to keep their slaves. As the Revolutionary War began, the British looked to use this weakness against the colonists.

British Commander Lord Dunbar saw the slavocracy as something he could exploit precisely for this hypocritical display of patriotism. Dunbar was the first to incorporate black slaves and the only British commander steadfast on enlisting blacks in combat. Dunbar, also the Royal governor of Virginia, put forth a proclamation granting freedom to any slave who would fight for the King.<sup>19</sup> Yet the British had no post-war plan concerning the enlisted slaves, due to pressures resulting from the slave trade and West Indian planter lobbies.<sup>20</sup> The slaves who did flock to the British, their abilities were divided up. A few took arms and the rest filled the non-combatant labor force.<sup>21</sup>

As for the colonists, they had always worried what the black slaves would do in a time of war. During the French and Indian war 1754-1763, both slave and free blacks allied with Creek Indians in hopes the French would grant them their freedom. Uniting

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, “The roots of racism”.

<sup>19</sup> The American Revolution, “African Americans In The Revolutionary Period”; available from <http://americanrevolution.com/AfricanAmericanInTheRevolution.htm>; Internet: accessed 2 April 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), 36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21.

with the oppressor's enemy was in direct retaliation regarding the extreme indignation for American slavery with its institutionalized racism and hypocritical patriotism.<sup>22</sup>

On the contended side, Rhode Island produced the first all-black military unit. This regiment fought in many battles, including Yorktown, and Aquidneck Island.<sup>23</sup> The South, pressured Congress to not allow black enlistment fearing slaves would use the War as a personal Revolution against slavery. At first, Congress ordered all blacks removed from the Continental Army. In response, black veterans complained directly to Washington, who handed the problem over to John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress. As a result, black veterans were allowed to stay and the new recruits denied.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, when the colonists realized they were out numbered in 1777, Congress allowed black enlistment, free and slave. In total, an estimated five thousand blacks fought for the colonies and tens of thousands for the British.<sup>25</sup>

With the Treaty of Paris signed in 1783, the American Revolutionary War came to a close. The blacks that stayed found the war had opened opportunity for them to begin presenting demands upon white society that hitherto were closed shut.<sup>26</sup> This newly created opportunity contributed to the Northern trend of abolitionism. The South was still dependant upon slave labor partly due to its agrarian infrastructure, yet slavery faced a divine opposition. The First Great Awakening breathed new life into American religion. Many Americans began to take their religion very seriously and began to question themselves morally. Johnstone was no different. He was immensely religious. He wanted

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>23</sup> The American Revolution, "African Americans In The Revolutionary Period".

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 1980 revised and updated addition 1995), 87.

religion to serve not as an institution of fear, but as an institution that would lead the soul down the path of virtue and not vice.

Johnstone's religious fever illustrated his belief that religion needs to be the basis for a sound social structure. In addition, religion as he wrote is the "best practical system...it soothes and comforts the mind of the afflicted and troubled."<sup>27</sup> He like many other slaves saw religion as the doorway not only for psychological autonomy, but also as a means to gain strength in the fight for emancipation. Many black writers wrote with a Protestant Christian voice, with extreme emphasis on the Bible,<sup>28</sup> portraying religion as an institution for hope. Taking a look back prior to 1750, there had been an estimated fifteen published attacks condemning American slavery mostly from the blacks' oldest friends, the Quakers.<sup>29</sup>

Johnstone pointed out in his letter the Quakers role as liberators. He stated, "...the Quaker society therein have *manumised* and set free all the slaves and set free all the slaves in their possession or in any wise their property."<sup>30</sup> The Quakers began immigrating to this country in 1620, a good portion from the beautiful country of Holland.<sup>31</sup> As Johnstone pointed out, for any religious denomination, the Americas fostered a chance for religious freedom. He observed, "...after religious dissensions caused very many to leave their native country and come hither with their families and

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<sup>27</sup> Johnstone, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Vincent Carretta, editor, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors In The English Speaking World Of The 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Kentucky: The University Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>29</sup> Gibson, *The Loyal Blacks*, 2+7.

