Revising the Errand:
New England's Ways and the
Puritan Sense of the Past

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THE Puritan settlers of New England, we know, were driven by a
sense of errand. They migrated in order "to study and practise true
Scripture-*Reformation*," quitting an unregenerate England to work
out in the wilderness "a due forme of Goverment both civill and
ecclesiasticall."[1] This errand carried with it a particular conception of
history and of New England's place in history. The ministers who defined
the errand viewed themselves not as exiles subsisting in outer darkness
but as actors in the penultimate scene of sacred history. They claimed for
their mission "a speciall overruleing providence,"[2] a key role in the drama
of Christian eschatology. Their migration signaled that the world-wide
struggle with Antichrist approached its climax; their "Scripture-*Reforma-
tion*" would help to annihilate the Beast and usher in the Millennium.
Sacred history supplied them with a key by which to interpret the signs of
their own times and align their experience with scriptural expectations.

Historians and critics such as Robert Middlekauff and Sacvan Berco-
vitch have elucidated the New Englanders' identification of colonial
history and biblical prophecy.[3] We have also learned, above all from Perry
Miller, of the contradictions inherent in the Puritan errand—contradic-
tions between New England as a separate place and as an extension of the
old country, between the Calvinist call to purity and the Calvinist sanction

[1] Jonathan Mitchel, *Nehemiah on the Wall in Troublesom Times* . . . (Cambridge,
Mass., 1671), 28; John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in *Winthrop
Papers*, II (Boston, 1931), 293.

[2] Winthrop, "Modell of Christian Charity," in *Winthrop Papers*, II, 293.

[3] Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-
1728* (New York, 1971); Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*
(New Haven, Conn., 1975), and *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wis., 1978). It
should be clear how great a debt I owe to Bercovitch's synthesis of textual analysis
and cultural history, although my conclusions regarding the jeremiad and the New
England generational crisis have a somewhat different emphasis from his.

of worldly action, between the elect community as church and as nation.[4]
We know that the emergence of these contradictions in the 1660s and
1670s seemed to the New England ministers "sad symptomes of the Lords
departure" from the holy commonwealths, tokens that New England had
failed its errand.[5] But we do not understand so well how this pervasive
sense of decline merged with, shaped, and was shaped by the Puritans'
conception of their own history. While Joy Gilsdorf and others have
studied the effect of the declension theme on millennial rhetoric,[6]
historians have yet to think through how the events that punctuated this
crisis of confidence altered the American Puritans' sense of their past or of
their place in the general trajectory of historical change. How the past
provided them with ways of understanding or legitimating or criticizing
the drift of events and how the drift transformed their image of the
general shape of history—these are the questions on which I will focus.

I

The halfway covenant of 1662, a crucial event in New England's crisis of
confidence, provides a rich occasion for these questions. As historians of
Puritan intellectual culture have shown, it arose from tensions fundamen-
tal to the Congregational doctrine of church order—tensions concerning
the status of the children of church members.[7] According to the New

[4] For analyses of the contradictions in the Puritan errand see Miller, *The New
England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), esp. 19-146, and
"Errand into the Wilderness," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass.,
1956), 1-15, as well as Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John
Winthrop* (Boston, 1958), and *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New
York, 1963). Miller's emphasis on New England's declension has been roundly
and justly criticized for the dominance it has exerted over colonial cultural
historiography. Colonial community studies in particular have challenged the view
of a New England inexorably falling away from some aboriginal state of purity. The
insights of this social history notwithstanding, however, the ministers' fears for
New England's declension—upon which Miller based his portrait—remain a real
historical problem. Even if New England was not coming apart at the seams,
Puritan orthodoxy, with its conception of the colonial errand, was. In this sense
"declension" remains a valid concept, a way of naming Puritanism's cultural crisis
rather than New England's social change. I will try to use it as such.
[5] Eleazer Mather, *A Serious Exhortation to the Present and Succeeding Generation in
New-England . . . ,* 2d ed. (Boston, 1678), 17.
[6] For the relationship between millennialism and fears of declension see Aletha
Joy Bourne Gilsdorf, "The Puritan Apocalypse: New England Eschatology in the
Seventeenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1965), esp. 126-158; J. F.
Maclear, "New England and the Fifth Monarchy: The Quest for the Millennium in
Early American Puritanism," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXXII (1975),
257-260; and Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, esp. 14-17, 83-92.
[7] The most comprehensive study of the baptism controversy is Robert G. Pope,
The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England (Princeton,
N.J., 1969), while Paul R. Lucas traces the conflicts it spurred in Connecticut

England Way, a church was to be composed of "visible saints," men and women who could not only demonstrate an understanding of the Christian revelation and prove themselves free of social scandal but also testify persuasively to "a work of saving grace" in themselves.[8] They must have had a conversion experience that gave tentative assurance of their faith and their membership among the elect. Since the church was formally constituted through "Mutuall covenanting and confoederating of the Saints," the congregation itself would judge the redemptive credentials of new applicants for membership.[9] The church was thus a community of the (putatively) saved—the "regenerate."

The place of the Reformed sacraments, baptism and communion, in such an ecclesiology was ambiguous. On the one hand, the Congregational belief in God's limitless sovereignty—the sine qua non of Puritan divinity—denied to the sacraments any efficacy to determine a person's spiritual status; to accord such power to worldly, mediating forms would come close to idolatry. The sacraments were meant not to produce a hoped-for conversion but to confirm a sense of election already attained. They were, in the idiom of Puritan orthodoxy, the "seals of the covenant" rather than the ground of it. This dependence of sacramental participation on a prior title to church membership is most clear in the case of communion (or as the Puritans called it, the Lord's Supper). Not only were all but visible saints excluded from partaking, but in some New England towns unregenerate churchgoers could not even watch the sacrament being administered. Any person who breached these rules brought damnation to himself or herself and profaned the worship of the elect.

Yet the Puritan divines were nothing if not "ambidextrous theologians," to use E. Brooks Holifield's apt phrase, for whom "what the right hand

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Colony (*Valley of Discord: Church and Society along the Connecticut River, 1636-1725* [Hanover, N.H., 1976]). Miller (*New England Mind*, 82-104) and Morgan (*Visible Saints*, 125-138) offer concise interpretations of the intellectual issues involved; E. Brooks Holifield discusses the controversy in relation to Puritan sacramental theology generally (*The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* [New Haven, Conn., 1974], esp. 169-196).

[8] The canonical expression of the New England church order was "A Platform of Church Discipline . . . ," in Williston Walker, ed., *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1893), 194-237. Drafted by Richard Mather, this Cambridge Platform was adopted by a synod of ministers in Cambridge, Mass., in 1648. The most important Puritan commentaries on the New England orthodoxy include Richard Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* . . . (London, 1648); Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant* (London, 1651); and John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* . . . (London, 1644). Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 64-112; David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1972), esp. 93-120; and Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, esp. 139-196, offer helpful commentary.

[9] Hooker, *Survey*, 46.

took away, the left hand could retrieve."[10] Even as they hailed God's transcendence, they sought to bind him to the visible ordinances and acts of the New England Way. Too restricted a view of the efficacy and scope of the sacraments, after all, might call into question the need for sacraments to begin with. The Antinomian crisis of the 1630s had shown New England the dangers of such unscriptural rigor and taught it to protect the mediatory instruments that gave its churches order and continuity. This more world-accepting strain found its emphasis in Puritan baptismal theology. For in contrast to their fastidious protection of the Lord's Supper, the Puritan divines extended baptism to at least one group of people who could *not* be presumed regenerate: the children of the saints themselves. Everyone agreed that the children of church members came within the church covenant by virtue of their parents' membership. This was to be understood not as an exception or an addendum to the covenant but as intrinsic to it: the key scriptural passages that marked the covenant as the fundamental relationship between God and the community of the faithful included the seed of believers.[11] If children were within the covenant, of course they were entitled to at least the initiatory seal of membership. Some few rigorists believed in banning infant baptism in order to keep the sacrament as pure as the communion table, but orthodox Congregationalists agreed that such Anabaptism lacked scriptural justification and was heretical.[12] They were content to let baptism lead a theologically double life—as both a token of grace bestowed to visible saints and a promise of grace offered to their children.

   Knotted into the heart of the New England Way, then, lay commitments to two principles—the church as community of the elect and infant baptism—that sat uneasily side by side. Logically the two principles could be aligned by requiring (as the Cambridge Platform of 1648 did) the children of saints, when they were grown, to "manifest their faith & repentance by an open profession before they are received to Lords Supper, & otherwise not to be admitted there unto."[13] But what was to happen to church children who felt unable to make this profession, the platform neglected to say. The implicit expectation was that the bulk of baptized children would undergo conversion and make their profession of faith, that child and adult membership would be largely continuous. Such an expectation was, as Edmund S. Morgan points out, "arrogant and inconsistent" with the Calvinist belief in God's unconstrained dispensation of grace; nor was it any more efficacious than modest.[14] Throughout the

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[10] Holifield, *Covenant Sealed,* 155. My discussion of Puritan sacramental theory in this and the preceding paragraphs owes much to Holifield's lucid analysis.
   [11] See, for instance, Gen. 17; Deut. 7:9; Ezek. 37:25-28; and Acts 39.
   [12] John Cotton rehearsed the orthodox Congregationalist objections to Anabaptism in *The Grounds and Ends of the Baptisme of the Children of the Faithfull . . .* (London, 1647).
   [13] "Platform of Church Discipline," in Walker, ed., *Creeds and Platforms,* 224.
   [14] Morgan, *Visible Saints,* 126.

