

*Strangers in the House of God:
Cotton Mather, Onesimus, and an
Experiment in Christian Slaveholding*

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WHEN A DEADLY smallpox epidemic broke out in Boston in 1721, the Reverend Cotton Mather promoted a highly controversial course of action that would either save countless lives or help to escalate the spread of the disease. Inoculation was at that time an obscure and little understood practice, although reports of its success in Constantinople had already circulated among the ranks of London's Royal Society.¹ Mather, a keen observer of the natural world and an avid follower of the medical sciences, was convinced that inoculation could effectively combat the disease. His belief was based on testimony not from Turkey, but from a highly unlikely source that

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1. Dr. Emanuel Timonius sent his observations of inoculation as it was practiced in Constantinople to the Royal Society in 1713. His report was printed in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* in 1714. Dr. Jacobus Pylarinus's account of the procedure was published in the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1716. See George L. Kittredge, 'Some Lost Works of Cotton Mather,' *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 45 (1911-12): 419-20.

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was much closer to home: African slaves in Boston. Mather observed that the slaves who had undergone a similar procedure in their native West Africa were able to stave off the disease while in constant contact with the afflicted.² Although most of Mather's contemporaries viewed inoculation as a highly dangerous and counterintuitive practice, Mather was confident that it was no less than the key to saving the town of Boston.³

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, public opinion in New England held that Africans lacked the Enlightenment gifts of rationality and reason. Mather, however, saw little reason to doubt their testimony concerning inoculation. In *The Angel of Bethesda*, the ambitious medical treatise that he completed in the aftermath of the epidemic, the minister recounted their method of inoculation:

I have since mett with a considerable Number of these *Africans*, who all agree in One Story; That in their Countrey *grandy-many* dy of the *Small-Pox*: But now they learn This Way: People take Juice of *Small-Pox*; and *Cutty-skin*, and Putt in a Drop; then by'nd by a little *Sicky, Sicky*: then very few little things like *Small-Pox*; and no body dy of it; and no body have *Small-Pox* any more. Thus in *Africa*, where the Poor Creatures dy of the *Small-Pox* like Rotten Sheep, a Merciful GOD has taught them an *Infallible Praeservative*. Tis a common Practice, and is attended with a *Constant Success*.⁴

2. See Cotton Mather, *An Account of the Method and Success of Inoculating the Small-Pox, in Boston in New-England* (London: J. Peele, 1722), reprinted in *Smallpox in Colonial America* (New York: Arno Press, 1977). After describing the procedure by which patients are inoculated against the disease, Mather confirms: '. . . they, in a few Days, grow a little Sick, and a few *Small-Pox* break out, and by and by they dry away; and that no Body ever dy'd of doing this, nor ever had the *Small-Pox* after it: Which last Point is confirm'd by their constant Attendance on the Sick in our Families, without receiving the Infection. . . .' (2).

3. For a compelling reading of Mather's complex attitude toward the reliability of Africans' testimony, see Margot Minardi, 'The Boston Inoculation Controversy of 1721-1722: An Incident in the History of Race,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 61 (2004): 47-76. She identifies the contradictions that abound in Mather's scientific thinking about race and racial difference. Minardi points out that Mather believed in Africans' ability to reason, but he also believed that they were mentally inadequate. While he attributed this unfortunate inadequacy to a particular race, he could also look beyond racial difference and believe that a cure for smallpox that worked for one race could also work for another.

4. Reprinted in Kittredge, 'Some Lost Works of Cotton Mather,' 431-32.

Mather was careful to point out that Africans were not the inventors of inoculation; only their Maker could be responsible for the creation of such a 'Praeservative.' But could Africans be trusted as the bearers of God's shield against infection? Mather seems to have thought so.⁵ Unlike most of his peers who looked upon African slaves as a highly dubious source of medical expertise, the minister was persuaded not only by the consistency of their 'One Story' but also by the sincerity and simplicity of their storytelling. While his attempt to capture their imperfect English grates against our present-day sensibilities, Mather must have thought that the sound of their speech would help to validate their testimony.⁶ Whether or not Mather succeeded in persuading his readers about the efficacy of inoculation, he most certainly helped to reaffirm prevalent ideas about the Africans living among them. With their childlike diction and unquestioning faith in a medical procedure that was surely beyond their comprehension, the Africans that Mather 'ventriloquized' on the printed page only reaffirmed the notion of a simple-minded people who would helplessly perish 'like Rotten Sheep' without the good graces of their Maker.

Mather did not need to venture far in the town of Boston to find slaves with knowledge of inoculation. Indeed, a slave who lived under his own roof for nearly a decade had undergone the procedure in Africa before his passage to the colonies. Some five years before the outbreak, Mather recorded this slave's testimony in a letter to Dr. John Woodward of the Royal Society:

5. In *An Account of the Method and Success of Inoculating the Small-Pox*, Mather reminds his readers that medical science owed many debts to non-Christians: 'They plead, *That what is now done, is a Thing learnt from the Heathens; and it is not lawful for Christians to learn the Way of the Heathen.*' 'Tis to no Purpose to tell them, that *Hippocrates, and Galen* were Heathen. . . .' *Smallpox in Colonial America*, 24.

6. Minardi argues that Mather's attempt to capture the slaves' African English was meant to 'make his retelling as authentic (to his white readers) as possible.' She further notes: 'The result endows Mather with a strange mix of humility and condescension: humility because he was willing to pay attention to the Africans and condescension because he set their speech off as precious or even deviant.' Minardi, 'The Boston Inoculation Controversy,' 63.

... Enquiring of my Negro-man *Onesimus*, who is a pretty Intelligent Fellow, Whether he ever had the *Small-Pox*; he answered, both, *Yes*, and *No*; and then told me, that he had undergone an Operation, which had given him something of the *Small-Pox*, & would forever praeserve him from it; adding, That it was often used among the *Guramantese*, & whoever had the Courage to use it, was forever free from the fear of the Contagion.⁷

In Mather's rendering of it, this slave's response far outstrips those of his peers in terms of subtlety and sophistication. His shrewd understanding of inoculation as a means of acquiring infection precisely in order to defend against it (as reflected in his canny '*Yes*, and *No*') suggests a slave who stood apart from his peers, at least in the eyes of his master. The qualification of Onesimus as a 'pretty Intelligent Fellow' is further evidence that the minister appreciated the significant differences that distinguished this slave from others.

