

# THE POLITICAL PREACHER

Reverend Joseph Rayner Stephens (1805–1879)

Independent Chapel, Ashton-under-Lyne, 6 January 1839

I am well aware, my brethren, that I have long been charged—indeed have always been charged—with a deviation, a positive departure from the line of duty prescribed to the profession of which I am an unworthy member, though I trust an upright, a sincere, and a devoted one. It is said that I have dis-honored and desecrated the holy office by neglecting the purely religious and spiritual claims which the Church has made upon the time, the talents, and the influence of her ministers; by postponing the discussion of abstract doctrines, the tenets of a metaphysically-reasoned system of theology or the admitted articles of a settled and established orthodoxy; and instead of this, or before this, or along with this, insisting on the obligation the whole Christian world is under to carry into actual, visible, immediate practice the plain precepts of that religion whose first and last and only law on earth is that we should love our neighbor as ourself, doing unto others as we would they should do unto us.

I have gone on to enquire whether the principles of the factory system, for instance, are in accordance with the precepts of our most holy religion. Whether Christian mill-owners are justified in pursuing a system of manufacture which has done more to injure the health, impair the constitution, and demoralize the character of a vast mass of our population than any other recorded in history, which has made such a fearful waste of the natural, the social, and the moral life of our industrious countrymen that it has become a question not only whether the silken cord that should bind society in love can any longer hold her various members within its soft and peaceful circle, but whether the race itself, the human breed, be not so far degenerate as to threaten imbecility, idiocy, or actual extinction to a most extensive and alarming degree? I have asked, especially, whether the principles of our modern political economy can be made to quadrate with the statements of divine revelation. Whether it be indeed true that the earth is too small for its inhabitants, whether the beings born into the world are indeed too many and multiply too fast for its harvests, the production of its husbandry, and the supplies that lie hidden in the mysterious, inexhaustible storehouses of the great Creator of Heaven and Earth.

It is the imperative duty of every man to do all he can to restore his country to moral health and social soundness again by the love he bears to his brethren, by the reverence he bears to the ashes of his fathers, and by the oath that binds him in cheerful allegiance to the God of all his mercies. But most of all are the clergy called to this solemn service—the ministers of religion are the ambassadors of the Most High, the representatives of Jesus.

The Bible shows us that every conspiracy against the liberties of nations is composed, in equal parts, of wicked prophets and wicked princes, the joint rulers, elders and shepherds of the people. Would the clergy of England, even now, at the eleventh hour, in God's name and in God's behalf "judge the fatherless and plead for the widow,"<sup>1</sup> less than twelve months might change this wilderness into a broad field of fertility and beauty. Should they, on the other hand, unhappily hold their peace when they behold the wickedness that is committed in the land, join hands with the layman in grinding the faces of the poor, less than twelve months may seal the doom of both and bring down upon all, our cup already all but running over, the righteous vengeance our sins have merited.

Moses, who, with his own hand "slew the Egyptian" whom "he spied smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren"<sup>2</sup> was entrusted with the thunderbolts of an avenging God. To an earthly eye there appeared no token of a

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<sup>1</sup> Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17, KJV)

<sup>2</sup> And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. (Exodus 2:11–12, KJV)

superintending Providence. The “law” was enforced, and there were none to deliver the hapless bondsmen who sighed and groaned to heaven as vainly, it might have seemed, as they cried and prayed to the legally-appointed commissioners and guardians who were charged with the execution of the Act by which the Israelites were restrained from multiplying to the Malthusian point of a “surplus population”. But though around was lamentation and woe, tribulation and anguish; though hope had fled away, and dark despair settled brooding with black wing upon dreary Goshen, where they dwelt; yet it is written, written to warn the wicked and cheer the drooping sufferers of a much more bloody age; it is written, read it proud oppressor of the poor and tremble; read it way-worn wanderer, lonely widow, broken-hearted mother weeping for thy children because they are not; read it ye outcasts of men and put your trust in God, Who is indeed “nigh at hand and not afar off.”<sup>1</sup>