1650s it came more and more to seem that the second-generation children were simply not growing up to be saints.[15] They were, however, growing up to be parents. Now, were *their* children within the covenant and hence entitled to baptism? With the appearance of the third generation, the patchwork logic of the Cambridge Platform was made moot. The passing of time brought the conflicting principles to critical mass.

On this point of interpretation the whole New England Way threatened to founder. To say yes to the grandchildren's baptism, argued purists such as Charles Chauncy and John Davenport, would end the churches' commitment to the ideal of regenerate membership. Either it would bifurcate church membership into those with access to communion and those with access only to baptism, or else it would expose communion to the same enlargement of scope. In either case it would divorce what Congregationalism had sought to unite: the visible church of worshippers and the invisible church of saints.[16]

On the other hand, to deny baptism and covenantal inclusion to the third generation would amount to claiming that, somewhere along the line, the second-generation children had forfeited their membership and "discovenanted themselves."[17] When had this happened? They were for the most part spotless, civil, catechized churchgoers who had done nothing to deserve expulsion. Ministers such as Richard Mather, Increase Mather, Thomas Shepard, Sr., and Jonathan Mitchel believed this discovenanting a monstrous lack of charity and saw in the exclusion of the

[15] To realize that the New England ministers believed the numbers of unconverted church children to be swelling is not to demonstrate that they were. Historical analyses of fluctuations in church membership and of the continuity of membership within families yield no consistent pattern for Puritan New England, but it seems that often the ministers underestimated the piety of their towns and churchgoers. See Gerald F. Moran, "Religious Renewal, Puritan Tribalism, and the Family in Seventeenth-Century Milford, Connecticut," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXVI (1979), 236-254, and Moran and Maris A. Vinovskis, "The Puritan Family and Religion: A Critical Reappraisal," *ibid.*, XXXIX (1982), 39-42. Indeed, Edmund S. Morgan has suggested that a decline in conversions may itself have signaled not a cooling of piety but a more scrupulous personal standard for church membership among the unconverted ("New England Puritanism: Another Approach," *ibid.*, XVIII [1961], 236-242). In any event, the actual behavior of the churchgoers, its historical relevance notwithstanding, is not my concern here; the ministers' perception of that behavior and their response to it are. As I remarked in n. 4, even if the fears regarding declension were sociologically *false,* they were culturally *real*—and they are all the more significant if mistaken.

[16] The principal tracts against the enlargement of baptism were Charles Chauncy, *Anti-Synodalia Scripta Americana,* a dissenting appendix to [Jonathan Mitchel], *Propositions concerning the Subject of Baptism* . . . (London, 1662), which was the majority report of the synod of 1662, and John Davenport, *Another Essay for Investigation of the Truth* . . . (Cambridge, Mass., 1663). Davenport's critique of the halfway covenant doctrine was prefaced by "An Apologetical Preface to the Reader" by Increase Mather.

[17] Chauncy, "Anti-Synodalia," 33, in [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism.*

children of the second generation a violation of the familial loyalties that played so powerful a part in the culture of early New England.[18] Increase Mather, for example, invoked "tribal" motives to justify a lenient attitude toward the children of church members: "Did not our Fathers come hither in hope that they should leave their children under the Discipline and Government of the Lord Jesus in his Church? Hath not Christ owned the application of solemn publick Admonitions, &c. to some of them that have been Children of the Church, (tho not in full Communion) even so as to convert their souls thereby?"[19]

Parental tenderness aside, there were socially pragmatic reasons for ensuring that the children of unconverted church members remained "under the Discipline and Government of the Lord Jesus." The Puritan family was the fulcrum of the Congregational polity, the point on which its socialization process centered—and the place at which it might fail. "Families are the Seminaries of Church and Common-wealth," Eleazer Mather put it. *"Keep the Lord with you in Families, and keep him then in all Societyes; let him go thence, and he will quickly go from the rest."*[20] The unregeneracy of the (baptized) second generation was, of course, a disturbing sign that the family was failing its mission as a "seminary," but— or so many ministers reasoned—was not the refusal to baptize the grandchildren only compounding the problem, splitting generation from generation and family from church? On such a view, the primary danger lay not in the erosion of congregational purity but in a loss of tribal unity. The most important effect of extending infant baptism would not be to threaten the privileges of church membership, but to increase the scope of church discipline.

Such an assertion of dominance had political motives as well. The New

[18] The principal tracts in favor of the enlargement of baptism were [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism,* the document adopted by the halfway covenant synod; Thomas Shepard, *The Church-Membership of Children, and Their Right to Baptisme . . .* [1648] (Cambridge, Mass., 1663); [Richard Mather], *A Defence of the Answer and Arguments of the Synod . . .* (Cambridge, Mass., 1664), written as a close rebuttal of Davenport's tract; Increase Mather, *The First Principles of New-England, concerning the Subject of Baptisme . . . ,* published with "A Letter concerning the Subject of Baptisme . . ." by Jonathan Mitchel (Cambridge, Mass., 1675); and Increase Mather, *A Discourse concerning the Subject of Baptisme . . .* (Cambridge, Mass., 1675). Increase Mather switched from opposition to support of the expansion of baptism in the early 1670s; he published arguments in support of both camps.

On Puritan "tribalism" see Morgan's classic *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England,* rev. ed. (New York, 1966), esp. 161-186, as well as the reappraisal offered in Moran and Vinovskis, "Puritan Family and Religion," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XXXIX (1982), 31-38.

[19] Mather, "A Discourse concerning the Danger of Apostacy . . ." [1677], in Increase Mather, *A Call from Heaven, to the Present and Succeeding Generations . . .* (Boston, 1685), 126, hereafter cited as Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostacy."

[20] Mather, *Serious Exhortation,* 20.

England Way had established a bond between covenanted church and theocratic polity through which ecclesiastical and civil institutions reinforced each other's authority. If, through too rigorous a standard for baptism, church members diminished to a small fraction of the body politic, the identification of piety with political power would dissolve. The holy commonwealths would risk the splitting of sovereignty from church association and perhaps even the emergence of a liberal state seduced into religious toleration.[21]

Whichever side of the controversy they took, then, it is no wonder that the New England intellectuals read in the apparent decline of conversions the failure of their errand. The issue of baptism tore the fragile web of the "due forme of Goverment both civill and ecclesiasticall," the weaving together of citizen, parent, and saint. As the number of unbaptized grandchildren grew, the divines took the only compromise possible to patch these roles together. At a small assembly of ministers in 1657 and at a full synod of the Massachusetts Bay churches in 1662, they argued that the children of baptized members who were still not in full communion (that is, not visible saints) would yet receive baptism as long as their parents publicly assented to Christian doctrine and "*solemnly own[ed] the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church.*"[22] Such baptized but unconverted members would come under church discipline, but the synod refused them access to the communion table and denied them the right to vote on congregational matters such as the choosing of a minister or the disciplining of other members. The halfway covenant, as critics would later nickname the compromise, nibbled at the edges of the New England Way by sanctioning a criterion

[21] Mitchel, "Letter concerning Baptisme," 5, appendix to Increase Mather, *First Principles,* makes clear how concerned the supporters of enlarged baptism were to maintain the civic hegemony of the church. For the New England Congregationalists' orthodox attitude toward religious toleration see Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostacy," 75-79. For secondary works on church-state relations in colonial New England see Morgan, *Puritan Dilemma,* 84-100, 155-173, and *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York, 1967), 64-85; Hall, *Faithful Shepherd,* 121-155, 227-248, for Massachusetts Bay; Lucas, *Valley of Discord,* esp. 43-86, and Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan To Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), for Connecticut; and T. H. Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas in New England, 1630-1730* (New Haven, Conn., 1970), 37-47.

[22] [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism,* 11. The 1657 assembly of ministers produced "A Disputation concerning Church-Members and Their Children . . . ," written by Nathanael Mather and excerpted in Walker, ed., *Creeds and Platforms,* 288-300. The Connecticut churches were represented at the meeting of 1657 but not at the synod of 1662. A majority of Connecticut congregations did adopt some version of the halfway covenant during the late 1660s, but disputes over baptism engendered bitter dissension and the hiving-off of new churches in several towns; see Lucas, *Valley of Discord,* 73-86, and Pope, *Half-Way Covenant,* 75-131.

for adult membership different from visible sainthood. Nevertheless it was probably the best means of safeguarding the fundamental elements of orthodoxy. It accommodated biological necessity and social prudence without undermining the heart of Congregational worship, the purity of communion.

