THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

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1

Introduction: The Puritan Errand Reassessed

On board the *Arbella*, on the Atlantic Ocean, John Winthrop set forth the prospects of the infant theocracy* in a provisional but sweeping prophecy of doom. The passengers were entering into covenant with God, as into a marriage bond — and therefore, charged Winthrop, they might expect swift and harsh affliction. Invoking the ominous precedent of Israel, he explained that henceforth the Lord would survey them with a strict and jealous eye. They had pledged themselves to God, and He to them, to protect, assist, and favor them above any other community on earth. But at their slightest shortcoming, for neglecting the "least" of their duties, He would turn in wrath against them and be revenged:

> if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned into Cursses

*The term *theocracy* has been criticized, cogently, by a number of recent historians. I retain it here partly as a convenience and partly because the New Englanders themselves repeatedly used it, meaning thereby to indicate not the rule of the priesthood, but the harmony between minister and magistrate in church and state affairs. So conceived, the term seems to me to express the confluence of the sacred and the secular, which this study tries to examine.

> upon us, till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are goeing.[1]

Winthrop's grim forecast struck a familiar chord. Only several weeks before, as the passengers prepared to embark from Southampton pier, John Cotton had similarly warned them about the perils of their high enterprise. Where much is given, he intoned, much is demanded. The same God who had sifted them as choice grain from the chaff of England, and who would soon plant them in the New World, might "also roote [them] out againe." Men generally succumbed to carnal lures, leaned toward profits and pleasures, permitted their children to degenerate. Such tendencies were punishable anywhere, but among those whom the Lord favored they were grievous beyond measure — ingratitude heaped upon disobedience, natural depravity compounded by deceit. Should the emigrants fall prey to such temptations, God would surely withdraw their "special appointment," weed them out, pluck them up, and cast them irrevocably out of His sight.[2]

No doubt these threats were prompted in part by anxiety; their very stridency speaks of hardships to come in settling an unknown land. But more significant, I think, is how closely they foreshadow the major themes of the colonial pulpit. False dealing with God, betrayal of covenant promises, the degeneracy of the young, the lure of profits and pleasures, the prospect of God's just, swift, and total revenge — it reads like an index of favorite sermon topics of seventeenth-century New England. In particular, of course, I refer to the political sermon — what might be called the state-of-the-covenant address, tendered at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant-renewal and artillery-company ceremonies, and, most elaborately and solemnly, at election-day gatherings) — which has been designated as the jeremiad.

The standard definition is Perry Miller's. It has become as familiar to students of the period as his classic view of New England's errand — properly so, since he made the jeremiad the proof text of his interpretation. Miller's argument, presented in its broadest sweep in his essay "Errand into the Wilderness," centers upon the ambiguity inherent in the concept of errand. An errand, Miller observes, may be either a venture on another's behalf or a venture of one's own, and

the Puritans' tragedy was that their errand shifted from one meaning to another in the course of the seventeenth century. They first saw themselves as an outpost of the Reformation. Their New England Way was to be a detour (and they hoped a shortcut) on the road leading from the Anglican establishment to a renovated England. After 1660, however, with the collapse of Cromwell's Protectorate, the colonists found themselves isolated, abandoned. "Their errand having failed in the first sense of the term, they were left with the second." They turned inward, accordingly, to fill their venture "with meaning by themselves and out of themselves" — and discovered there, in what was meant to be utopia, "nothing but a sink of iniquity." Hence the vehemence of their "literature of self-condemnation": they had been twice betrayed. Not only had the world passed them by, but the colony itself, the city set on a hill as a beacon to mankind, had degenerated into another Sodom. They vented their outrage, Miller tells us, in an "unending monotonous wail," a long threnody over a lost cause, in which they came increasingly to acknowledge that New England was sick unto death. In 1679, a synod of leading clerics listed the land's "enormities" under twelve general "heads"; thereafter the preachers, in "something of a ritual incantation,"

> would take up some verse of Isaiah or Jeremiah, set up the doctrine that God avenges the iniquities of a chosen people, and then run down the twelve heads, merely bringing the list up to date by inserting the new and still more depraved practices an ingenious people kept on devising. I suppose that in the whole literature of the world, including the satirists of imperial Rome, there is hardly such another uninhibited and unrelenting documentation of a people's descent into corruption.[3]