The children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried; and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them.<sup>2</sup>

I need not follow Moses in the career of vengeance, which he was commanded to pursue

I instance Egypt because it shows you that the boasted discovery of Malthus, though decked out in all the bravery of a deceitful philosophy and paraded with all the pomp and circumstance of “science falsely so-called” is nothing more than a metempsychosis of the idolatry of the darkest ages of the world, a revival of the bloody practices of the most savage, immoral, and inhuman nations, the first and, I hope, the last attempt ever made in Christendom to abolish the holy laws of Jesus and bring these “kingdoms of our God and of His Christ” under his dominion who has been “a liar and a murderer from the beginning.”<sup>3</sup>

I instance Egypt because I wish every Christian citizen, and especially every Christian minister, to compare the condition of the Israelites under their taskmasters with the condition of Englishmen under the social slavery beneath which they groan. I call upon my fellow-countrymen generally, upon my brother clergymen of all denominations particularly, to institute this comparison. They will then find that in every point of the comparison their Christian brethren, born in the same land, heiring the same rights, baptized into the same faith, equally with themselves the redeemed of the Lord “groan being burdened”<sup>4</sup> with a heavier and far more bitter yoke.

We are nowhere told that in Egypt the men were worked so hard or had to work so long as our fellow countrymen have; nor that the women were doomed to do man’s work; nor that little children were driven to work at all as children and women are everywhere forced to do in the cornfields, the coal pits, and the cotton mills of Christian England. There is nothing said of hunger or nakedness, or roaming houseless abroad; of filth, rags, starvation, and misery such as is at this hour the hapless lot of millions of our fellow countrymen. Nor was the “law” to strangle and drown every male child half so inhuman, half so horrible a mode of “legislating for the independence and comfort” of the people “lest they should multiply” too fast and become too many for the security of the estates of their representatives, as the plan adopted and carried out by Christian statesmen in our own country under the provisions of the “Poor Law Amendment Act.”

The Israelites still had their home and their hearth, their wife and such of their children as did not come under the “provisions of the act.” They “dealt” mercifully as well as “wisely” with them in comparison with the “dealings” of the “Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales,” who break up every poor man’s cottage, take away every poor man’s wife, lay their bloody hands on every poor man’s child, imprisoning, starving, and

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<sup>1</sup> Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off? (Jeremiah 23:23, KJV)

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 2:23–25, KJV

<sup>3</sup> Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. (John 8:44, KJV)

<sup>4</sup> For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. (II Corinthians 5:4, KJV)

destroying without mercy and without measure all the poor of England “lest they should multiply” and replenish the earth.

Hence it is that I hail the proposed revival by Marcus of the Egyptian theory of “limiting populousness.”<sup>1</sup> For this reason I hail his scientific discovery of “painless extinction,” and I implore the Poor Law Commissioners to abandon their system of gratuitous torture, their endless modes of savage barbarity, and at once adopt the easier, more merciful and economical method recommended to their notice by this Christian successor of the magi of Egypt!

But most solemnly, my brethren, I ask you whether God, Who smote Egypt for crimes infinitely less atrocious than ours, will withhold the rod of His indignation from England; whether God Who drowned Pharaoh and his heathen host in the Red Sea on account of their impious invasion of His right, their blasphemously daring attempt to set aside and thwart and neutralize His prerogative, will suffer Christian statesmen to commit far more heinous crimes, far more horrible atrocities in His name and under the cloak of His authority. No, surely, no! England, land of Bibles and abominations, land of Christian ordinances and of infernal horrors, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon, for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of thy coming judgment than for thee! Ministers of Christ, the God of Moses bids you go up to the court of Pharaoh and make one general, peradventure a last, “appeal from the pulpit on behalf of the poor!” The salvation or the destruction of your country hangs upon your lips.

R.W. Postgate, *Revolution from 1789 to 1906* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921):119–122.

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<sup>1</sup> An 1838 pamphlet entitled *On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness*, published under the pseudonym Marcus, discussed the possibility of using infanticide and using poisonous gasses to limit over-population.