Perhaps this synopsis makes clear why the halfway covenant provides a rich field for examining the Puritans' sense of their history during a crisis of cultural legitimacy. The competing bases of membership—sainthood versus seed—gained sanction from different biblical and ecclesiastical pasts. The conflict between these pasts threw into relief the Puritan intellectuals' use of the past in general, the places in which they sought to locate its legitimacy or authority, the resources it gave them to resolve conflicts and evade or embrace change. And since the very substance of the baptism controversy concerned the nature of their churches' continuity through time, the conflicting positions not only drew upon different histories but implied different conceptions about the shape of history as a whole. Rival traditions of church history underpinned rival conceptions of the church in history; and no single tradition or ancestral authority gave an inclusive, satisfactory answer to this problem of transmission and continuity. Although the holy commonwealths had faced crises before—the Antinomian challenge, the Pequot War—the halfway covenant signaled perhaps the first time that the intellectuals' sense of the past gave them no clear instructions concerning the New England Way. Instead, the unraveling of citizen, parent, and saint manifested itself as a disintegration of their seemingly unified history into fractional traditions, each able to cite scripture to its own purpose.

Here was a wellspring for the gloom concerning declension. The inability to reconcile the competing principles proved to the second-generation divines not merely the depravity of humans in general but their own particular insufficiency vis-à-vis the errand with which God had honored them. In their self-abasement they idealized the founding fathers of New England, enthroning them next to scriptural heroes to pass judgment on their own failures. They did not understand that the fathers' church order seemed so monolithic because its contradictions required the passing of time to come to ripeness. In the Cambridge Platform the first generation had sidestepped the problem of the children's membership, relying on the drift of events, on the "natural history" of New England society, to settle the baptism controversy. But since drift and natural history were themselves the sources of the problem, this strategy only intensified the crisis of legitimacy. The divines of the next generation drew the lesson that the lack of conversions, along with their own lack of clear doctrine concerning the unconverted, betokened " *a Grievous* Decay of Piety *in the Land . . . and a* Leaving of the First Love."[23] In their inability to reconcile purity and charity, congregational and national identities, the ministers had in fact begun to drift from their past; but they

[23] Increase Mather, "Preface," in *A Course of Sermons on Early Piety* (Boston, 1721), iii.

did not grasp that the separation crisis, like the New England Way itself, had been bequeathed to them.

II

Let us go back to the orthodox sense of history inherent in the Puritan errand. We know that the Congregational church order required "Mutuall covenanting and confoederating of the Saints" and that a covenant, whether national or congregational, required the contracting parties to be "*wholly free,* each from the other. There *can be no necessary tye* of mutuall accord and fellowship come, but by *free ingagement.*"[24] There were no a priori relationships, no ordinances and sacraments, no pastor and no flock, until the church covenant; it instituted a breach in time between what had been and what was to come. Such an ecclesiology implied that the Puritans were in certain ways free from historical determination, detachable from their European and Anglican pasts, and embarked on something original. They viewed themselves as "the Lords *first-born* in this Wilderness," as "a Nation borne in a day,"[25] and they tied this imagery of priority and new birth explicitly to the covenant theology: "The Name and Interest of God, and Covenant-Relation to him, it hath been written upon us in Capital Letters from the beginning," preached William Stoughton, and Edward Johnson exulted that "this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth in, new Churches, and a new Common-wealth together."[26]

As Johnson's allusion to Revelation suggests, however, all those *news*— and the *new* of New England—did not imply that the Puritan errand came early in sacred history, in the youth of the world. Quite the contrary: as historians of the New England Way have stressed, the migrants saw themselves and their mission punctuating the end of premillennial time. The break between old and new that the church covenant typified would find its fulfillment in the inauguration of the thousand-year reign of Christ. It was the Puritans' historical mission to perfect the covenant theology on the eve of this epoch: "As it was necessary that there should be a *Moses* and *Aaron,* before the Lord would deliver his people and destroy *Pharoah* lest they should be wildred indeed in the Wilderness; so now it was needful, that the Churches of Christ should first obtain their purity . . . before Antichrist come to his finall ruine."[27] The New England

[24] Hooker, *Survey,* 46, 47.

[25] W[illiam] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest; Not to Lie . . .* (Cambridge, Mass., 1670), 17; Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour. A History of New-England . . .* (London, 1654 [1653]), 34.

[26] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest,* 17; Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence,* 3.

[27] Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence,* 231. On Puritan millennialism in New England see Gilsdorf, "Puritan Apocalypse"; Maclear, "New England and the Fifth Monarchy," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XXXII (1975), 223-260; James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); and Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad,* esp. 7-9, 38-40, 68-73, 85-92.

thinkers imagined themselves at once newcomers and latecomers, com-
posing the "first purity" of the churches in the last age of the world.
Behind this paradoxical sense of historical placement lay a vision of their
past as hopelessly decadent yet capable of a final, millennial renovation.
They believed that they had inherited a Europe long dominated by the
Antichrist of Catholicism, and they were particularly alarmed at the
historical drift of their own national church toward popery. Yet however
much history seemed to them a narrative of superstition and apostasy, it
was destined to bring the Beast to his "finall ruine" in a culminating work
of reformation.

The divines had a clear sense of their role in this reformation. Their
latecomer/newcomer status placed them in a world whose moral linea-
ments had long since been determined. Christendom was irrevocably what
they called a "mixed multitude," a vanguard of confirmed saints amid a
mass of confirmed sinners, and there was little they could do to alter the
balance of souls. Rather, their task was to unmix the multitude, inscribe
visible boundaries between saints and sinners, and array the saints
together for the climactic struggle. Within the individual congregation
they accomplished this unmixing through the doctrine of regenerate
membership: this is why they said that each church was "gathered out of
the worlde" by the covenant that instituted it.[28] And that covenant
mirrored the larger, world-historical gathering-out of the Puritan saints,
their migration to the New World to prepare for the Armageddon of the
old one: "Christ the glorious King of his Churches, raise[d] an Army out
of our *English* Nation, for freeing of his people from their long servitude
... and because every corner of *England* was filled with the fury of
malignant adversaries, Christ create[d] a *New England* to muster up the
first of his forces in."[29]

The Puritan work of reformation took the form of an errand into the
wilderness, then, at least partly in response to the vision of history within
which the Puritans situated themselves. The only way they could redeem
the Old World was to withdraw from it. The wilderness itself was the
appropriate scene for such an errand because it embodied spatially the
migrants' sense of historical placement: it was a place that God had held
back from cultivation so that his elect might have a New World to come to
in the latter days. The Puritan thinkers valued it solely in opposition to the
European past, as a space for segregation and mustering. This is why, the
efforts of John Eliot notwithstanding, the Puritans generally took such a
negligent attitude toward the conversion of the Indians. What was new in
New England was not the making of new Christians but the purifying of
the institutions of the old ones. They brought their covenants to the
wilderness not to evangelize but to winnow: "God sifted a whole Nation
that he might send choice Grain over into this Wilderness."[30] Similarly the

[28] Albert H. Peel, ed., *The Seconde Parte of a Register* (London, 1915), I, 86,
quoted in Morgan, *Visible Saints,* 14.
[29] Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence,* 1.
[30] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest,* 19.

Puritan divines believed that the Millennium that those covenants typified would bring not the conversion of the mass of humanity—the Jews were an important exception[31]—but the withdrawal of the saved remnant into the New Jerusalem. The withdrawal of the saints to New England prefigured this.

If the preachers saw themselves as latecomers winnowing a corrupted world, this does not mean that they sought to effect a radical break from their past. For all their embrace of the *new* in New England, they feared innovation almost as much as the decayed traditions of Rome: "the *Innovators,* that have sett up a *new Church* in *Boston,* (a new one indeed!)," fumed Cotton Mather against the Brattle Street church, "have made a *Day of Temptation* among us."[32] What distinguished the New Jerusalem of John of Patmos from the "new Church" of Mather's attack was the sanction the former drew from past models. The ministers sought to anchor their radical designs in this historical sanction, for "the shortest and surest way . . . to end all controversies, especially about the worship of God, . . . was to find out how it was in the beginning, and at the first institution."[33]

In the beginning—as the phrase implies, the New England divines turned back to scripture to legitimate and indeed make recognizable their millennial project: "I am now prest for the service of our *Lord Christ,* to re-build the most glorious Edifice of Mt. *Sion* in a Wilderness, and as *John* Baptist, I must cry prepare yee the way of the Lord, make his paths strait, for behold hee is comming againe, hee is comming to destroy *Antichrist.*"[34] They sought to ground their reformation of church order in what they took to be the scriptural principles of the primitive church: "Let the matter and the forme of your Churches," instructed Edward Johnson, "be such as were in the Primitive Times (before Antichrists Kingdome prevailed) plainly poynted out by Christ and his Apostles."[35] For all its revisionism, then, the New England Way did not claim to forge a revolutionary new order but to revive an earlier past in which history and prophecy had composed a single text. The profane past made necessary the task of liberating the saints from the mixed multitude; this sacred past made the work possible. It reduced the rule of apostasy to a mere temporary interregnum in a world-historical drama of original wholeness/fall/reformation that would climax with Christ's second coming.