All this is well known. It is too well known perhaps, for it seems to have fostered a series of misrepresentations both of the jeremiad and of the Puritan concept of errand.* For one thing, the New

*Students of the period, in what amounts to a ritual incantation of their own, have told us over and again about the Puritans' "sense of impending doom" (Edward K. Trefz, "The Puritans' View of History," *Boston Public Library Quarterly*, 9 [1957], 118), and have described in detail the "many clergymen in the pulpits of 1660–1730 . . . trying to rub the strangeness from their eyes as if they had suddenly returned to a society which . . . was full of new ways and strange gods" (A. William Plumstead, Introduction to *The Wall and the Garden: Selected Massachusetts Election Sermons, 1670–1775* [Minneapolis, 1968], ed. Plumstead, p. 30).

England jeremiad was plainly the product not of the second- and third-generation colonists, but of the first emigrants. Within the first decade of settlement, the clergy were already thundering denunciations of a backsliding people. The first election-day sermon we have warns the settlers against their apparent desire to choose "a captain back for Egypt." Two years earlier, and only six after the *Arbella* had landed, Thomas Shepard mourned that "We never looked for such days in *New-England*. . . . Are all [God's] kindnesses forgotten? all your promises forgotten?" During the 1670s, Increase Mather, bemoaning his own degenerate times, recalled that "*Our Prophets have foretold us of these dayes*. . . . *Renowned* Hooker *would many times express his fears*, that God would punish . . . New-England" — as did John Norton, and Peter Bulkeley, and John Davenport, and Richard Mather, and John Winthrop. Even the mild and "blessed Mr. *Cotton*, did in his time . . . testify against such a spirit of worldliness and Apostasy, even in those dayes prevailing in this Country."[4] Mather might easily have extended the list of first-generation worthies. Considered as a mode of denunciation, the jeremiad was an ancient formulaic refrain, a ritual form imported to Massachusetts in 1630 from the Old World. Insofar as the Puritan clergy were castigating the evils of the time, they were drawing directly upon the sermons of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, which in turn derived from the medieval pulpit.*

But the Puritan clergy were not simply castigating. For all their catalogues of iniquities, the jeremiads attest to an unswerving faith in the errand; and if anything they grow more fervent, more absolute in their commitment from one generation to the next. The most severe limitation of Miller's view is that it excludes (or denigrates) this pervasive theme of affirmation and exultation. Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America's first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. The essence of the sermon

*Coincidentally, in the year of the Cambridge Synod, 1679, the Anglican Bishop Gilbert Burnet invoked this long tradition and warned Englishmen (once again) that "the wrath of God hangs over our Heads. . . . The whole Nation is corrupted . . . [and] we may justly look for unheared of Calamities" (Preface to *The History of the Reformation in England*, Vol. I [London, 1683; first published 1679], sigs. A7^v–A8^v).

form that the first native-born American Puritans inherited from their fathers, and then "developed, amplified, and standardized,"[5] is its unshakable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause.

The traditional mode, the European jeremiad, was a lament over the ways of the world. It decried the sins of "the people" — a community, a nation, a civilization, mankind in general — and warned of God's wrath to follow. Generation after generation, from the medieval era through the Renaissance, Catholic and then Protestant audiences heard the familiar refrain. The Lord required them to walk in righteousness, not to glory in the self; to follow His commandments, not the temptations of the flesh. So it had been in Eden, when Adam fell. So it had been in Jeremiah's time, when that most eloquent of Old Testament prophets railed against the stiff-necked Hebrews. So in Christ's time, when He denounced a generation of vipers, and in the age of the apostles and at the fall of Rome. All of history proved it: humanity was naturally depraved. It was the judgment of God after the flood, at the very moment when He decided not to destroy mankind after all, that "the imaginacion of mans heart *is* evil, *even* from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). The preachers used such texts in their jeremiads as moral lessons, but the texts themselves held out little hope, if any. As Hannah More put it in 1780, it was always "the fashion to make the most lamentable *Jeremiades* on the badness of times," because the times were always bad. Even as the preacher exhorted, they knew enough about their listeners not to expect much from them. Now again, as in Jeremiah's day, the mass of mankind would stumble and slide. Now as always, many were called but few chosen; and for the many, who willfully strayed from God (though He begged them through His prophets to return), there would be wailing and gnashing of teeth. "God writes his *severe truths* with the *blood* of his disobedient subjects."[6]