The scenario of a master who seeks the means to prevent an epidemic from a slave who possesses the means to disarm it offers up a rich fantasy of racial harmony based on Christian benevolence and paternalism. Not all, however, were susceptible to that fantasy. Indeed, Mather and the few who supported the widespread application of inoculation were countered by many who argued that the slaves' advice was not advice at all, but rather a devious and concerted plot to overthrow their masters and the institution that held them in chains.⁸ Such concerns were not entirely unfounded. Slaves had committed a wide array of crimes,

7. The letter, dated July 12, 1716, has been reprinted in Kittredge, 'Some Lost Works of Cotton Mather,' 422.

8. That New Englanders feared the advice of their slaves is made clear by a 1721 tract entitled *Some Account of what is said of Inoculating or Transplanting the Small Pox. By the Learned Dr. Emanuel Timonius, and Jacobus Pylarinus. With some Remarks thereon. To which are added, A Few Queries in Answer to the Scruples of many about the Lawfulness of this Method. Published by Zabdiel Boylstone*, parts of which are reprinted in Kittredge's 'Some Lost Works of Cotton Mather.' The tract, much of which Kittredge attributes to Mather's own hand, argues: 'There is at this Time a considerable Number of *Africans* in this Town, who can have no Conspiracy or Combination to cheat us. No body has instructed them to tell their Story. The more plainly, brokenly, and blunderingly, and like Ideots, they tell their Story, it will be with reasonable Men, but the much more credible' (430).

from petty theft to conspiracy to outright murder. Whether justified or not, the fear of organized slave rebellion led to the passage of provincial laws aimed at limiting and controlling slaves' movements. In 1703 Boston officials set strict curfews for 'Indian, negro and molatto servants and slaves' in Boston, who were thought to be responsible for the 'Disorders in the Night' that plagued the town's residents.⁹ The law decreed that servants and slaves should not be found abroad past nine o'clock without the express permission of their masters or owners. Those found in violation of this rule were subject to punitive action by 'all justices of the peace, constables, tythingmen, watchmen, and other of her majesty's good subjects,' a provision that effectively turned a good proportion of the white male population into the watchful eyes of the town.

The inoculation controversy put Mather in the unusual position of being 'at the mercy' of those who were literally at the mercy of others. Indeed, the epidemic seemed to reverse the roles of master and slave by overturning the usual order that placed the worldly above the ignorant, the enlightened above the barbaric, the free

9. See *Acts and Resolves, Public And Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay, 1691-1780*, 21 vols. (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1869-1922), 1:35. Chapter 11, 'An Act to Prevent Disorders in the Night,' complains of 'great disorders, insolencies, and burglaries' that 'are oftentimes raised and committed in the night time by Indian, negro and molatto servants and slaves, to the disquiet and hurt of her majesty's good subjects. . . .' The two sections of the law are reprinted below:

[Sect. 1] That no Indian, negro or molatto servant, or slave, may presume to be absent from the families whereto they respectively belong, or be found abroad in the night time, after nine a clock, unless it be upon some errand for their respective masters or owners.

[Sect. 2] And all justices of the peace, constables, tythingmen, watchmen, and other of her majesty's good subjects, being householders within the same town, are hereby respectively impowred to take up and apprehend, or cause to be apprehended, any Indian, negro or molatto servant or slave that shall be found abroad after nine a clock at night, and shall not give a good and satisfactory account of their business, make any disturbance, or otherwise misbehave themselves, and forthwith convey them before the next justice of the peace (if it be not over-late in the night), or to restrain them in the common prison, watch-house or constable's house, until the morning, and then cause them to appear before a justice of the peace, who shall order them to the house of correction, to receive the discipline of the house and then be dismiss'd, unless they be charged with any other offence than absence from the families whereto they respectively belong, without leave from their respective masters or owners; and in such towns where there is no house of correction, to be openly whip'd by the constable, not exceeding ten stripes.'

before the enslaved. Such complex reversals of power and knowledge lend weight to the argument made by Herbert G. Gutman, David Brion Davis, Ira Berlin, and others that the institution of slavery cannot be defined as a system of total subordination on one side and total domination on the other.¹⁰ The institution must instead be examined as a far more nuanced phenomenon characterized by negotiation, concession, and even compromise. To assert the master's absolute domination is to deny the slave the world that he created despite the difficult conditions of his life. Indeed, the very existence of a slave culture that stood apart from but alongside the dominant culture is proof that the institution was never entirely in the hands of masters alone. Far from being a unique instance in which slaves wielded a certain modicum of power over their masters, the smallpox crisis was instead representative of the tenuous position that masters had always held in relationship to their human 'property.'

What exactly was the nature of the relationship between Mather and Onesimus that encouraged the minister to trust his slave's testimony? Onesimus had been presented to Mather by his congregation. By the time he made reference to Onesimus's knowledge of inoculation in 1716, Mather had owned him for ten years. During those years, Mather had taken it upon himself to educate and 'Christianize' Onesimus, following his own prescription illustrated in *The Negro Christianized*, which included catechisms specially written for Negroes of varying 'capacities.'¹¹ What complicated Mather's response to Onesimus's testimony was the fact that the slave in whom the minister had invested so much religious zeal had not experienced any Christian inspiration of his own: Onesimus,

10. See Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); and Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

11. Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized. An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706). *Early American Imprints*, ser. 1, , 1639-1800, Evans 1262. At the end of the essay, Mather offers 'A Shorter Catechism' for 'Negroes of a Smaller Capacity' and 'A Larger Catechism' for 'Negroes of a bigger Capacity.'

despite Mather's best efforts to convert him, was still unsaved by the time he offered testimony about the efficacy of inoculation.

That a slave had not experienced conversion was significant because it predicted dire consequences for the Christian slaveholder who owned him. Such concern for the state of the slave's soul arose from the Puritan concept of the family. In the Puritan mind, the family comprised not only those whom we now consider members of the nuclear family, but also any servants and slaves who might be residing under the same roof. This conception of the family originated in the covenant of grace that bound entire households—including husband, wife, children, servants, and slaves—to God.¹² The head of the household, namely, the father of the home, had not only the condition of his own soul to consider, but also the condition of every other person living under his roof, related by blood or not. Onesimus's status as unsaved was a consequential blight on Mather's record as the ministering father of the household. Mather's own immediate family members also stood to lose providential favor as a result of the slave's status: God's displeasure was much more likely to be felt when households were not uniformly graced by His light.

In keeping with the Puritan incorporation of the slave into the body of the covenanted family, slaves were deeply integrated into the everyday rhythms of colonial social life, but they were also deeply alienated from that life. On the one hand, slaves were the intimate sharers of domestic spaces and the day-to-day patterns of family life; on the other, they were viewed as permanent strangers whose status as such was cemented by both law and custom.¹³

12. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 6–10.

13. I borrow the term 'stranger' from the Body of Liberties of 1641, which allowed for slavery in Massachusetts. It reads: 'It is Ordered by this Court and the Authority thereof; That there shall never be any Bond-slavery, Villenage or Captivity amongst us, unless it be lawful Captives taken in just Wars, [and such strangers] as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us, and such shall have the Liberties and Christian usage which the Law of God established in Israel concerning such persons doth morally require; Provided this exempts none from servitude who shall be judged thereto by Authority.' See Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1930–35), 3: 4.

According to James H. Vaughan, the simultaneous marginalization and integration of slaves into society was made possible by the institutionalization of marginality itself. Slaves came to inhabit an uneasy 'limbic' state in which their assimilated yet alien status became formally recognized as such.¹⁴ Scholars have turned to theories of kinship in order to examine the slave's 'limbic' status within the family structure. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff contend that instances of slavery must be examined along a 'slavery-to-kinship continuum.' According to Miers and Kopytoff, slavery and kinship are not separate spheres, but rather, are the extreme ends of a single continuum. Along that continuum, it is possible to find slaves who are incorporated into the family structure as 'kin,' and blood kin who are relegated to the status of slaves.¹⁵ The authors argue that slavery may be defined as a transfer of kinship rights whereby an individual is reduced not to the status of mere property, but rather to the status of a dependent minor.¹⁶ Claude Meillassoux takes an opposing point of view, arguing that slavery rests not on the possibility of a slave becoming 'kin,' but rather on the juridical impossibility of the slave ever becoming such. According to Meillassoux, slavery is the 'antithesis of kinship' and works 'through the dislocation of the productive and reproductive cycles on which kinship is based.'¹⁷ Orlando Patterson also views slavery as the end of kinship and as a form of 'social death.' Denied his own ancestry and genealogy, the slave becomes a 'socially dead person' who ceases to belong to any recognizable social order.¹⁸ In her own evaluation of the intertwining of slavery and kinship, Joanne Pope Melish argues that slavery in New England might be

14. See James H. Vaughan, 'Mafakur: A Limbic Institution of the Margi,' in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Antropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 85-102.

15. Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, 'African "Slavery" as an Institution of Marginality,' in *Slavery in Africa*, 22-26.

16. Kopytoff and Miers, 'African "Slavery" as an Institution of Marginality,' 66-67.

17. Claude Meillassoux, *The Antropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnois (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 35, 40.

18. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

described as a pattern of kinship 'in which the rights of one class of human beings to reproductive and other social relationships, personhood, and labor have been assigned to another person or persons, as a result of capture and transfer in the market, so that subjects are rendered kinless, depersonalized, and transformed into *things* with the ratification of the law.'¹⁹ If 'kinship' was the means by which slaves were 'rendered kinless,' then Onesimus was caught in the strangest of paradoxes. On the one hand, he was made a permanent stranger by a culture that stripped him of the rights of personhood and viewed him as the property of another. On the other, he was made a member of a family that incorporated him into their hopes for a sanctified household.

Onesimus's position as an unsaved member of the Mather family raises several critical questions about Christianized slavery in New England at the beginning of the eighteenth century. How did the slave's status as saved or unsaved alter his position within the Christian household? What were the social possibilities of the slave who experienced saving grace, and how were those possibilities limited or cut short when he did not? The slaveholder's own motivations and desires are equally worthy of consideration. What could the slaveholder hope to achieve or gain by 'Christianizing' his slave? And in what ways could slaveholding help to illuminate the slaveholder's own relationship to his Maker? Finally, to what extent could the slaveholder imagine his slave as a kind of 'kin'? Mather's experiment in slaveholding was not entirely representative of New England slaveholding in general; indeed, in *The Negro Christianized*, Mather lamented that many slaveholders seemed to lack a proper interest in the spiritual welfare of their slaves. But Mather's practical experiment in Christianized slaveholding does represent a significant case study by which to examine the paradox of slavery as a form of 'kinship' in New England.

19. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 25.

When Mather received Onesimus at the beginning of the eighteenth century, slavery was already well established in New England. The institution found its first footing in the region in 1638, when Puritan settlers exchanged Indian prisoners of war for African slaves from the West Indies.²⁰ While the long-standing myth that slavery in New England was no more than a passing and curious anomaly continues to serve as a powerful fiction in the American imagination, new scholarship has done much to dismantle that fallacy. Although the actual number of slaves in New England never represented more than a small fraction of the population at large, historians have found that slaves played significant roles in the development of the region's culture and economy. In her study of New England's gradual and reluctant disavowal of slavery, Joanne Pope Melish observes that the slave population's period of sharpest growth, from 1700 to 1750, were years that saw a movement away from subsistence production within the home and a simultaneous movement toward more specialized labor outside of the domestic realm. According to Melish, the simultaneous rise in the numbers of slaves in New England and the transformation of the market economy was no coincidence; slave labor had become a critical factor in the expansion of New England's changing economy.²¹ Ira Berlin also finds that the economic impact of slave labor in the North has been severely underestimated. Berlin notes that during the middle decades of the century, the highest concentrations of slaves in the North were typically in urban centers. Initially the domestic servants of the upper classes, slaves later became the property of the artisan middle classes, which became increasingly dependent on their skill, ingenuity, and labor.²² While the Mathers did not depend on slaves for the bread upon their table, Onesimus probably represented a substantial boon—both financial and practical—for the family.

20. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Norton, 1977), 68-69.

21. Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 18-20.

22. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 178-80.

By the time Onesimus arrived at his door, Mather was something of a public advocate on behalf of all slaves. He had provided funds to establish a school for blacks seeking literacy instruction; he also had established a Religious Society for Negroes and invited its members into his own home for spiritual enlightenment. His *Rules for the Society of Negroes*, published in 1693, and *The Negro Christianized*, published in 1706, further bolstered his credibility as an authority on the subject of Christian slaveholding. In *Rules for the Society of Negroes*, Mather speaks for Christian slaves in much the same manner that he speaks for slaves in *The Angel of Bethesda*, but with one critical difference: the Christian slaves 'speaking' here are capable of speaking standard English. The broadside begins: 'We the Miserable Children of *Adam*, and of *Noah*, thankfully Admiring and Accepting the Free-Grace of GOD, that Offers to Save us from our Miseries, by the Lord Jesus Christ, freely Resolve, with His Help, to become the Servants of that Glorious LORD.' That Mather imagined the collective voice of black slaves as indistinguishable from the voice of white Christians suggests that he believed in the fully humanizing potential of Christianity to convert not only the heathenish, but also the racially different. The internal argument of the broadside also invites the possibility of a common genealogy shared by whites and blacks alike: Adam and Noah are ancestral figures to both. Despite such points of connection, the list of rules was unmistakably intended for one population alone. The list begins and ends with injunctions toward the proper keeping of the Sabbath and the proper education of the Christian servant through catechism; the rules that fall between them, however, serve an entirely different purpose: to encourage Negro slaves to monitor and control not only themselves, but also their peers. Rule VII, perhaps the most explicit rule of all, reads: 'We will, as we have Opportunity, set our selves to do all the Good we can, to the other *Negro-Servants* in the Town; And if any of them should, at unfit Hours, be *Abroad*, much more, if any of them should *Run away* from their Masters, we will afford them *no Shelter*: but we

will do what in us lies, that they may be discovered, and punished. And if any of *us*, are found Faulty, in this Matter, they shall be no longer of *us*.' Mather's hope for surveillance within the slave community itself suggests less than charitable motives on the writer's part, but any criticism of the minister must be tempered by the fact that he ultimately hoped that the divide between '*us*' (Christianized slaves) and '*them*' (unconverted slaves) would eventually cease to exist with the successful shepherding of all slaves to the Christian fold.

Mather published *The Negro Christianized* in direct response to the spirited public debate over whether a slave who was baptized should be set free.²³ The argument revolved around the long-standing question of whether one Christian could hold another Christian in perpetual bondage. Mather assured slaveholders that baptism and conversion did not emancipate their property; on the contrary, he argued that religious instruction and conversion were the best means of affirming and legitimizing slavery's place within Puritan society. But the essay indicates that Mather was motivated to compose *The Negro Christianized* for other reasons as well. Outraged by the state of heathen darkness to which many slaveholders had abandoned their charges, Mather wrote:

. . . With what Face can you call yourselves *Christians*, if you do nothing that your *Servants* also may become Christians? A *Face* that has been *Baptized* into the Name of the One GOD, in Three Persons, may Blush to continue unconcerned, Whether the Name of that God, be ever Known or no, in the very *Families* that belong unto them. Are they Worthy to be counted *Christians*, who are content tho' a part of their *Families* remain *Heathen*, who do *not know God*, nor *call upon His Name*? We read, I Tim. 5.8. *If*

23. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1660-1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 257-89. Greene suggests that slaveholders were opposed to baptizing their slaves for a variety of reasons. New Englanders widely believed that only heathen could be held in perpetual bondage. Slaveholders also feared that baptism might make slaves less desirable to potential buyers and might encourage slaves to think of themselves as equal to their masters. Baptism might also give slaves the right to a political voice, since church membership was a prerequisite for political participation. See also Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 197-222, and Lawrence W. Towner, 'The Sewall-Saffin Dialogue on Slavery,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 21 (1964): 40-52.