[31] The Puritan eschatologists elevated a prophecy of Paul's that the Jews would convert to Christianity en masse on the eve of Christ's return into one of the cardinal themes of their discussions of the Millennium. See Increase Mather, *A Dissertation concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation* . . . (London, 1709), and Samuel Willard, *The Fountain Opened* . . . *Wherein Also Is Proved That There Shall Be a National Calling of the Jews* (Boston, 1700), as well as Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad,* 73-80.

[32] Cotton Mather, "Diary," quoted in Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), 131.

[33] Chauncy, "Anti-Synodalia," 14, in [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism.*

[34] Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence,* 26.

[35] *Ibid.,* 3-4.

The Puritan ministers reached back to scriptural foundations, and identified the work of reformation with one of restoration, in a number of ways. First, they argued that the Congregational churches not only emulated biblical models but were actually descended from them. Against the logic of the covenant idea, which seemed to emphasize the rupture between old and new in the act of covenanting, the New England preachers sought literally to trace their churches back to the era of primitive Christianity; their own covenants, they argued, were merely reaffirmations and codifications of the ones by which the English churches had originally been gathered before the use of popish corruptions. This care for continuity and legitimate ancestry shows why, despite the corruptions of Anglicanism, the New Englanders (the Pilgrims excepted) refused to separate officially from the parent church. They condemned separatism for innovation, and when separatists challenged them to show an original, continuous covenant for the Church of England by which to justify their allegiance, they took pains to establish an implicit one where nothing explicit could be found: "[T]he Covenant . . . is either *implicite* or *explicite*," Thomas Hooker argued. "The Covenant is preserved for the *substance* of it, [whichever] of the waies it comes to be acted. And all the Churches that ever were, or now are, true Churches, whether in *England, Holland,* or *France,* etc. have, at least, in them an implicite Covenant, which is abundantly evidenced by the constant practise, which is performed."[36]

What saved the doctrine of implicit covenants from tautology were the scriptural models against which a church's "constant practise" could be judged. The Puritan divines argued for the continuity of their covenants by finding for them both literal and typological precedents in biblical history. They combed the Pentateuch and Paul's writings for the minutest instructions as to church order. More generally they culled scripture for precursors of their errand as a whole, heroes who prefigured their Way and confirmed the world-historical meaning they believed it to possess. They tended to fix on figures who, like themselves, already followed on earlier falls into apostasy, who renewed the covenant and restored purity to God's house, and who therefore recapitulated in miniature the triadic movement of sacred history. John the Baptist had an obvious fascination: he had withdrawn to a wilderness to purify the ways of the Lord; he sifted the mixed multitude of the Israelites by instituting the seal of baptism and excluding the Pharisees from it; he stood at the threshold of the first messianic age.[37] This search for precursors, however, did not stop with the New Testament. Jonathan Mitchel compared the Bay Colony magistrates

[36] Hooker, *Survey,* 83-84. On the historical continuity claimed by the Puritans for their church covenants see Morgan, *Visible Saints,* 29-32.

[37] On John the Baptist as a precursor see Samuel Danforth, *A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness* . . . (Cambridge, Mass., 1671), 1-2; Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence,* 26; and Chauncy, *Anti-Synodalia,* 15-16, in [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism.*

to Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile;
John Winthrop recalled Moses' "Prophetical Song" to tie the Puritan
migration to the Hebrew redemption from slavery.[38]

In short, the ministers found in the Bible mirrors for their own
latecomer status and their errand of recovery. They constructed a lineage
of figures who always already came after a fall. They represented sacred
history as a narrative of reformations, of ever-renewed efforts to purify an
irrevocably lapsed world. Increase Mather, for instance, in a panoramic
survey from which I quote only a small part, depicted the biblical past as a
constant dialectic of degeneracy and heroic revival:

> The posterity of the Lords Servants . . . have in a little time so
> forsaken him, as that solemn Reformation has been necessary: Look
> beyond the Flood and we shall see it so. One of Adam's children with
> all his numerous posterity forsook the Lord: Cain was excommunicate
> out of the Church. . . . [N]ow the world grew numerous, and a
> multitude of sinners caused impunity in sin, so as that they that were
> godly and conscientious were fain in the . . . first Ages and Genera-
> tions of the world to seperate themselves and become distinct
> Societies. . . . After Religion was revived in Noah's Family, his pos-
> terity quickly forsook the Lord. . . . [I]n *Abraham's* time there was
> such Apostacy as that Religion was almost gone out of the world, only
> in his Family there was a pure Church Established: Yet his posterity
> did quickly forsake the Lord. . . . The Church was settled in Jacobs
> Family: Corruption and Superstition did creep into his Family, so as
> that he was fain to set upon a work of solemn Reformation.[39]

In the Puritan sense of history, it seems, the world was not only fallen but
continually falling all over again. Yet the very sweep of Mather's passage
shows how the New England ministers parlayed the rather dismal biblical
record of human apostasy into a picture of the past on which they might
sustain their errand. The patriarchs' failure to reform *their* fallen age
simply metamorphosed them into precursors for further errands of
recovery by later saints, who might look back to them for an alternative
tradition, a "usable past." Abraham's circumcision of Isaac prefigured and
was superseded by John's baptism of Jesus; John's preparation for the first
coming in turn foreshadowed the Puritans' preparation for the second.
Each figure cast lines forward and backward, and, by acting as both
fulfillment and prefiguration, each became knit into a genealogy of saints.

Thus the divines fashioned a network of continuities out of a series of
oscillating, inconclusive struggles between apostates and reformers. They

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[38] On Nehemiah as a precursor see Mitchel, *Nehemiah*, 18-23; on Moses see
Winthrop, "Modell of Christian Charity," in *Winthrop Papers*, II, 295, and
Danforth, *Brief Recognition*, 8.

[39] Mather, "Danger of Apostacy," 79-81.

embedded the world-historical drama of wholeness/fall/redemption in the movement of these struggles from one saintly generation to the next; the very incompleteness of each reformation conserved the momentum of world history toward the Millennium. Seen from a saint's-eye view, the cycle of apostasy and reformation became dynamic and unified, an eschatological sifting of the mixed human mass down to a community of the elect. The sifting had begun with Cain's ostracism, and it would culminate with the withdrawal of the saints to the New Jerusalem on the Day of Judgment. Such a vision of history pointed to New England as the latest scene of the eschatological narrative. The Puritans' own sifting of souls in the wilderness became at once an adumbration of the heavenly division of the house and the penultimate episode on the way to it: "[T]his our Common-wealth seems to exhibit to us," preached Urian Oakes, "a *specimen,* or a *little model of the Kingdome of Christ upon Earth.*"[40]

Yet if the New England ministers fashioned a tradition that pointed forward to their own errand, they also exposed the tradition to all the contradictions of that errand. Their sense of the past was paradoxical from the start; they had formulated it by weaving together moments of separation or rupture into an overall continuity, by turning apostasy into a typological call for further reformation. Under the pressure of the baptism controversy, this peculiar synthesis of new and old, continuity and discontinuity, broke down. The contradictory imperatives of the New England Way seemed to refer back to contradictory strands of the sacred past—strands that refused to become integrated into a single, continuous legacy.

In particular the halfway covenant crisis manifested itself in tensions between the Old and New Testament pasts, between the national covenant bequeathed by the Hebrews and the congregational covenant of primitive Christianity. Puritan theology in both old and New England elided these covenants by weaving a pattern of typological precedence and direct continuity that ran from ancient Israel through the founding of Christianity to their own churches. The Puritans extended their own ancestry backward by Christianizing the Old Testament, subsuming the history of the Jews into the gospel story of the divine bestowal of grace: "the greatest part of the Old-Testament is Gospel, containing the Gracious Transactions of God with fallen Man: Now wherever such a thing is made mention of, it must needs come under the tenor of the New-Covenant."[41] God's covenant with Israel, stressed the theologians, was in *essence* one and the same with the promise of salvation now offered to the elect of all humanity.

Abraham was the key figure in this elision of the pre-Christian and Christian pasts. Puritan theologians, following a long-established tradition of Reformed and Pauline exegesis, assimilated his covenant with God to that of the early Christian church. They argued elaborately that his

[40] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded With . . .* (Cambridge, Mass., 1673), 21.
[41] Samuel Willard, *Covenant-Keeping the Way to Blessedness . . .* (Boston, 1682), 4.

establishing of circumcision as an initiatory seal of the covenant adumbrat-
ed John's instituting of baptism—this argument took on supreme impor-
tance in the halfway covenant debates—and they endowed with anagogical
meaning Abraham's geopolitical dealings with God. "There was something
Typical in Abraham's covena[n]t concerning *Canaan*[,] a type of heaven,"
wrote Thomas Shepard, Sr.; ". . . the Covena[n]t made with Abraham was
a Gospel-Covenant."[42] Gospelizing Abraham enabled the Puritans to use
him as a measure for their own work of reformation. In his image they
became idol smashers, heroes who had built an altar to God in exile,
founders of a holy commonwealth that they explicitly identified with
Israel.