This sermon form the Puritans brought with them to Massachusetts Bay. But from the start they sounded a different note. Theirs was a peculiar mission, they explained, for they were a "peculiar people," a company of Christians not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred

historical design. Their church-state was to be at once a model to the world of Reformed Christianity and a prefiguration of New Jerusalem to come. To this end, they revised the message of the jeremiad. Not that they minimized the threat of divine retribution; on the contrary, they asserted it with a ferocity unparalleled in the European pulpit. But they qualified it in a way that turned threat into celebration. In their case, they believed, God's punishments were *corrective*, not destructive. Here, as nowhere else, His vengeance was a sign of love, a father's rod used to improve the errant child. In short, their punishments confirmed their promise. The Puritans did not seek out affliction, but where they found it they recorded it as zealously, and almost as gratefully, as they recorded instances of God's mercies toward them. The two kinds of "providences" were mutually sustaining;* together they opened out into the grand design of New England's errand into the wilderness.

Appropriately, this rhetoric of mission begins with the sermons delivered by Cotton and Winthrop to the *Arbella* passengers, between April and June 1630. As several recent scholars have noted, their very threats convey a series of figural correspondences that preclude the prospect of failure. Winthrop couched his remarks about God's vengeance in allusions to an "extraordinary work and end" based on an unalterable pledge. Though he voices the usual threats, in effect his scriptural phrases locate the venture within a configuration extending from Ararat, Sinai, and Pisgah to the New World city on a hill, and thence forward — in a "golden chain" of prophecy that "can never be broken" — to Mount Zion of the Apocalypse. With this intent, too, Cotton chose for his text the seventh chapter of the Second Book of Samuel: "I wil appoint a place for my people Israel, and wil plant it, that they may dwel in a place of their owne, and move nomore" (7:10) — a passage which, as his listeners well knew, included the promise of the millennium: "And thine house shalbe stablished and thy kingdome for ever before thee, *even* thy throne shalbe stablished for ever" (7:16). America, Cotton explained,

*This dualism has a long tradition behind it, of course. Flood and rainbow, exile and restoration, Christ *agonistes* and Christ glorified — nothing is more commonplace in Christian homiletics than the application of this dual image to sacred history. And nothing more flagrantly violates Christian tradition than the application of these texts to a civic community, engaged in a secular enterprise.

was the new promised land, reserved by God for His new chosen people as the site for a new heaven and a new earth. *A Model of Christian Charity* announces (in Loren Baritz's phrase) that all of history is converging upon "the cosmic climax of Boston's founding." More cogently still, *Gods Promise to His Plantation*, as Jesper Rosenmeier has shown, reveals "the Puritans' hopes that their plantation would become the scene of Christ's triumphant descent to His New Jerusalem."[7]

The American Puritan jeremiad owes its uniqueness to this vision and mode of rhetoric. In Europe, let me emphasize, the jeremiad pertained exclusively to mundane, social matters, to the city of man rather than the city of God. It required not conversion but moral obedience and civic virtue. At best, it held out the prospect of temporal, worldly success. At worst, it threatened not hellfire but secular calamity (disease, destruction, death). The Puritans' concept of errand entailed a fusion of secular and sacred history. The purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.