*any provide not for his own, and especially those of his own house, he has denied the Faith, and is worse than an Infidel.*²⁴

The tone of the passage illustrates Mather's disdain for those New England slaveholders who felt little or no sense of the burden that fell to them with regards to the upbringing of their slaves. Mather saw an inherent contradiction in that posture, arguing that 'no man can Really and Heartily be of any *Religion*, without some Desire to have that *Religion* Propagated.'²⁵

To Mather, the even greater sin was the slaveholder's failure to recognize his own state of enslavement to the one and all-powerful Master:

... It was an Admonition once given; Eph. 5.9. *Masters, Know that your Master is in Heaven.* You will confess, That the God of Heaven is your *Master*. If your Negroes do not comply with your *Commands*, into what Anger, what Language, Perhaps into a misbecoming *Fury*, are you transported. But you are now to attend unto the *Commands* of your more Absolute *Master*; and they are His *commands* concerning your *Negroes* too. What can be more Expressive, than those words of the Christian Law? Col. 4.1. *Masters, give unto your Servants, that which is Just & Equal, knowing that ye also have a Master in Heaven.*²⁶

Here, Mather deftly subsumes the slaveholder's imagined power over his human property with a grim reminder of the slaveholder's own subjection to the higher power that rules over all. To believe in one's own unchecked power is to deny the power of God to punish those who abuse His commands. Although its title trumpets the 'Good Work' of the Christian Negro, Mather's essay is actually about the potential good work of the Christian slaveholder. To his credit, Mather would in subsequent years come to scrutinize his own behavior as a slaveholder as carefully as he would the deeds and actions of his slave.

24. Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 7.

25. Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 8.

26. Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 4-5.

Mather's diary offers fleeting glimpses of what transpired in the family household and what eventually led up to the minister's final decision to release Onesimus a decade after his arrival. In the year 1706, when Onesimus first entered the household, Mather was the forty-four-year-old minister of Boston's prominent North Church, the same church that his father, Increase, once led. Mather was then married to his second wife, Elizabeth Hubbard Clark, and was father to a total of six children (four from his first marriage, to Abigail, who died in 1702, and two from his present marriage to Elizabeth).²⁷ More children were soon to arrive in what must have been a busy and bustling household. Although the family lived in a relative degree of comfort, the Mathers certainly did not enjoy extravagances. In their selection of such a fine gift, the congregation clearly perceived them to be the worthy objects of their collective charity.

Mather recounted the day he received the slave with evident satisfaction. On the thirteenth day of December, in 1706, he wrote:

This Day, a surprising Thing befel me. Some Gentleman of our Church, understanding (without any Application of mine to them for such a Thing,) that I wanted a *good Servant* at the expence of between forty and fifty Pounds, purchased for me, a very likely *Slave*; a young Man, who is a *Negro* of a promising Aspect and Temper, and this Day they presented him unto me. It seems to be a mighty Smile of Heaven upon my Family; and it arrives at an observable Time unto me. I putt upon him the Name of *Onesimus*; and I resolved with the Help of the Lord, that I would use the best Endeavours to make him a Servant of Christ, and also be more serviceable than ever to a Flock, which laies me under such Obligations.²⁸

Given his propensity toward literalizing the Word in his everyday life, Mather chose a name for his new 'gift' that placed both master and slave in a specific biblical context. Onesimus, literally

27. Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 263-64.

28. Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather*, Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed. 2 vols. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1957), 1: 579.

meaning 'serviceable' or 'useful,' was a common name for slaves in antiquity. The specific Onesimus that Mather invoked was the biblical slave whose story is related in Paul's epistle to Philemon. Unhappy with the conditions of his life, Onesimus fled from his owner, Philemon, committing the theft of not only his person but probably also of his master's possessions. On his flight from Colossae, Onesimus was arrested and subsequently imprisoned. In prison, he met an unlikely prisoner, Paul, who befriended and converted him. Tempted to send his new convert abroad to spread the message of the gospel, Paul resisted the impulse and instead sent the runaway slave back to his owner to make amends for his crimes. With Onesimus serving as his secretary, Paul dictated a letter that asked Philemon to embrace his returned slave not as property, but rather, as 'above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me.' More specifically, the letter asks Philemon to consider the ties of Christian brotherhood that bind him to his slave as above the ties that bind the slave to him as material property. Indeed, Christ's ownership of his followers comes before any other forms of ownership that might structure social life among men, a tenet that Mather repeatedly used as a refrain in *The Negro Christianized*.

Significantly, despite its frequent adoption by those who decried the inhumanity of slavery, Paul's epistle is not explicitly 'antislavery': nowhere in the letter does he urge Philemon to emancipate his slave.²⁹ But the epistle is antislavery in spirit, as it reminds the reader that any temporal ownership of a Christian by another Christian must be mitigated by the fact that God owns all creatures, no matter their station in life. Paul asks of Philemon a new recognition of Onesimus as a Christian and therefore a peer; only in the much less consequential sphere of human affairs should Onesimus be considered a runaway slave. By naming his own slave Onesimus, Mather implicitly invited a sense of equality between them, based on their mutual condition of debasement in

29. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 86-87.

the eyes of the Lord. Humbled by his congregation's generosity toward him, the minister also painted an image of his own enslavement to those who supported him. Despite his stature in New England history and his status within the community, Mather felt obliged to 'be more serviceable than ever' to his congregation, a phrase that suggests that he, too, might aptly be named 'Onesimus.' In giving their minister a slave, the congregation had in effect acquired another.

After the happy occasion of Onesimus's arrival, Mather did not refer to his slave again in his diary until five years later. When he did return to the subject, the occasion was not a happy one. On December 9, 1711, he wrote:

G. D. I must keep a strict Eye on my Servant *Onesimus*; especially with regard unto his Company. But I must particularly endeavour to bring him unto Repentance, for some Actions of a thievish Aspect. Herein I must endeavour that there be no old Theft of his unrepented of, and left without Restitution.

But then, upon every observable Miscarriage of any Person in my Family, I must make my Flight unto the Blood of my Saviour, as a Family-Sacrifice; that so the Wrath of God may be turned away from my Family.³⁰

Some explanation of Mather's idiosyncratic diary-keeping habits is necessary here. Beginning in 1711, Mather changed the way he composed and arranged his diary entries.³¹ In previous years, Mather kept his diary entries separate from his 'Contrivances to do good.' In 1711, however, he began to incorporate these plans into the diary itself.³² He now began nearly every diary entry with the initials 'G.D.,' meaning 'Good Devised.' As a result, the contents of the diary shifted from what he had accomplished to what he intended to accomplish; the retrospective now gave way to the

30. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 139.

31. E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Family Literacy in Early Eighteenth-Century Boston: Cotton Mather and His Children,' *Reading Research Quarterly* 26 (1991): 351.