Perhaps most important, Abraham legitimated the Puritan claim to
include saints' children within the covenant. "Hath not the Lord given that
Covenant of grace which was to Abraham and his seed, now to beleevers
and our seed?"[43] argued John Cotton in an attack on Anabaptism. The
continuity of the covenant from Israel to New England implied as well the
continuity of election from generation to generation within a tribal/na-
tional church. Nowhere in the New Testament did the New England
ministers find so clear a guarantee that God's promise extended to the
children. As we have seen, they cherished this guarantee. They felt the
claims of their saintly errand bound up with the claims of blood, and they
argued that the Congregational Way conferred special hope upon the
descendants of the godly: "Now God hath seen meet to cast the line of
Election so, as that it doth (though not wholly and only, yet) for the most
part run through the loyns of godly parents. There are, it is true, Elect
Children, who are not born of elect parents, but there are few (if any)
Elect Parents without elect children. . . . [T]he Elect of God are not in all
Nations alike, but in some the Lord gathers his Elect to himself from
generation to Generation."[44] Christianizing Abraham permitted the Puri-
tan divines in turn to tribalize Christianity: "the *Books* that shall be opened
at the last day," William Stoughton promised his listeners, "will contain
Genealogies in them."[45]

Such an adoption of the Hebrew covenant also sanctioned the political
aims of the Puritan errand. The migrants' commission had been, after all,
to institute not only a church order but a church polity, to "shake off the
dust of Babylon, both as to Ecclesiastical and Civil Constitution."[46] In the
Israelites, New Englanders found a model for this elision of community
and congregation, a model that they could at once emulate and transcend:

[42] Shepard, *Church-Membership*, 6-7. For Puritan treatments of Abraham and his
covenant see also Cotton, *Grounds and Ends*, 38-151 (chap. 3), and Miller, *New
England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 85-87.
[43] Cotton, *Grounds and Ends*, 38.
[44] Increase Mather, "Pray for the Rising Generation," in Increase Mather, *A
Call from Heaven*, 178.
[45] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest*, 33.
[46] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostacy," 77.

"*Jerusalem* was, *New England* is, they were, you are God's own, God's covenant People."[47] Tracing their lineage back to Abraham, in short, enabled them to knit together nation and church, consanguinity and election, and to legitimate a conception of their errand in which "family and tribe, piety and politics, . . . all the cultural norms of the community were fused."[48]

Yet neither norms nor pasts would harmonize so easily. Church and nation could really coincide only in the heady moment of New England's founding, when society as a whole, one might say, had undergone a conversion experience. As the city on the hill re-entered ordinary history, with the raising of the new, less gracious generation, the impossibility of combining tribal comprehensiveness and ecclesiastical purity became apparent—and so in consequence did the contradictions of the covenant theology itself. For the covenant idea was actually an ambiguous mixture of two separate relationships: it connoted at once a contract made *with* God and a promise made *by* him.[49] It represented a sort of theological double entendre by which the Puritan divines sought to imbue their own efforts at human reformation with the sainthood unconditionally given (and withheld) by God. Of course New England could not ultimately have its covenant both ways: either "national" bonds constrained the bestowal of grace, or visible sainthood alone determined inclusion. Baptism, an act both sacramental and tribal, represented the place at which these tensions were most exposed. And so it was that in the halfway covenant crisis, the disparate elements in the theology finally precipitated out.

Thus the baptism controversy disclosed a rift in the Puritan sense of the past that typological bandages could hardly mend. Abraham instructed the New Englanders to initiate the children of any good parent who acknowledged the covenant. John the Baptist retorted that, under the new dispensation, the seed of Pharisees—those who were merely civil without being faithful—had lost their title to the seals. Having exerted themselves to bring these two side by side, the Puritans could not find exclusive sanction for either of the versions of reformation the two represented. Thus for the first time in the colonists' experience, the ministers had to fight with one another over their past—which is to say, over the terms of their errand. At the same time they began to hearken back to the founding

[47] Samuel Wakeman, *Sound Repentance the Right Way to Escape Deserved Ruine . . .* (Boston, 1685), quoted in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 61.

[48] Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 97.

[49] Michael McGiffert traces the ambiguities of the covenant idea in English religious thought, particularly the development of the concept of a covenant of works to both complement and safeguard that of the covenant of grace ("Grace and Works: The Rise and Division of Covenant Divinity in Elizabethan Puritanism," *Harvard Theological Review*, LXXV [1982], 463-502). William K. B. Stoever studies the role of, and tensions in, the "two covenant" doctrine in early New England theology in *"A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven": Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, Conn., 1978).

of New England, to the generation-long moment in which the colonies had seemed to stand above the flux. They looked back to this time of fullness, from which they had declined, to see whether it could settle their fight over the nature of the past. By doing so they made themselves a new past, in a city halfway down the hill.

III

It was, as I have said, not logic but the passing of time that uncovered the contradictions in the New England Way. While that time was passing, Massachusetts Bay churches honored their commitments to both infant baptism and congregational purity; they left the contest unresolved and prepared the ground for both sides of the 1662 synod to claim the founders' support. In 1634 John Cotton supported the baptism of a saint's grandchild whose immediate parents were not church members.[50] In 1645, in an unpublished treatise, Richard Mather argued precisely the position taken by the synod, as did Thomas Shepard, Sr., in a formal epistle written in 1648 and published one year later.[51] Most important, the delegates to the Cambridge Synod of 1648 approved a draft of the halfway position submitted by the elder Mather, *"though because some few dissented, and there was not the like urgency of occasion for present practise, it was not then put into the* Platform."[52]

The delegates may have demurred out of respect for the sentiments of their congregations. Actual church behavior tended to substantiate the dissenters' later assertion that their position restricting baptism "hath been both the Judgment and general practise of the Churches in the *Bay Patent* . . . for the space of 30 years."[53] Even Richard Mather's Dorchester church obstructed his attempt in 1655 to institute the halfway doctrine when three neighboring churches sent messages of disagreement.[54] The congregations acted, perhaps, less from conviction than fear of innovation, but some of the founders did oppose the enlargement of baptism on principle. John Cotton (who seems to have donated ammunition to both sides) wrote, "[W]here neither of the Parents can claime right to the Lords

[50] Increase Mather, *First Principles,* 2-3.

[51] Richard Mather, "A Plea for the Churches of Christ in New England" (unpublished manuscript), quoted in Increase Mather, *First Principles,* 10-11; Shepard, *Church-Membership.*

[52] [Mitchel], "The Preface to the Christian Reader," in *Propositions concerning Baptism,* [ix].

[53] Chauncy, *Anti-Synodalia,* 1, in [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism.*

[54] Pope, *Half-Way Covenant,* 20-21. For congregations' resistance to the halfway covenant see *ibid.,* 34-35, 132-139; Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, "Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British American Colonies," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XXXIX (1982), 249-250; and Ross W. Beales, Jr., "The Half-Way Covenant and Religious Scrupulosity: The First Church of Dorchester, Massachusetts, as a Test Case," *ibid.,* XXXI (1974), 465-480, which disputes elements of Pope's analysis.

Supper, there their Infants cannot claime right to Baptisme."[55] John
Davenport never wavered from the strictest of dispensations.

One's general impression, then, is of tentative support for the halfway
covenant's doctrine in theory, which caution or intransigent congregations
kept from issuing in practice. For fifteen years there was only a reason to
do nothing, but time passed and the number of unbaptized grandchildren
grew. Meanwhile those preachers who did express a view betrayed few
signs of understanding how deeply the baptism issue jeopardized the
whole Congregational system. In his letter on church membership, for
instance, the elder Thomas Shepard showed more interest in persuading
his reader to the halfway position by whatever means than in integrating
that position into the New England Way; his arguments—including an
astonishing acceptance of the pervasiveness of hypocrisy—seem to under-
mine the whole doctrine of regenerate membership:

> though all [church members] are *externally*, and federally holy, yet
> some, yea many, yea the greatest part of such may be *inwardly bad*,
> and as prophane in their hearts, as Esau; and must we therefore refuse
> them to be Church-members because many of them may be inwardly
> bad? verily there must then never be Churches of God in this
> world. . . . It is a miserable mistake to think that inward[,] reall
> holyness is the only ground of admission into Church-Membership,
> . . . but it is federal holyness, whether externally professed as in
> grown persons, or graciously promised unto their seed.[56]

John Cotton, on the other hand, never sacrificed the integrity of the
notion of holiness to the need for infant baptism, but he displayed an
apparent incomprehension of the magnitude of the danger posed by the
problem. Those who warn against an ultimate dilution of holiness caused
by infant baptism, he wrote,

> putteth a fear where no fear is, or at least a causeless feare . . . though
> all the Infants of Church-Members bee baptized yet none of them are
> received . . . unto Communion at the Lords Table . . . untill they doe
> approve themselves . . . by publick Profession. . . .
> . . . Let then this primitive practise bee restored to its purity (as it is
> in some of the first Churches planted in this Countrey) and then there
> will bee no more feare of pestering Churches with a carnall Genera-
> tion of members baptized in their Infancy, then of admitting a carnall
> company of Hypocrites. . . . Either the Lord . . . will sanctifie the
> hearts of the baptized Infants to prepare them for his Table; or else
> hee will discover their hypocrisie . . . and so prevent the pollution.[57]

[55] Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New-England* (London, 1645),
87, quoted in Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 146.
[56] Shepard, *Church-Membership*, 13.
[57] Cotton, *Grounds and Ends*, 161-163.