<sup>30</sup> Johnstone, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> David M Murray-Rust, "Quakers in Brief: an over view of the Quaker movement from 1650-1990"; available from <http://people.cryst.bbk.ac.uk/~ubcg09q/dmr/chap1.htm>; Internet; accessed 10 April 2006.

goods where they might enjoy a liberty of conscience.<sup>32</sup> In view of that, the Quakers, being one of the many looking for this “liberty of conscience.”

Quakers vest their belief in “the light of God.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, a direct relationship between God and each believer, and that every human contains a portion of God. Interestingly, what sets them apart from most religions is that Quakers see creed as secondhand knowledge of the divine, and that each believer’s “inner light” is the primary source of divine communication. In 1652, George Fox established the Religious Society of Friends (Quakerism) in the Colonies.<sup>34</sup> Thus with this religious freedom, the Quakers were able to incorporate their religious views into their everyday life, starting by condemning slavery and freeing their remaining slaves.

Unfortunately, not everyone prescribed to Quakerism. One such example the South tried to put forth reaching far back, in order to Biblically justify African slavery, was the story of Ham.<sup>35</sup>

The story is found in Genesis 9:20-25 and begins after the great flood. Noah began to plant a vineyard and eventually began to drink the wine produced from this vineyard. Noah became intoxicated undressed and passed out in his tent. Ham, the son of Noah, found his father naked inside the tent. He left to tell his other two brothers, Shem and Japheth. Shem and Japheth came back with some sort of clothing, walked in backwards so they would not see their father’s nakedness and covered him. Noah awoke and found out what Ham had done. Noah was outraged and said, “Cursed be Canaan.”

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<sup>32</sup> Johnstone, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Murray-Rust, “Quakers in Brief.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Blacks and Jews News page, “Jews and the Black Holocaust”; available from [http://www.blackandjews.com/Jews\\_and\\_slavery.html](http://www.blackandjews.com/Jews_and_slavery.html); Internet; accessed 2 April 2006.

Canaan was the name of one of Ham's sons. Noah cursed Canaan becoming the lowest slave to both Shem and Japheth.<sup>36</sup>

It's been interpreted that Noah's three sons were thought to be connected to the three continents then known; Shem with Asia, Japheth with Europe and Ham with Africa. The term Hamitic refers to the people who traditionally were believed to be a descendant of Ham. Ham's sons typically enemies of the Jews, were said to have fathered the southern peoples of Africa. But the story of Ham speaks nothing of race and the Bible provides no evidence that black skinned people descended from Ham. In fact, according to the Biblical text, Canaan is the only one of Ham's sons who is not dark skinned.<sup>37</sup> Yet many Southern plantation owners, the Ku Klux Klan, and even the Mormons up until 1978, wielded it as Biblical proof for white supremacy.<sup>38</sup>

Johnstone, definitely an avid Bible reader, supplied Biblical examples within his letter contesting that in the past the word of God was preached to all and all could share in the glory of God! He stated:

And accordingly see that Phillip the Apostle by an express divine command arose and went to the south and baptized an Ethiopian, an Eunuch who was a black man, for which, see the Acts of the Apostles, chap viii. ver. 26, and that in the earliest ages of Christianity the gospel was preached to blacks, tawneys, and whites, indiscriminately.<sup>39</sup>

More importantly he strongly pointed out, "I do not mean that religion springs from fear, but I mean a religion founded on love of virtue and detestation of vice."<sup>40</sup> The embrace of virtue would lead to an abomination of vice. This embrace of virtue was the ultimate goal

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<sup>36</sup> The Bible, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (New York, NY: Watchtower Bible And Tract Society, 1984), Genesis 9:20-25.

<sup>37</sup> Straight Dope Science Advisory Board, "What's up with the biblical story of drunken Noah?"; available from <http://www.straightdope.com/mailbag/mdrunknoah.html>; Internet: accessed 27 April 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Black and Jews News Page, "Jews and the Black Holocaust."

<sup>39</sup> Johnstone, *The Address of Abraham Johnstone*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Johnstone wanted during his time, and the ultimate peak he was looking to achieve with religion.

Johnstone, in the expectation of his death, held a sense of comfort knowing his “God and Redeemer” is waiting for him on the other side. He wrote, “that moment when I am going to be ushered out of this vain frail world...I shall meet my creator face to face, and there must answer for my transgressions.”<sup>41</sup> As his letter came to a close, he proclaimed his innocence, and reiterated his hopes that his letter would leave an impression, like the “incessant dropping makes an impression on the stone.”<sup>42</sup>

In ending, Johnstone’s faith in mankind is evident. He has become a “devoted victim,” speaking aloud against institutionalized racism, where his “just resentment” resonates. His life as a slave from birth, leading to his retreat to New Jersey, culminating in his premature death from a verdict reached ambiguously justifies his claims.