32. Monaghan, 'Family Literacy in Early Eighteenth-Century Boston.'

prospective.³³ The 'Good Devised' in the entry that Mather composed with regards to his slave was as much a warning for the minister as it was for Onesimus. Because the 'Good Devised' signified Mather's intentions for the future, it is difficult to tell if or how the minister executed his intentions of making Onesimus recognize his own transgressions. It is impossible to determine, as well, how Mather's efforts were rewarded, or if they were rewarded at all. What is possible to conjecture from the diary is that Mather perceived Onesimus's fortunes as closely bound up with the fortunes of his family. The tone of grim determination that underscores the entry suggests that if Onesimus posed a challenge to his master's skills, the master would respond with redoubled effort.

Two years later, Mather again referred to his slave: 'G. D. My Negro-Servant, is one more Easily govern'd and managed, by the Principles of Reason, agreeably offered unto him, than by any other methods. I would oftener call him aside, and assay to reason him into a good Behaviour.'³⁴ One must wonder what principles other than those of 'Reason' Mather tried using without success with Onesimus. Indeed, Mather's 'Principles of Reason' would not have diverged dramatically from his 'Principles of Faith,' as logic, reason, and rationality were in the Puritan mind divine gifts that God in His goodness bestowed upon mankind after the fall.³⁵ But the entry does suggest the failure of a certain tactic pursued by the minister and an ongoing but uneasy negotiation between them.

Later that year, Mather wrote again of his servant. The entry gives the reader a clearer picture of how Mather intended to discipline his slave and win his cooperation. 'G. D. There are several Points, relating to the Instruction and Management of my Servant *Onesimus*, which I would now more than ever prosecute. He shall be sure to read every Day. From thence I will have him go

33. Monaghan, 'Family Literacy in Early Eighteenth-Century Boston.'

34. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 222.

35. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 111-53.

on to Writing. He shall be frequently Catechised. I would also invent some advantageous Way, wherein he may spend his Leisure-hours.³⁶ Deeply involved in the education and religious upbringing of his children, Mather was probably also involved in the improvement of his slaves. Mather's diary abounds with references to the ways in which he devoted himself to the education and spiritual life of those under his keeping: reading scripture aloud to his wife, children, and servants; using such occasions for prayer and reflection about their own daily lives; asking his children, once they could read, to recite catechism, and then to compose essays in response to assignments he had given them on a particular topic.³⁷ It is unclear how often Mather demanded recitation from Onesimus, but he seems to have believed that the spiritual improvement that came with these practices could as easily be acquired by his slaves as by his children.

There is at least one indication in Mather's diary that the minister combined opportunities for teaching his own children with opportunities for teaching his slaves. In the following entry, Mather illustrates the centrality of devotion in his family's daily life:

I went down unto my Family, where I catechized the Children, and went through the Sermons of the Day with them, in the way of a Dialogue; and Sang and Prayed with them, and with the neighbours that came in, to join with us.

Then I caused the Children to tell me, what new matter of prayer they were now apprehensive of? And Charged them to Retire with it before the Lord.

I also made one of them, to hear the Negro-Servant Say his Catechism.³⁸

36. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 271-72.

37. See Monaghan, 'Family Literacy in Early Eighteenth-Century Boston,' 352-58. See also E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Early America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 120-40.

38. Cotton Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather, D.D., F.R.S. for the Year 1712*, ed. William R. Manierre II (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964), 69.

The entry raises more questions than it answers. Where exactly was Onesimus when the family was occupied with its daily devotions? Was the slave invited to join in the children's lessons, or was his spiritual education set apart from the rest of the family's? These are tantalizing questions that vexingly remain unaddressed by Mather. The entry does, however, show that the responsibility to educate Onesimus fell not only to the minister but also to other members of the family. Here we see one of Mather's children tasked with the duty of hearing Onesimus's recitation of catechism. That the child in question may have been six-year-old Sammy, who then was already proficient in reading both English and Latin, is testimony to Mather's careful attention to the intellectual development of his children.³⁹

From these diary entries, we know that Onesimus could read, and, if Mather had his way, would one day be able to write. It is something of a historical oddity that Mather was invested in teaching his slave to read and write: a little over a century later, these were the very skills that Southern slaveholders feared in their slaves. As illustrated in the slave narratives of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the ability to read gave slaves an opportunity to realize the magnitude and scope of their own degradation; the ability to write gave them a chance to devise ways to freedom.⁴⁰ At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, slaveholders such as Mather entertained no such fears. The cultural signification of reading and writing during Mather's own era requires some consideration.

In eighteenth-century New England, the ability to write was not as critical a skill as reading; writing during this time period was typically a means of note-taking and recording, such as was required in business, and had little to do with personal expression or the construction of personal identity.⁴¹ Reading, on the other

39. Silverman, *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 268.

40. See E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 108 (1998): 309-41.

41. Monaghan, 'Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free,' 314-15.

hand, was a Christian necessity. As David D. Hall has argued in his influential study of popular religion in early New England, becoming literate was synonymous with becoming religious.⁴² The high premium placed on literacy was tied to the belief that the Bible contained the 'voice' of God and as such could be 'heard' by anyone who could read.⁴³ The ability to read the Bible on one's own offered a way for the Protestant to reach God without the pomp and circumstance of the Catholic rites of worship that required the authority of a university-educated minister.⁴⁴ In New England, much of the authority rested with individual readers who could read Scripture for themselves and who could judge its authenticity by the motions of their own faith.⁴⁵

What might literacy have signified to Onesimus? In the absence of his own thoughts on the matter, it is impossible to gauge with any precision his own personal response to the education that was imposed upon him. Besides the few catechisms composed especially for Negroes, such as are found in Mather's *The Negro Christianized*, there are few historical sources that reveal how slaves were educated, and whether their education differed from that which was received by their masters' children. We do know that from the Puritan standpoint, the slave's mind was not unlike the child's: a highly impressionable slate upon which Satan had already imprinted his own image. The only remedy for the dire condition into which all children were born was catechism, by which Satan's image was gradually replaced with God's.⁴⁶ To be reluctant in the reading of catechism was not only to be a wayward pupil; it was also to be the willing agent of Satan. It was imperative, then, that slaves be trained to read catechism, by which means their own innate sinfulness would be eradicated.

42. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 18, 21-70.

43. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 24.

44. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 24.

45. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 24-25.

46. Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America From the New England Primer to the Scarlet Letter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 57.

Rehearsed in these terms, Onesimus's education would have been inseparable from his master's attempts to convert him.

Although Mather might have viewed him as a child, Onesimus was probably long past childhood in actual years. In the following entry, we learn something of the 'private' life that Onesimus led in spite of his station as a slave. 'G.D. Having allowed unto my Servant Onesimus, the conveniences of the Married State, and great Opportunities to get money for himself, I would from hence take occasion mightily to inculcate on him, his obligations to keep the Rules of Piety, and Honesty; and Particularly Charge him, to devote Part of his gains to Pious Uses.'⁴⁷ It is unclear whether Onesimus's wife lived in the Mather household or elsewhere in town. Equally uncertain is her status either as a free woman or as the property of another slaveholder.⁴⁸ The diary's silence on the matter suggests that she did not reside under the same roof as her husband and that Mather felt little obligation to concern himself with her welfare, spiritual or otherwise. That Mather allowed Onesimus the chance to work for his own wages indicates that she lived elsewhere and depended upon her husband's financial support. Mather's language on the subject suggests that he saw himself as a model of benevolence in granting Onesimus the privileges of matrimony and independent wage-earning.