For Cotton the one threat posed by infant baptism was hypocrisy, the exposure of the communion table to those who would profane it. The other threat—that the Lord would not sanctify the children's hearts and hence that they would not *seek* communion—impinged on him so little that he did not even bother to refute it. If Shepard's worldliness surprises us on the one hand, so does Cotton's inattention to the world on the other.

What Cotton took as given was the general coincidence between the circle of communicants and the community of descendants, between church and nation. Neither he nor the other architects of the New England Way seem to have traced the consequences implicit in Shepard's more open-eyed approach: that these could not coincide in a postlapsarian world; that if the church provided two bases for membership, there must finally be two kinds of holiness defining two covenants sealed by two different sacraments—and (as we shall see) legitimated by two separate histories. By the 1650s and 1660s these divergences could no longer be denied or ignored. The second-generation divines codified them in the doctrines of the 1662 synod. But even as they grasped the need for action, they, like the founders, seem not to have understood that the baptismal adjustments had been necessary all along, that the crisis was intrinsic to the problem of translating their Way into worldly, temporal life. Rather, they acted as the orthodox often act when confronted with a problem which their orthodoxy cannot work out. They blamed themselves and insulated the orthodoxy from doubt.

This combination of self-castigation and filial piety, Perry Miller has taught us, provoked the second generation's most notable contribution to Puritan intellectual culture. Renewing a rhetorical form—the jeremiad, which English preachers had exploited for a hundred years—the younger ministers developed a new stance of anxiety and accusation that testified to their increasing conviction that New England had failed its world-historical mission: "Of solemn and serious enquiry to us all in this general assembly is whether we have not . . . forgotten our errand into the wilderness," preached Samuel Danforth in a 1670 election sermon: "Doth not a careless, remiss, flat, dry, cold, dead frame of spirit, grow in upon us secretly, strongly, prodigiously? . . . Yea and in some particular Congregations amongst us, is there not *instead of a sweet smell, a stink?* . . . Pride, Contention, Worldliness, Covetousness, Luxury, Drunkenness, and Uncleanness break in like a flood upon us, and good men grow cold in their love to God and to one another."[58]

The fear that New England had "changed from a religious to a worldly interest," and the renewed form of the jeremiad articulating that fear, emerged with astonishing completeness during the decade following the halfway synod.[59] The baptism crisis was not of course the sole reason for this emergence. But both the baptism issue and the new rhetoric of declension had roots in the same moment, the moment in which the

[58] Danforth, *Brief Recognition,* 13.
[59] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostacy," 89.

second generation attained its majority. The younger ministers felt New England poised uncertainly between the continuation of the founders' church polity and the betrayal of it. William Stoughton called the moment "a Probation-time, even to this whole People," "a time and season of eminent trial to us," and he exhorted his second-generation peers in particular to return to orthodoxy before their decline became irrevocable:

> *Unto those who are the Generation risen and rising up in the midst of us*[:]
> Suffer *me*, my *Brethren* and *Companions*, who am one *of you*, to direct
> this word of the Lord unto *you*. . . . It is high time . . . for us to be
> thorowly awakened. . . . It is high time for us to prepare the shoulder
> in good earnest, and to give our necks to the yoke of God, that we
> may not be a *fruitless, a faithless, a perverse Generation*. . . . My
> Brethren, we are the Seed of such as are and have been the *friends of
> God*. . . . Shall all those precious things of God in this Wilderness,
> which were so savoury and sweet unto our fathers, . . . shall these be
> unto us their Children, as sapless, savourless, husky things *so quick-
> ly?*[60]

As Stoughton's language makes clear, it was from the identification of institutional with generational decline that the jeremiads gained their rhetorical power. The younger ministers defined apostasy as filial inadequacy writ large, and they preached reformation as the duty not only of Christians but of children. "It was their love to your Souls" that "brought your Fathers into this Wilderness," Samuel Willard told his audience. "You . . . will be unworthy heirs . . . if you do not prosecute their begun designs."[61] No wonder, then, that the baptism crisis so strongly epitomized New England's *"great radical Apostacy."*[62] The very tribalism that led the Puritans to embrace infant baptism intensified their despair at the institutional consequences of the doctrine. The apparent slackening of piety among the children betokened the colony's inability to continue the errand of purifying church order and sifting the mixed multitude: "How is the good grain diminished, and the chaff increased? . . . We who rise up to tread out the footsteps of them that are gone before us, alas! what are we? . . . *Children that are corrupters.*"[63]

Out of this sense of guilt and bereavement, the second-generation ministers fashioned not only a new rhetorical stance but a new relationship to their past. New England's decline placed a divide between past and present that embodied their feeling of estrangement from sources of religious authority. They projected that authority back across the divide, onto their dead parents, with obsessive force and urgency. The self-accusation of the jeremiads brought with them an increasing idealization of the founders of New England. In contrast to the corruptions of the

[60] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest*, 16, 17, 26-27.
[61] Willard, *Covenant-Keeping*, 117-118.
[62] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostasy," 89.
[63] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest*, 21.

children, the original settlers were endowed with the stature of scriptural heroes; Increase Mather called them *"Nehemiahs"* and "Pauls" and, perhaps most tellingly, *"Abrahams."* The patriarch, "when God called him removed out of *Ur of the Chaldees* to the place which the Lord would shew him, & there built an Altar to the everlasting God; so did our Fathers remove out of their own land when God called them, and came hither to build an Altar here . . . , yea, and they have set the Altar upon its right Basis too."[64] The baptism crisis fed this idealization of the fathers as it fed the sense of inadequacy among the sons. The divines recalled a time when the founders' primitive faith had prevented any breach of congregational purity, any need to swell the churches with the unconverted: "In the last age, in the dayes of our Fathers, . . . [there was] scarce a Sermon preached but some evidently converted; yea, sometimes hundreds in a Sermon: which of us can say we have seen the like?"[65] In short, the jeremiads attributed to the first settlers a veritable utopia of civil righteousness and ubiquitous grace, a church polity that had come near the Millennium: "Let me speak freely . . . there never was a generation that did so perfectly shake off the dust of Babylon, both as to Ecclesiastical and Civil Constitution, as the first Generation of Christians that came into this Land for the Gospels sake. Where was there ever a place so like unto New Jerusalem as New-England hath been?"[66]

As New England hath been: with this amalgam of bad conscience and filial piety, New England seems for the first time to have gained a past tense. Until the 1660s, as we have seen, to look back had meant to look at Europe or scripture; the New World was not yet a place with a history of its own. Even twenty years after the Great Migration, Edward Johnson had narrated his chronicle of colonial events, *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour,* primarily in the present tense. The jeremiads ended for good this sense that New England's errand belonged purely to the present and the future. By burdening the founders' time with all the holiness and heroism they felt the present to lack, the younger preachers made possible, and necessary, the redefinition of the founding as an object of historical consciousness. Their sermons were the first works to view early New England from afar, exhorting their audience to regain as a memorialized past what had been lost as present custom.

Thus it is in the jeremiads that we find the earliest calls for the writing of an authoritative history of the holy commonwealths. Beginning with the younger Thomas Shepard in 1672, scarcely an election day passed without some plea that *"a speedy and Effectual Course may be taken that the great things that God did for our Fathers"* in New England *"be faithfully recorded & transmitted to Posterity."*[67] In a time of decline, argued Urian Oakes, "it

[64] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostacy," 90, 91, 77.

[65] Increase Mather, "Pray for the Rising Generation," in Increase Mather, *Call from Heaven,* 181.

[66] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostacy," 77.

[67] *Ibid.,* 96. Shepard's call came in the election sermon, *Eye-Salve, Or a Watch-Word from Our Lord Jesus* . . . (Cambridge, Mass., 1673), 15-16.

is our great duty to be the Lords *Remembrancers* . . . that the mercies of the Lord . . . may be faithfully registered in our hearts, and remembred by us."[68] Whereas Johnson's present-tense chronicle had been a religious booster tract, aimed at displaying the wonders of New England to an unreceptive world, these ministers sought history for internal consumption, as "one good meanes to prevent Apostacy."[69] Such a record would furnish an anchor for a society that had drifted from its generational and doctrinal moorings.