Colonial independence from Britain began to take form with the Declaration of Independence, claiming natural rights for all humankind, yet failed to mention the African slave, even though African slaves did much of the backbreaking work needed for this New World. Johnstone, as a slave, did much backbreaking work himself and reflected within his letter the anger he felt towards the hypocritical proclamations given by Jefferson, a slave owner.

From this, Johnstone saw two enemies, “enemies of our color, and of freedom,” which coincided historically with the American Revolution. Thousands of black slaves left the colonies, following British commander Lord Dunbar, who promised freedom to any black slave willing to fight for Britain. And the fact that thousands of slaves left to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 31.

fight for the British was a direct response towards the hatred for American slavery. Johnstone, an American slave, assumingly took no part in the Revolution but his assessment was correct. Africans' were up against two enemies: racism and freedom. Slave owners always lived in fear that one-day the slaves would revolt. It was one of the main reasons blacks were not allowed to fight, thus, the country would be ripe with racial tension. This tension is precisely what would block any attempt at freedom. But first freedom had to be won spiritually.

Johnstone found great comfort in his religion. For him, religion's purpose was the practice of virtue and the eradication of vice. The Quakers, in some respects, put to practice Johnstone's religious goals, setting free their slaves, consequently condemning slavery. Following this, many such denominations such as Methodists and the Baptists opened their doors to black slaves; with the Northern churches separating themselves from the Southern churches, due to the issue of slavery. In one aspect, the South made attempts to justify African slavery using the story of Ham, claiming African inferiority traces back to Biblical times. Yet despite otherwise, Johnstone was a believer, and was then ready to meet his God face to face.

We may never have spoken with Abraham Johnston nor lived during his time, but we can safely assume his heart was disturbed with all the social ills throughout his time. In our time, we still see people being oppressed. We still see people who are betrayed by their leaders. Because of this, all of humanities freedom is slowly encroached upon every minute. Johnstone would agree that no one is free when others are oppressed.

Johnstone believed religion could have helped, but is it not about time we took control of our own lives. We are the ones who must pay for our actions. We are our own

enemies, apprehended to believe some other is responsible! This sense of inspiration is what Johnstone wanted his letter to ignite. Yet he was cautious. He knew that his letter in time would fade. For this he said:

But as soon as the noise ceases and the gloom dispess, all farther fear and all thoughts of the thunder or, divine admonitions vanishes with it, or as ye have often observed the parched earth soak in the moisture of a plentiful shower, and exhibit no farther signs of the refreshing dew...for as the water by continual and incessant dropping makes an impression on the stone, so will these my admonitions make an impression on your minds by frequent readings and recourse to them...I think them calculated to promote your prosperity in this world , and ensure you that everlasting happiness in the next, which ye all obtain is the sincere wish, and shall be the dying prayer of your truly affectionate, but deplorably distressed friend.<sup>43</sup>

ABRAHAM JOHNSTONE

Woodbury jail july 2d. 1797

These were his last words contained within his letter.

His letter has made an impression one me, one that has left me with optimism and comfort. Johnstone was probably a quiet guy who worked hard, was intelligent, and even though lived a life of bondage, seemed to find hope for the future, even in death.

Remarkable to think about, the future is unpredictable and death is inescapable, why should we not have hope. Because it seems hope is all we have.

In an instance of felicity, Johnstone has left us with one last thought. A thought that is understood from a man who has fallen to the evils of his fellow man.

He wrote:

For after all the bounty of nature and all the labor of virtue, many imperfections will still be discovered in human beings, even by those who

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

do not see with all the perspicuity of human wisdom; and he is guilty of the most aggravated detraction, who reports the weakness of a good mind, betrayed in an unguarded moment, something which is rather the effect of negligence than design.<sup>44</sup>

It is we who depend upon one another. Mankind's imperfections must not become his downfall. Nor must his neighbor betray his weaknesses of intellect. But we all must understand the problem lies within ourselves.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 22.