The children that resulted from this union do not immediately register in Mather's diary. Sadly, when they do appear in the diary, their appearances concern their untimely departures from the earth. In the first weeks of 1714, Mather wrote: 'My Servant burying of his Son, it gives me an Opportunity, to inculcate agreeable Admonitions of Piety upon him.'⁴⁹ Just two years later, Mather

47. Mather, *Diary for the Year 1712*, 83.

48. Silverman, *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 264. In researching Mather's life for the biography, Silverman was evidently unable to learn anything of Onesimus's wife. Silverman mentions the death of only one son in 1714. Monaghan reads the two diary entries as relating to two of Onesimus's deceased children, as I do. See her note 79 to the chapter 'Death and Literacy in Two Devout Boston Families' in *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. For a detailed description of marital relationships among slaves in New England, see Greene's chapter 'The Slave Family' in *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 191-217.

49. Mather, *Diary*, 2:282.

wrote a disturbingly similar entry: 'My Servant has newly buried his Son; (*Onesimus* his *Onesimulus*). Lett me make this an Occasion of inculcating the Admonitions of Piety upon him.'⁵⁰ Mather was well versed in the practice of transforming the grief of losing a child into the Christian practice of humility and piety. By this time, he had already lost nine of his fifteen children. Just a few months after the death of Onesimus's second child, Mather himself would watch a tenth child, Katharine (or Katy, as she was usually called), die, probably due to consumption.⁵¹ In providing Christian comfort to his bereaved slave, Mather was relying on well-rehearsed themes on the imminence of death and the transience of earthly life that Puritans developed in response to their anxieties about childhood mortality. Parents were sternly warned to avoid the excesses of parental affection and were encouraged to keep a certain distance between themselves and their offspring. Indeed, parents were constantly reminded that they did not 'own' their children; God did. Whether or not it was effective, the cultural mandate for such distance was probably intended to keep parents from excessively grieving over the loss of a child.⁵² Because approximately one out of every four children born between 1640 and 1759 died before the age of ten, parents were well advised to prepare for such a possibility.⁵³

If the unfortunate pun of 'Onesimulus' as the 'simulacrum' of his father Onesimus is any indication, Mather used the death of the child as a reminder that the father's end, like the child's, was near. Both father and child could not know their ultimate fate in the hands of an inscrutable God, but the father, unlike the child, could try in life to discover the motions of God's grace within him, a chance that the child had now lost forever. The uncertainty that surrounded the fate of children surely haunted Mather

50. Mather, *Diary*, 2:342.

51. See Silverman, *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, for a full description of the fate of all of Mather's children. See p. 292 for a description of Katharine's (Katy's) death.

52. David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 58.

53. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 55.

himself, as his own deceased children did not remain in this world long enough to experience conversion. In the years to come, Mather would be particularly affected by the death of his favorite son, Increase (affectionately called 'Creasy' by his family), who was lost at sea in 1724. A wayward child, Creasy from the start showed none of the academic promise that his father had exhibited at a precociously early age. And unlike both his grandfather (after whom he was named) and his father, Creasy was by temperament and inclination totally unfit for the ministry. Difficult as it was for Mather to relinquish his expectations for this most favored son, the worst was yet to come. The ship that Creasy had boarded in Barbados was reported to have foundered at sea. As far as his father knew, Creasy at the time of his death had not experienced saving faith.⁵⁴ Mather agonized over his son's uncertain spiritual condition. If Creasy never experienced conversion in his lifetime, God had possibly overlooked him in the election of saints. If in his final days Creasy did experience some faith, then there might be reason to hope. In the absence of certain signs of faith, Mather was forced to hope for the best. For Mather, the death of this son was a terrible and final separation from which he was slow to recover.⁵⁵

In the months after his second child's death, Onesimus's waywardness precipitated a separation of a different kind. In August of 1716, Mather wrote: 'G. D. My Servant *Onesimus*, proves wicked, grows useless, Froward, Immorigerous. My Disposing of him, and my Supplying of my Family with a better Servant in his Room, requires much Caution, much Prayer, much Humiliation before the Lord. Repenting of what may have offended Him, in, the Case of my Servants, I would wait on Him, for his Mercy.'⁵⁶

54. For a more detailed analysis of the effect that Creasy's death had upon Mather, see Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 387-90. According to Silverman, Mather found some hope in a note that Creasy had left upon his father's table before his departure. The note, entitled 'Instrument of a Soul repenting and returning to GOD,' promises reformed behavior and a more saintly path in the future.

55. After Mather received word of the shipwreck, he returned helplessly again and again to the topic of his son's death in the diary. Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 389.

56. Mather, *Diary*, 2:363.

Mather finally relinquished all hope of conveying to Onesimus the dire consequences of his behavior. Although Mather's records do not reveal the exact nature of Onesimus's transgressions within the household, we know that his becoming 'Froward' (meaning 'obstinate,' or 'stubbornly disobedient') and 'Immorigerous' (meaning 'uncivil') was the final straw for the minister. Onesimus's willful behavior may have been the result of the 'freedom' he had been granted to earn his own wages and to interact with other Africans in town. His marriage and his maintaining of a separate household may have also contributed to his distinctly 'unservant-like' behavior. Whatever the reasons for his extreme incivility, Mather found that such behavior dangerously overturned the notions of servility and debasement that the minister had come to associate with the condition of all Christian servants, enslaved or free. The offending member of the family must now be excised from the household with care.

In a memo preserved at the American Antiquarian Society, Mather outlined the conditions by which he would release Onesimus and grant him his freedom. That Mather was in the throes of considerable indecision and anxiety as he drafted these conditions seems evident from the document itself. Several lines are vigorously crossed out, and words added in the margins. The conditions that Mather let stand read as follows:

My servant *Onesimus*, having advanced a Summ, towards the purchase of a Negro-Lad, who may serve many occasions of my Family in his Room, I do by this Instrument, Release him so far from my Service and from the claims that any under or after me might make unto him, that he may Enjoy and Employ his whole Time for his own purposes, and as he pleases. But upon these conditions. First, that he do every Evening visit my Family, and prepare and bring in, the Fuel for the day following, so Long as the Incapacity of my present Servant, shall oblige us to Judge it necessary: As also, in great snows, appear seasonably with the help of the Shovel, as there shall be occasion.

Secondly, that when the Family shall have any Domestic Business more than the Daily affairs, he shall be ready, upon being told

of it so far to Lend an helping Hand, as will give no Large nor Long Interruption to the Business, of his own, to which I have dismissed him; As particularly, to carry corn unto the mill, and help in the fetching of water for the washing, if we happen to be destitute. And in the piling of our wood, at the season of its coming in.