The chorus of calls for a history of the planting of New England was not simply the natural result of time passing; it was the expression of a need. Robert Middlekauff has offered the provocative thesis that the whole Puritan errand was itself a projection of that need: the picture of the Congregational Way that comes down to us via the later sermons and writings, he suggests, was a retrospective invention of the second generation to give measure to its sense of failure and belatedness.[70] If this overstates the case a little, it is surely true that the younger ministers bestowed on New England a past that the place never quite had and, with that past, polished the errand into a more pristine form than the founders had usually given it. They answered their own call for a domestic history by assimilating the founders to the heroes of the Bible or the Reformation. They endowed their fathers with the monumentality of sacred history and came to speak of them in the cadences of scripture: "you *Fathers,*" intoned William Stoughton, *"you have known that which was from the beginning;* you may take up the Apostle *John's* expressions, and say, *That which was from the beginning, . . . we have heard . . . and our hands have handled* of the Cause and Interest of God in this Wilderness."[71]

There was nothing heterodox about this need to "scripturalize" the fathers. We have seen how characteristically the Puritans turned to their past for spiritual anchorage; here they simply extended to early New England the qualities they attributed to any epoch that had become part of their official memory. Nevertheless, this characteristic gesture transformed utterly their vision of history and sense of historical placement. The Puritan intellectuals continued to identify themselves as latecomers on the stage of sacred history, but now they seemed less the harbingers of a new age than the afterthoughts of an old one. As they looked back for precursors, what they saw was no longer a lineage of restorers but one of apostates: "When the Old World did Apostatize, after the Reformation in the dayes of *Seth,* that second Apostacy proved fatal. If Churches in New-England degenerate, it is an Apostacy after Reformation. How fatal is such a relapse like to be! . . . And truly to be amongst the last Apostates will be most woful."[72] This new sense of legacy implied a changed relationship

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[68] Oakes, *New-England Pleaded With,* 23.
[69] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostasy," 99.
[70] Middlekauff, *Mathers,* 96-112.
[71] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest,* 25.
[72] Increase Mather, "Danger of Apostasy," 93-94.

with the future, too. No longer were the Puritans the agents of the approaching Millennium. Their spiritual decline relegated them to a minor role in the eschatological drama: they were to contest with Antichrist not on the stage of world history but within their own churches and souls. "It is not *long* before the Lord will *finish his great works* in the world: *Antichrist* shall be destroyed, *Israel* shall be saved," prophesied William Stoughton. "[S]hall we be among the *last Apostates,* for whom the sorest vengeance is laid up in store. . . . Shall we lose our *share* in those *times of Refreshment* which are so near to come?"[73]

In short, the second-generation preachers felt adrift in history. The chain of typological equivalences securing New England back to Israel and forward to the New Jerusalem had somehow come undone. The commonwealths lived in a "Probation-time" in which all prophecies ended with a question mark. Contemporary events confirmed this feeling of uncertainty and powerlessness, and seemed to signal the excising of the New World experiment from sacred history. The English Puritan embrace of religious toleration, King Philip's War, and the Andros regime made clear New England's loss of historical agency. Declension no longer lay back with Antichrist in the Old World. The children could not withdraw from corruption as the first migrants had done; they could, however, quarantine the corruption by withdrawing their errand from themselves to the safekeeping of their fathers. Brought up short by the baptism crisis, the defeats in England, and the increasing commercialization of their commonwealths, terrified by the prospect of a Judgment for which they were unprepared, the second generation needed a refuge for the New England Way. They entrusted it to an idealized past so that they could continue to consult it.

IV

The halfway covenant, coming in the midst of this sea change in attitude, signaled the first time the divines appealed to their own predecessors for legitimacy and authority. When Increase Mather, for example, decided in the early 1670s to switch from opposition to support for the 1662 synod, he first published not an ecclesiological tract arguing the point but an anthology of passages "out of the *Original Manuscripts* of the *First* and chiefe *Fathers*" "abundantly sufficient to evince that *the first Fathers* of this Country were for that *Enlargement of Baptisme,* which the late Synod Book pleads for, And that therefore *such a practice is no Apostacy from our Primitive Principles.*"[74] Mather's *First Principles of New England concerning the Subject of Baptisme* displayed with particular clarity the second-generation posture of filial atonement, since his change of heart amounted to a reconciliation with the views of his own father, Richard Mather, a leader of the synod majority. Increase embodied the

[73] Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest,* 32-33.
[74] Mather, *First Principles,* title page, 24.

overlay of intellectual and family history implicit in the whole generational crisis, and indeed he admitted to publishing the work "that I might please God in *obeying the fifth Commandment*."[75] Such appeals were not, however, limited to blood relations; Jonathan Mitchel prefaced the publication of the synod's results, "*What is here offered is far from being any declining from former Principles, it is rather a pursuance thereof; for it is all included in, or deducible from what we unanimously professed and owned in the . . .* [Cambridge] Platform of Discipline, *many years since.*"[76] Nor (as Increase's divided loyalties suggest) were the early days invoked only in support of the halfway covenant; Charles Chauncy's *Anti-Synodalia Scripta Americana* asserted that "what the Dissenters hold and defend, is the old way of *New-England,* and what is now pleaded for, and to be introduced, is an innovation."[77]

What was actually the old way? It contained, of course, both positions. As I have tried to show, the New England system from the start glossed over the contradictions between infant baptism and regenerate membership, nation and church, and issued in ambiguous practice. But ambiguity was one thing the divines could not admit; above any particular point of doctrine they all agreed with John Davenport that "the whole Scripture, *breathed of God,* holdeth forth a perfect Rule,"[78] which their errand embodied. It was this assumption that drove them to idealize the past as the repository of a unity they themselves had misplaced. But because the past lacked that unity as well, the ministers' appeals to it had an effect precisely opposite to what they sought. Rather than reconciling the later generation, these appeals uncovered the divisions in the first. As it had to, the dual basis of church membership bifurcated the history of New England. This did not mean that the contestants finally realized their manifold heritage, shook hands, and tried to settle the problems without the authority of predecessors; to the contrary, the presumption of unity led both camps to claim that their piece of the past was in fact the whole.

With the baptism controversy, then, the Puritan divines not only idealized their past but quarreled over it for the first time. Each side of the controversy constructed its own version of the myth of heroic origins, its own definition of the fathers' legacy and the children's lapse. To Jonathan Mitchel it was the exclusion of the unregenerate church children that epitomized New England's historical drift: "It is easie to see that in the way your self and some others go," he wrote to an opponent, "*the bigger half of the people in this Country will in a little Time be unbaptized.*"[79] In his view the halfway covenant was a mainstay against apostasy: "in the way of *successive baptizing* the Children of all that had a standing in the *visible*

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[75] *Ibid.,* [vi].

[76] [Mitchel], "Preface," in *Propositions concerning Baptism,* [iv].

[77] Chauncy, *Anti-Synodalia,* 5, in [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism.*

[78] Davenport, *Another Investigation,* 2.

[79] Mitchel, "Letter concerning Baptisme," 5, appendix to Increase Mather, *First Principles.*

Church . . . the Lord hath continued *Religion* among *Christian people* from Age to Age, whereas the like Continuance and Preservation of true Religion could not have been hoped for, nor probable in the Contrary way."[80] Charles Chauncy, on the other hand, rejected the imputation of "[a]ll such tendency to irreligion or Apostacy by this denial of Baptism to such Children"; he argued that the halfway covenant was not a response to irreligion but a symptom of it: "it is apparent unto all what a corrupt masse of Unbelievers shall by this change throng into the fellowship of Gods People, and the children of strangers, uncircumcised in heart, shall be brought into Gods Sanctuary to pollute it."[81]

The struggle to appropriate the past extended not only to American events but to the scriptural history underpinning them. Opponents of the synod majority sought to discredit the inclusion of the unconverted church children by breaking the bond between Abraham and Jesus, circumcision and baptism, nation and congregation, on which it was based. Thus Chauncy argued that

> in reference to Baptisme, Christ taught his Apostles the matter and manner of it, . . . far differing from the administration of Circumcision; Circumcision was first appointed for a Domestical, and then for a National Church, whereas Baptisme is appointed for a Congregational. . . . The sum and issue here is, That Baptisme being a New-Testament Seal, is tyed to Christs commands and rules, given to the Apostles, and by them delivered to Gospel-Churches, and the Subject of Baptisme must be sought out and found in them.[82]

The supporters of enlarged baptism, on the other hand, relied on the proposition *"that one and the same Covenant which was made to Abraham in the old Testament, is for substance the same with that in the New."*[83] What was at stake here was not simply the status of specific biblical precedents but the very mode of exegesis by which the New England ministers defined their relation to scripture. Implicit in the dissenters' position, as Holifield has pointed out, was a criticism of typology itself as a method for incorporating Israel, the gospel, New England, and the Millennium within a single historical narrative.[84]

Thus the halfway covenant inaugurated a debate not only over the content of New England's past but over the appropriate means of interpreting its place in history generally—a debate that continued through King Philip's War, the Stoddard-Mather polemics, the loss and regaining of the colonial charters, and the founding of the Brattle Street church. Beneath its apportioning of specific events and heroes, this

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[80] *Ibid.*, 4-5.
[81] Chauncy, *Anti-Synodalia*, 37, 10, in [Mitchel], *Propositions concerning Baptism*.
[82] *Ibid.*, 14.
[83] Shepard, *Church-Membership*, 6.
[84] Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 172, 179-181.

struggle signaled a more fundamental divergence between what we may call the natural and spiritual histories of New England. The divergence did not wholly coincide with, though it was intertwined with, the secularization of New England society; historians tend to identify these all too presumptively. Jonathan Mitchel's world was hardly less sacred than his teacher Charles Chauncy's, but the men represented two different views of the conditions under which people further or enhance the world's sacredness. They place humanity in two different kinds of history.