To some extent, Miller acknowledged this sense of purpose. The Puritan jeremiads, he wrote, register

> bewilderment, confusion, chagrin but there is no surrender. A task has been assigned upon which the populace are in fact intensely engaged . . . [Thus] while the social or economic historian may read this literature for its contents — and so construct from the expanding catalogue of denunciations a record of social progress — the cultural anthropologist will look slightly askance at these jeremiads. If you read them all through, the total effect, curiously enough, is not at all depressing: you come to the paradoxical realization that they do not bespeak a despairing frame of mind . . . whatever they may signify in the realm of theology, in that of psychology they are purgations of the soul; they do not discourage but actually encourage the community to persist in its heinous conduct. The exhortation to a reformation which never materializes serves as a token payment upon the obligation, and so liberates the debtors. Changes there had to be: adaptations to environment, expansion of the frontier, mansions constructed, commercial ventures undertaken. These activities were not specifically nominated in the bond Winthrop had framed. They were thrust upon the society

> by American experience. . . . Land speculation meant not only wealth but dispersion of the people, and what was to stop the march of settlements? . . . [The first emigrants] had been utterly oblivious of what the fact of the frontier would do. . . . Hence I suggest that under the guise of this mounting wail of sinfulness, this incessant and never successful cry for repentance, the Puritans launched themselves upon the process of Americanization.[8]

I have quoted this passage at length because it so clearly shows the grounds of Miller's analysis. What he meant by ambiguity was opposition: the errand is either for oneself or for someone else; the jeremiads either discourage or encourage. Clearly, this stems from a "paradoxical realization" that somehow the errand functioned both ways, and that the jeremiads included both threat and hope. But for Miller the realization is an ironic one — it lies in the reader's capacity to see conflicting elements at work in the same act. The Puritans' sense of a failed errand, he claimed, led them to make the errand their own. Their "cry for repentance" furthered the community's "heinous conduct." And the reader's ironic awareness, in turn, builds upon a series of static oppositions: content versus form, social progress versus catalogues of denunciation, psychology versus theology, the march of settlements versus the ideal of theocracy, and summarily "the American experience" (manifest in land speculation, growing wealth, population dispersion) versus the Puritan lament, a "mounting wail of sinfulness" that issues in a self-defeating ritual of purgation. Methodologically, this implies the dichotomy of fact and rhetoric. Historically, it posits an end to Puritanism with the collapse of the church-state. From either perspective, in what is surely a remarkable irony in its own right, Miller's analysis lends support to the dominant anti-Puritan view of national development — that the "American character" was shaped by what he called "the fact of the frontier."*

We need not discount the validity of this frontier thesis to see what it does *not* explain: the persistence of the Puritan jeremiad

*The phrase seems to me especially striking (and ironic) in that Miller, in his prefatory notes to "Errand into the Wilderness" (1952), takes issue on Ramistic grounds with what he calls Turner's misguided notion of the relation between metaphor and fact. Miller adds that he himself has used *errand* and *wilderness* "as figures of speech" (*Errand into the Wilderness* [Cambridge, Mass., 1956], p. 2).

throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in all forms of the literature, including the literature of westward expansion. Indeed, what first attracted me to the study of the jeremiad was my astonishment, as a Canadian immigrant, at learning about the prophetic history of America. Not of North America, for the prophecies stopped short at the Canadian and Mexican borders, but of a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial limits, could read its destiny in its landscape, and a population that, despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed, could believe in something called an American mission, and could invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest. I felt then like Sancho Panza in a land of Don Quixotes. Here was the anarchist Thoreau condemning his backsliding neighbors by reference to the Westward errand; here, the solitary singer Walt Whitman, claiming to be the American Way; here, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, descendant of slaves, denouncing segregation as a violation of the American dream; here, an endless debate about national identity, full of rage and faith, Jeffersonians claiming that they, and not the priggish heirs of Calvin, really represented the errand, conservative politicians hunting out socialists as conspirators against the dream, left-wing polemics proving that capitalism was a betrayal of the country's sacred origins. The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors, was never "Who are we?" but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: "When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?" And the answers, again as in the Puritan jeremiads, invariably joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America's mission.

This litany of hope seems to me a direct challenge to Miller's concept of ambiguity. Perhaps the clearest way to show this is to recall the great election-day address which he used as proof text for his analysis, Samuel Danforth's *Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*. Danforth delivered the address in May 1670, exactly forty years after the *Arbella* fleet landed, and no one at that emotional gathering felt more keenly than Danforth that the new promised land was far from won. Yet what he said then remains one of the most impassioned statements on record of the *persistence* of the founders' dream. Taking his text from Christ's "encomium of