Whereas also, the said *Onesimus* has gott the money which he has advanced as above-mention'd, from the Liberties he took, while in my Service, and for some other Considerations, I do expect, that he do within six months pay me the sum of Five Pounds, wherein he acknowledged himself Endebted unto me.⁵⁷

Although Mather viewed Onesimus's dismissal from the household as a 'release,' it might be more accurately described as an 'exchange': by the conditions set forth by Mather, the slave was to trade the five pounds that he anticipated from his future labor for a larger sphere of freedom than he had previously enjoyed. The memo suggests that in the early eighteenth century, 'freedom' was a relative term that required further qualification when applied to blacks. Indeed, Boston's selectmen had already set a precedent for qualifying the state of freedom for the population of free blacks living there. Because they did not contribute to the common good by participating in military drills or the town's night watches (blacks were, after all, viewed as the primary instigators of nocturnal crime and disorder), free blacks were assigned other forms of labor, most commonly, the cleaning of highways and streets. Such civic-minded labor was not optional. In the selectmen's minutes are numerous listings of those who had been singled out for such labor, along with the days of labor that each had been assigned.⁵⁸

57. Cotton Mather, undated and unidentified letters and fragments, Mather Family Papers, 1613-1819, Box 5, Folder 1. American Antiquarian Society. The memo has been reproduced in Mather, *Diary*, 2:363, but the lines that were crossed out have been omitted from the transcription.

58. Other orders concerning free blacks were contemporaneous with Mather's slaveholding experiment. In 1714, for example, the selectmen 'do order the Free negro's mulattos &c. within this Town, hereafter named, each one of them, diligently to attend, and worke, on cleaning or repairing the H. wayes, and other services, of this town, at Such time and places as the Select men or Such person or persons whom they Shall appoint, Shall order and direct, for the Space of So many dayes as is here after Set down against each of their names respectively, as an equivalent to 'Trainings Watchings &c. . . .' *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, 1701-15*, 22 vols. (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1876-90), 11: 210.

Such records indicate that the town kept careful track of the free blacks among them. Mather's demand for further labor from his 'freed' slave was thus in perfect keeping with his times. It was generally understood that to be a 'free' black in New England was to lead a life that was closely monitored and constrained by whites.

In the last passage of the memo, Mather wrote that Onesimus himself recognized a debt of five pounds to his master. But the lines that Mather struck out from this passage are perhaps more revealing than what he let stand. The passage is here again reproduced, but this time, with the struck-out lines included:

Whereas also, the said *Onesimus* has gott the money which he has advanced as above-mention'd, from the Liberties he took, while in my Service, and for some other Considerations, ~~and I now stand obliged to provide for him in case of Sickness or Lameness, and he also may still repair to my Family for his Debt, and he has himself made the offer, I shall expect, that after the forth Day of March next, he pay to me of his earnings, pay me after the rate of Ten Shillings per week, until I shall see myself it reasonable to release him also from this Engagement~~ I do expect, that he do within six months pay me the sum of Five Pounds, wherein he acknowledged himself Endebted unto me.⁵⁹

Here, Mather literally cancels out the obligations that he at first considered himself under as Onesimus's former slaveholder. In Mather's revised thinking, the slaveholder is no longer 'obliged' to serve as the former slave's insurance policy against disaster—personal, financial, or otherwise. And in further severing the ties between them, Mather preferred that Onesimus's debts be paid in full and at once, not in the extended manner that he at first proposed. In these crossed-out lines, we catch a rare glimpse of Mather at work, revising and rethinking the ties of kinship upon which Christianized slavery rested. Here, the minister seemed to wrestle with the fiction that Christianized slavery enabled: That is, that Mather could serve at once as master and father to his

59. See note 57 above.

slave, and that Onesimus could stand in for both servant and son. In crossing out the lines that would have guaranteed a standing place for Onesimus within the family structure, Mather was crossing out the possibility that kinship could transcend the reality of slavery as a system that bartered in human souls.

And yet, despite Mather's attempt to negate the fiction of 'kinship,' his dismissal of Onesimus from the household can in some ways be read as the figurative 'death' of a son. If Creasy was lost to Mather, it was in large part because of the son's unregenerate status upon his death. Even more than death, Creasy's failure to experience conversion separated him from his father. Indeed, in just the way that Creasy was lost, Onesimus, too, was now lost. The decision to allow this figurative 'son' to go his own way was a solemn and difficult one for Mather, as made evident by the tortured drafting of this memo. Of his mode of child-rearing, Mather once wrote: 'To be chased for a while out of *my Presence*, I would make to be look'd upon, as the sorest Punishment in the Family.'⁶⁰ In chasing Onesimus from his presence forever, Mather may have hoped that the slave would experience their separation as the severest of all punishments. In this instance, however, there was no indication that the 'child' would be allowed to return.

Mather's other option for disposing of his slave was to sell him directly through the slave market. By 1716, the private selling of slaves had become something of a common practice, judging by the growing numbers of slave-for-sale advertisements that appeared in the *Boston News-Letter*, New England's first newspaper, which began circulation in 1704.⁶¹ The notorious public auction blocks of the Southern colonies that later became the stuff of nightmare in nineteenth-century slave narratives bore little resemblance

60. Mather, *Diary*, 1:536.

61. For a detailed analysis of the long history of advertising slaves for sale in the *Boston News-Letter*, see Robert E. Desrochers, Jr., 'Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 59 (2002): 623-64. Desrochers calculates that the newspaper had assisted in the sale of more than five hundred slaves by the end of 1720.

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that any
could be
afterwards
made was
been

My Servant Onesimus, having
advanced a sum, towards the
purchase of a Negro-Lad, who
may serve ~~you~~ many occasions
of my Family in his Room, I do
by this Instrument, Release
him so far from my Service, that
he may enjoy his whole Time
for his own purposes, I at the
pleasure of ~~you~~ But upon
these conditions, ~~that~~

First, that he do every Evening
visit my Family, & prepare
to bring in, ye next day
following, so long as ~~you~~
ye Incapacity of my present
Servant, shall ~~be~~ oblig'd us
to Judge it necessary. He
do also, in great Snows, ap-
pear reasonably ~~early~~
with ye help of ye Snow,
as thin shall be occasion.

Secondly, that when ye
Family shall have any
urgent domestic Business more
than ye daily ~~business~~
shall be ready, upon being
told of it, so far to lend in
helping hand, as will ~~not~~
we have nor long journey-
men to that Business, which
of his own, which I have
express'd care; He particularly
to carry concerning ye will,

Cotton Mather, Memorandum detailing the conditions for the release of his Servant Onesimus, Mather Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 1. American Antiquarian Society. Recto and verso shown.

and to help in the building of
water for the works, if it happens
to be deficient. And ~~on~~ on the
season of ~~the~~ wood coming in, he
shall also send his hand ~~in~~
supply of ~~the~~ plenty of ~~the~~ wood
at the season of its coming in.