The dissenters' attempt to break the continuity between the Israelite and the apostolic churches mirrored their own discontinuity with the seasonal, worldly life into which even the saintliest of societies must in time settle. Such a vision implied a rift between generations as well, for the dissenters believed that Christ required each epoch to forge its salvation anew in the crucible of doubt. There could be no shortcut to or substitute for the new birth of conversion: "Christian Churches," said John Davenport, "are . . . not capable of being propagated and continued, in a lineal succession, by natural generation."[85] As John the Baptist instructed them to do, such rigorists were willing to discovenant even the "Pharisees" of their own loins, who held only the credentials of the old birth. We may be shocked by their equation of their seed with "the children of strangers," but we should not attribute to them a lack of parental care; on their view, exhorting the young to confront, unsheltered, the burdens of spiritual majority was the most generous thing a parent could do. The dissenters' vice was not cruelty to children but a kind of arrogance toward ordinary human history: they refused to believe that God had let parenthood or citizenship determine how one should act as a saint. They were too willing to subordinate their polity to their purity.

The dissenters preached a kind of religious Maoism, a doctrine of continual reformation in which each generation withdrew from and remade its past into a new approach to the Millennium. Luckily they had an unimpeachable example of this breaking of bonds to which to appeal, the founding of New England itself; but they made bad history from the founding. They turned the migrants' successful revision of the past into their own freedom from it. They enshrined a special moment of revolutionary fervor, in which society and sect could coincide because neither had grown old, as the ideal of what any generation might attain: "Now if this were Truth in the Year 1639, . . . we see no reason why it should not be Truth in the Year 1662."[86] It is not surprising that of the leading opponents to the halfway covenant, two (Davenport and Chauncy) were members of that first generation who had outlived their peers, and two (Eleazer Mather and Increase Mather before his switch) were young men who had yet to experience parenthood or the other small trials of lasting in time.[87]

[85] Davenport, *Another Investigation,* 6.

[86] Increase Mather, "An Apologetical Preface," *ibid.,* viii.

[87] At the time of the 1662 synod, Increase Mather was 23 years old, only a few months married, and childless, and Eleazer was 25.

Theirs was not the prevailing doctrine. A majority of the New England intelligentsia viewed with alarm this vision of history as radical discontinuity and its spiritual banishment of the unconverted seed: "Do not on pretence of avoiding *Corruption,* run into sinful *Separation* . . . from the Children of the Covenant," warned Mitchel. "Prize and hold fast the Covenant of God to you and yours. . . . If we will own Gods Covenant but for one generation onely, (when as *Gen.*17.7. the *Covenant* runs *to us and our seed after us in their generations*) how justly may the Lord tarry with us but for *one generation,* and then break up house, and leave us to *confusion.*"[88] Such a plea reveals a more chastened conception of a chosen people's power in and over history. The halfway covenant did not abandon sainthood for parenthood, any more than its opponents had abandoned parenthood for sainthood, but it acknowledged that the errand had to be placed under the limits of natural history. "Salvation [is] from Generation to Generation," argued Increase Mather; there *were* no saints without parents, and saints should temper their rigor accordingly.[89]

The proponents of the halfway covenant did not view this tempering as a dilution or secularization of the New England orthodoxy. They insisted that fundamentally they were going on in the same Way; they had merely settled the Puritan city a little lower down the hill, where the air was not so thin. This small relocation, however, provided quite a different place for their errand in history. The city on the summit had stood above the flux of ordinary history, almost above temporality itself, a type for the New Jerusalem. By putting themselves below it, the ministers agreed to do without the millennial vista it offered. They did not need the vista: children were growing up to raise new children, and the world of nations and families showed no immediate signs of ending. What they needed was to continue the ordinary social dominance of the church, and Abraham's covenant "to a thousand generations" ensured this better than John's prophetic threats against the Pharisees. They had not stopped believing in the Millennium, but their errand became to prepare themselves for it, rather than to inaugurate it for the world. However many more generations the world would actually last, the Puritan divines had come to accept that they were not living above the flux of natural history but in the midst of it. With the halfway covenant they settled in for the duration.

V

Despite the changes put into practice by the synod, we should not quarrel with its assertion that it was only following the system of the founders; as Edmund Morgan writes, "The halfway covenant . . . was neither a sign of decline in piety nor a betrayal of the standards of the founding fathers, but an honest attempt to rescue the concept of a church of visible saints from the tangle of problems created in time by human

[88] Mitchel, *Nehemiah,* 28.
[89] Mather, *First Principles,* [vii].

reproduction."[90] Nor on the other hand should we dispute the historical claims of the synod's dissenters. They too were following "the standards of the founding fathers" in "an honest attempt to rescue the concept of a church of visible saints." The point is not which side gave the right answer to the question of continuity, but whether the question was posed sensibly to begin with. The Puritans' scriptural history, their picture of the colonial past, and their conception of the errand itself were genuinely ambiguous. Various authorities left various legacies sanctioning various practices.

The New England ministers resisted acknowledging this ambiguity out of a conviction that their Way "holdeth forth a perfect Rule." Their conviction of its unity and clarity ironically did as much to undermine the errand as did any of the disillusionments that befell them in the 1660s and 1670s. As the contradictions in the errand began to come clear, the divines lacked the means to resolve them. Characteristically they turned to history for such means and even recast their picture of the past to enhance these means. The result was not to knit together the fragments of their "Rule," but to unravel the traditions being used to legitimate it. To be sure, this unraveling of their intellectual legacy vastly enriched our own: it left us with the first great colonial literary form in the jeremiad, as well as the first distinctively Euro-American historical consciousness. Yet the New Englanders' accomplishments cannot disguise the fact that their picture of the past was, on its own terms, a failure. It could not solve the baptism controversy and shore up their errand, because it relied on a mistaken conception of the relationship between social memory and historical change.

What lay at the source of New England's crisis was less the particular contradictions of Puritan orthodoxy than the nature of orthodoxy itself. Almost invariably orthodoxy looks to its history for the "Rule" by which it guides action and erases ambiguity. Either it locates this "Rule" in a scriptural text or it turns history itself into a kind of scripture, endowing the past with interpretive authority; the New England Way did both. In either case, however, the orthodox tend to ignore their own agency in recreating the traditions to which they submit themselves. Social memory, that picture of the past by which a society situates and instructs its present, is itself the product of present-day needs, codes, and conflicts. It is transformed by precisely those forces of change that an orthodoxy like Puritanism looks to history to deny. As the baptism controversy illustrates, the collective sense of the past cannot settle social conflicts; it can only mirror them. Indeed, because the past is usually invoked as a way of resolving struggles over cultural authority, mirroring conflict is what it does best.

If this bodes ill for orthodoxies seeking to repress ambiguity or division, it is a boon for cultural historians. We may trace in social memory the changing patterns of resistance and assent by which different actors challenge, defend, and recreate their society's conceptions of legitimacy.

[90] Morgan, *Visible Saints,* 137.

In effect we may reverse the procedures of the Puritan historians: where they interpreted their American history in light of scriptural precedents, we may look at the scriptural past as a palimpsest on which the changing fortunes of New England are written. One may wonder if the example of early New England does not suggest the importance of studying this link between social memory and social conflict throughout American history. If only because the question of defining "Americanism" (our latter-day orthodoxy) has preoccupied Americans so persistently, cultural conflicts tend to show up as conflicting visions of the past. Whether in the partisan political cultures of the early national period, the antebellum debates over slavery, the great class battles of the Gilded Age, or the racial ideology of turn-of-the-century nativists, struggles for authority have taken history to be part of their contested terrain, invoking rival conceptions of national legacy, rival memories. Much of the best recent work in American cultural and intellectual history has touched on the role of social memory in mirroring and defining such struggles: studies of republicanism, frontier ideology, and post-Puritan millennialism spring to mind as obvious examples.[91] Nonetheless the history of American memory remains largely to be written.

[91] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), and *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn., 1973). On millennial conceptions of American national destiny see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven, Conn., 1978); and David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), esp. 285-342.