



James Monroe Whitfield “How Long?”

in *Autographs for Freedom*
published by the
Rochester [NY] Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society
1853__Excerpts



James Monroe Whitfield was born into a free black family in New Hampshire in 1822. As an adult in Buffalo, New York, he worked as a barber while publishing his poetry — *Poems* in 1846, *America and Other Poems* in 1853, and numerous poems published in African American newspapers. He was a harsh critic of slavery and of the American society that tolerated an inhumane system for its economic gain. After the success of *America and Other Poems*, Whitfield became a spokesman for abolition and the emigration of American blacks to Africa. He died in 1871 in San Francisco, having moved west before the beginning of the Civil War.

In this poem Whitfield asks “how long?” before the oppressed of the world, “trampled by the strong,” will remain enslaved. The poem, written in driving iambic tetrameter, mostly in alternating rhyme, is meant to be read aloud. Note the presence (in these excerpts) of nine rhyming couplets, two of which comprise the poem’s final four lines. What effect do these rhyming couplets have on the pace and emphasis of the poem?

How long, O gracious God! how long
Shall power lord it over right?
The feeble, trampled by the strong,
Remain in slavery’s gloomy night?
In every region of the earth,
Oppression rules with iron power;
And every man of sterling worth,
Whose soul disdains to cringe or cower
Beneath a haughty tyrant’s nod,
And, supplicating, kiss the rod
That, wielded by oppression’s might,
Smites to the earth his dearest right, —
The right to speak, and think, and feel,
And spread his uttered thoughts abroad,
To labor for the common weal,¹
Responsible to none by God —
Is threatened with the dungeon’s gloom,
The felon’s cell, the traitor’s doom,
And treacherous politicians league
With hireling priests, to crush and ban
All who expose their vile intrigue,
And vindicate the rights of man.
How long shall Afric’ raise to thee
Her fettered hand, O Lord, in vain,
And plead in fearful agony
For vengeance for her children slain?
I see the Gambia’s swelling flood,
And Niger’s darkly rolling wave,

Bear on their bosoms, stained with blood,
The bound and lacerated slave;
While numerous tribes spread near and far,
Fierce, devastating, barbarous war,
Earth’s fairest scenes in ruin laid,
To furnish victims for that trade,
Which breeds on earth such deeds of shame,
As fiends might blush to hear or name. . . .

Whitfield continues with verses on the brutal oppression of minority movements in Europe at the time, especially during the failed revolutions of 1848. Enslaved blacks in the U.S., Whitfield writes, are “doomed to a state of slavery, / Compared with which the darkest night / Of European tyranny, / Seems brilliant as the noon-day light.” The concluding lines of his poem follow.

What though no real shower of fire
Spreads o’er this land its withering blight,
Denouncing wide Jehovah’s ire
Like that which palsied Egypt’s might;²
And though no literal darkness spreads
Upon the land its sable gloom,
And seems to fling around our heads
The awful terrors of the tomb;
Yet to the eye of him who reads
The fate of nations past and gone,
And marks with care the wrongful deeds
By which their power was overthrown, —

Worse plagues than Egypt ever felt
Are seen wide-spreading through the land,
Announcing that the heinous guilt
On which the nation proudly stands,
Has risen to Jehovah's throne,
And kindled his Almighty ire,
And broadcast through the land has sown
The seeds of a devouring fire;
Blasting with foul pestiferous breath,
The fountain springs of moral life,
And planting deep the seeds of death,
And future germs of deadly strife;
And moral darkness spreads its gloom
Over the land in every part,
And buries in a living tomb
Each generous prompting of the heart.
Vice in its darkest, deadliest stains,
Here walks with brazen front abroad,
And foul corruption proudly reigns
Triumphant in the church of God,
And sinks so low the Christian name,
In foul degrading vice and shame,
That Moslem, Heathen, Atheist, Jew,
And men of every faith and creed,
To their professions far more true,
More liberal both in word and deed,
May well reject with loathing scorn
The doctrines taught by those who sell
Their brethren in the Saviour born,
Down into slavery's hateful hell;
And with the price of Christian blood
Build temples to the Christian's God,
And offer up as sacrifice,
And incense to the God of heaven,
The mourning wail, and bitter cries,

Of mothers from their children riven;
Of virgin purity profaned
To sate some brutal ruffian's lust,
Millions of godlike minds ordained
To grovel ever in the dust,
Shut out by Christian power and might
From every ray of Christian light.
How long, O Lord! shall such vile deeds
Be acted in thy holy name,
And senseless bigots o'er their creeds
Fill the whole world with war and flame?
How long shall ruthless tyrants claim
Thy sanction to their bloody laws,
And throw the mantle of thy name
Around their foul, unhallowed cause?
How long shall all the people bow
As vassals of the favored few,
And shame the pride of manhood's brow, —
Give what to God alone is due,
Homage, to wealth, and rank, and power,
Vain shadows of a passing hour?
Oh for a pen of living fire,
A tongue of flame, an arm of steel!
To rouse the people's slumbering ire,
And teach the tyrants' hearts to feel.
O Lord! in vengeance now appear,
And guide the battles for the right,
The spirits of the fainting cheer,
And nerve the patriot's arm with might;
Till slavery, banished from the world,
And tyrants from their powers hurled,
And all mankind from bondage free,
Exult in glorious liberty!



¹ common weal: common good

² Egypt's might: referring to the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament of the Bible, in which Moses leads the enslaved Jews out of Egypt.