And for
some other
considerations,

Whom as also, ~~the~~ ~~is~~ ~~our~~
- ~~sums~~ ~~has~~ ~~got~~ ~~ye~~ ~~money~~
which he has advanced ~~me~~
at a ~~low~~-~~interest~~, which for
of ~~the~~ ~~sums~~ ~~he~~ ~~took~~, which ~~is~~
my service, and I ~~am~~ ~~not~~
obliged to provide for him in
case of ~~his~~ ~~death~~ or ~~his~~ ~~illness~~,
and he also ~~is~~ ~~not~~ ~~bound~~
to my family for his ~~debt~~,
and he ~~is~~ ~~not~~ ~~bound~~ ~~to~~
ye office. I shall expect, that
after ~~the~~ ~~first~~ ~~day~~ ~~of~~ ~~March~~
next, he ~~is~~ ~~not~~ ~~bound~~ ~~to~~
pay me after
3 ~~years~~ ~~of~~ ~~his~~ ~~service~~, ~~for~~
which, ~~and~~ ~~if~~ ~~it~~ ~~is~~ ~~not~~ ~~found~~
it reasonable to release him
also from this engagement.
I do expect, that he do
within six months pay
me ye sum of two
hundred, which he
acknowledgeth himself
owed me.

to the Boston slave markets of more than a century before. Far more often, slaves in New England were exchanged through private means, the transactions often occurring right in the owner's (and hence the slave's) own home.⁶² Such transactions, facilitated by the advertisement columns of the newspapers, made the exchange of slaves a relatively 'civilized' matter in comparison to what was to follow. Despite such conveniences, Mather revealingly chose the more ambiguous route of emancipation that released Onesimus into the strange territory of black 'freedom.' It is significant that the minister decided to forego the considerable profit that the sale of a slave could potentially have brought him. Onesimus was perhaps no longer 'kin,' but he was still much more to Mather than the term 'property' would imply.

Onesimus's emancipation did not spell the end of Mather's career as a slaveholder. A year after parting ways with his slave, Mather noted in his diary: 'A strange Providence of GOD, has brought into my Family a new Servant; A Negro Boy of promising Circumstances.'⁶³ As with Onesimus, Mather bestowed upon this slave a name to remind the boy of his station in this life and the next: Obadiah, a name meaning 'servant of the Lord.' But as in the case of Onesimus, Mather had little luck in achieving his slaveholding ambitions. In the two other diary entries alluding to Obadiah, Mather reminded himself of the need for renewing his own efforts to make the boy redeem the promises of his name.⁶⁴ Mather probably achieved his greatest success as a slaveholder with Ezer, the third and last slave who made a repeated appearance in his diary. It is unclear when Ezer arrived in the Mather household; his master made no note of it. But Ezer must have fulfilled at least some of the long-standing hopes of his master by receiving baptism—the only slave of Mather's who seems to have done so.⁶⁵ In a letter to

62. Desrochers, 'Slave-For-Sale Advertisements,' 629.

63. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 477.

64. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 547, 562.

65. In his diary Mather makes several references to the care with which he must prepare Ezer for baptism. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 603, 624, 663, 672, 676.

the Reverend Thomas Prince, Mather not only confirmed Ezer's successful entry into the church, but also asked his esteemed colleague to baptize Ezer's children, who apparently belonged to Prince.⁶⁶

Despite his success with Ezer, these last entries lack the original enthusiasm that marked Mather's earlier allusions to his project in Christian slaveholding. The entries also lack the original anguish that Mather so obviously felt when his dreams of transforming Onesimus into a servant of the Lord ended in failure. One probable reason for these differences was that by 1722, the year in which Ezer was baptized, Mather's own life had taken dramatic turns for the worse. With his third marriage, to Lydia George, Mather acquired her family's financial debts and responsibilities. Money matters had plagued Mather throughout his life; now the burden seemed heavier than ever before.⁶⁷ Following in the footsteps of the famous Increase Mather was also proving to be an increasingly difficult task for his son. In its search for a new president, Harvard College, which appointed Increase to the presidency twice, had passed over his son for that position precisely as many times. During these years, Mather was also forced to confront the prospect of his father's death. For better or worse, Increase had always cast a long shadow on his son's life and fortunes. After a long illness, Increase died in 1723. Cotton Mather would outlive his father by only five years.

Paralleling Mather's personal decline seemed to be a decline of New England itself. The New England Way that early Puritan founders established as the foundation of life in the colonies was now threatened at every turn by dissent from within and opposition from without.⁶⁸ To Mather, slave uprisings provided further

66. 'Our Servant, Ezer, after a due Examination of his Knowledge and Beleef, and a due Testimony of his Good Conversation, was Received into the Covenant of GOD, and Baptised Lately with us. For which Cause, his offspring (whereof I hear, part is newly born in your Family, is humbly recommended unto the Christian Baptism with you, by, Sir, Your Brother and Servt. CO MATHER. Feb. 24. 1721[-22].' Mather, *Diary*, 2: 683.

67. Silverman, *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 312-20.

68. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 466-78.

evidence that New England was straying from the path of Christian righteousness. In a letter to his friend Thomas Prince, Mather lamented the fate of a slave who had rebelled by committing arson:

In the circumstances of the poor creature who is this week to die by the sword of justice, there is a voice of God crying to the city—not only the condition of such slaves is worthy to be considered, but also the threatenings which there have been of laying the town in ashes, are speaking things. I would humbly propose to you, and entreat of you, to bend your holy studies a little this way for your approaching lecture.⁶⁹

Mather's cryptic letter suggests that the fate of Boston was somehow tied to the fate of slaves, whose 'condition' had been sorely overlooked by those who profited from them. Rebellious slaves were ostensibly the ones who were responsible for the 'threatenings' to 'lay . . . the town in ashes,' but in the minister's biblical imagination, the potential disaster became prophetically apocalyptic for a town that had forsaken its Christian duties to its slaves.

After Onesimus's release, Mather still inquired after his former slave's spiritual condition and continued to hope for his conversion. One year after parting ways with him, Mather berated himself yet again for failing to inculcate faith in his former servant: 'I fear I have not been so frequent and fervent and particular, as I should have been, in my Prayers for the converting Influences of Heaven, on the Soul of my Servant *Onesimus*. Who can tell, what may be done for him, and what a new Creature he may become, if more prayers were employ'd for him!'⁷⁰ Returning to the theme of imminent death as reason enough for reflection on the state of one's soul, Mather wrote a few months later: '*Onesimus's Recovery from a dangerous Fitt of Sickness, must be improv'd for his*

69. Cotton Mather, *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1971), 367–68.

70. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 446.

Awakening to Piety.⁷¹ Whether or not this 'Awakening' ever came must be left to conjecture, as Mather's last entry about his former slave still anticipated a change but did not report it.

In his writings about inoculation during and after the smallpox epidemic of 1721-22, Mather repeatedly referred to the testimony that Onesimus had offered to him in 1716, the last year of their association as master and slave. There is no historical evidence that Mather again consulted his former slave when the disease was actually threatening the town of Boston. The minister's writings suggest that he continued to place unwavering trust in Onesimus's testimony, despite the public ridicule and skepticism that he endured because of it.⁷² It is significant to note that Mather entrusted the life of his own son Sammy to the preventative measure that Onesimus had proposed. After a frightful fever and a more severe outbreak of pocks than would normally have been expected from inoculation, Sammy made a full recovery.⁷³ What Mather endured during this time of perilous uncertainty can only be imagined. Inoculation, he knew, did not absolutely guarantee survival. There was a distinct possibility that he would be forced to bear the burden of his son's death. But even in such times of extremity, Mather never questioned the word of his slave. To Mather, even a stranger could be worthy of an extreme act of faith.

71. Mather, *Diary*, 2: 456.

72. See Minardi, 'The Boston Inoculation Controversy of 1721-1722,' for more on Mather's primary critic during the epidemic: William Douglass, Boston's only degreed physician who scorned and ridiculed the minister for advocating inoculation and for believing in the testimony of slaves.

73. Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 347-48.

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