“An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World”

One of the most important events that helped trigger the antislavery crusade was the appearance in 1829 of “An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” by David Walker. Walker was a former slave living in Boston who believed that slavery was morally wrong and that the institution was degrading. Walker attacked the argument that African Americans were a different species that were not quite human and therefore not entitled to full rights under the Constitution. He also encouraged slaves to seize their own freedom at any cost. Although Walker died under mysterious circumstances, he was one of the strongest voices of the abolition movement. As you read the excerpt, pay attention to how Walker distinguishes enslaved African Americans from other oppressed people.

My beloved brethren [brothers]:—The Indians of North and of South America—the Greeks—the Irish, subjected under the king of Great Britain— the Jews, that ancient people of the Lord—the inhabitants of the islands of the sea—in fine [in short], all the inhabitants of the earth, (except however, the sons of Africa) are called men, and of course are, and ought to be free. But we, (coloured people) and our children are brutes!! and of course are, and ought to be SLAVES to the American people and their children forever!! to dig their mines and work their farms; and thus go on enriching them, from one generation to another with our blood and our tears!!!! I promised in a preceding [earlier] page to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the most incredulous [unbelieving], that we, (coloured people of these United States of America) are the most wretched [extremely bad], degraded and abject [lowly] set of beings that ever lived since the world began, and that the white Americans having reduced us to this wretched state of slavery, treat us in that condition more cruel (they being an enlightened and Christian people) than any heathen [non-Christian] nation did any people whom it had reduced to our condition. These affirmations [statements] are so well confirmed in the minds of all unprejudiced men, who have taken the trouble to read histories, that they need no elucidation [explanation] from me. . . .

I call upon the professing [people claiming to be] Christians, I call upon the philanthropist [donor], I call upon the very tyrant himself, to show me a page of history, either sacred or profane [not religious], on which a verse can be found, which maintains, that the Egyptians heaped the insupportable [unbearable] insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the human family. Can the whites deny this charge? Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable [very unfortunate] condition of slaves under their feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes ofMonkeys or Orang-Outangs? O! my God! I appeal to every man of feeling—is not this insupportable? Is it not heaping the most gross [excessive] insult upon our miseries, because they have got us under their feet and we cannot help ourselves? . . . I do not know what to compare it to, unless, like putting one wild deer in an iron cage, where it will be secured, and hold another by the side of the same, then let it go, and expect the one in the cage to run as fast as the [other] one at liberty. . . .

Fear not the number and education of our enemies, against whom we shall have to contend for our lawful right; guaranteed to us by our Maker; for why should we be afraid, when God is, and will continue, (if we continue humble) to be on our side? The man who would not fight under our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom and of God—to be delivered from the most wretched, abject and servile slavery, that ever a people was afflicted with [forced to suffer] since the foundation of the world, to the present day—ought to be kept with all of his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his cruel enemies.

From David Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles, together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America. Copyright © 1965 by Hill and Wang, Inc.