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THE TYPOLOGY OF AMERICA’S MISSION

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The Puritans invented the sacred history of New England; the eighteenth-century clergy established the concept of America's mission. In this essay I want to suggest the nature of that development, with special emphasis on the role of the Edwardsian revivals. I use the word suggest to stress the limits of my subject. My perspective is a very partial one: partial in its view of Edwards, of Puritanism, of the Great Awakening, and above all, of the social and ideological factors that carried the colonies from revival to revolution. I try to indicate something of the "larger picture" in the course of my analysis, but mainly I focus on questions of rhetoric. My assumption is that (after due allowance is made for all the complexities involved) American culture may be said to have grown in a more or less coherent way toward a modern free enterprise economy, that that growth finds expression in the quasi-figural outlook we have come to associate with manifest destiny and the dream, and therefore that to describe that outlook is (by implication at least) to illuminate some of the controversial connections between Puritan, Yankee, and Revolutionary America.

The connections have been controversial for many reasons. In the interests of clarity, I center my discussion on the rhetoric of millennialism, and specifically Edwardsian "post-millennialism": first, in its relation to New England Puritanism; and second, in its relation to what has recently been termed "civil millennialism." In both cases, historians have emphasized a radical shift in approach. Without denying the fact of change, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the persistence of language and vision constitutes an underlying unity of design. I need hardly add that to demonstrate is not the same as to endorse.
Let me begin with the differences in outlook between the Puritan clergy and their Yankee successors. The New England colonists saw their errand into the wilderness as part of the final stage of history. In developing that view, they distorted traditional forms of exegesis, but they were careful to justify themselves by recourse to scripture. They always rooted their interpretations (however strained) in biblical texts, and they appealed to (even as they departed from) a common tradition of Reformed hermeneutics. Their Yankee heirs felt relatively free of such constraints. During the Enlightenment, the meaning of Protestant identity became increasingly vague; typology took on the hazy significance of image and symbol; what passed for the divine plan lost its strict grounding in scripture; providence itself was shaken loose from its religious framework to become part of the belief in human progress. The eighteenth-century clergy took advantage of this movement to shift the focus of figural authority, from Bible history to the American experience. In effect, they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment, from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history, into a metaphor for limitless secular improvement.

These discontinuities, as they have often been called, resulted from a process of extension and adaptation, not of transformation. The Puritan clergy had set out to blur traditional distinctions between the world and the kingdom. Their rhetoric issued in a unique mode of ambiguity that precluded the conflict of heaven's time and man's. "Canaan" was a spiritual state for them, as it was for other Christians; but it was also (in another, but not conflicting sense) their country. They spoke of the mutuality (rather than the coexistence) of fact and ideal. By "church-state" they meant a separation of powers in the belief that in the American Canaan, and there only, the ecclesiastical and the civic order had been made to correspond. And in the course of time the correspondence yielded the secular basis of multidenominational religion and the sacral view of free enterprise economics. Both these developments were rooted in the heterodox tenets established a century before: the moral distinctions between the Old World and the New (as between Egypt and Canaan), the interrelation of material and spiritual blessings, the concept of a new chosen people whose special calling entailed special trials, and above all a mythic view of history that extended New England's past into an apoca-
lypse which stood “near, even at the door,” requiring one last great act, one more climactic pouring out of the spirit, in order to realize itself.

Recent scholars have recognized the importance of millennialism to our religious and social history. But by and large they have dated that notion from the Edwardsean revivals, because of what they assumed to be a fundamental theological shift. Technically speaking, the seventeenth-century colonists (like most Protestants of their time) were pre-millennialists. That is, they believed that the descent of New Jerusalem would be preceded and attended by a series of cataclysmic divine judgments and followed by a universal change in all things. Jonathan Edwards, on the contrary, was a post-millennialist; he posited a final golden age within history, and thereby freed humanity, so to speak, to participate in the revolutions of the apocalypse. Students of the Great Awakening have used this distinction to make Edwards out to be a radically innovative historian, the first New World spokesman for an optimistic view of human progress.

The distinction is a questionable one. Historians of religion have long noted that pre-and post-millennialism are often present in the same movement, sometimes in the same thinker. And even if we accept a significant difference between the two approaches it is by no means certain that Edwards was our first post-millennialist. David Smith has argued that that honor belongs to the latter-day theocrats (like Samuel Sewall, Cotton Mather, and Joseph Morgan), and if to them, then also, I would maintain, to the first- and second-generation ministers who made the doctrine of the chiliad almost canonical in their church-state. For chiliasm, the belief in an earthly paradise, recasts the apocalyptic hope into something like the Edwardsean idea of progress, especially when it is accompanied, as it was in early New England, by a typological sense of fulfillment. “The flourishing beauty of . . . heavenly grace,” said William Hubbard, in an election-day sermon of 1676, “which did so strangely metamorphose the visage of the face of things at first in the world . . . was the verdant lustre . . . that turned [our] rough and barren wilderness . . . into a fruitful Carmel or fragrant Sharon”; and New Jerusalem, in turn, would bring that lustre to a “more brilliant glow.”1 The spiraling process that Hubbard outlines (Creation to Eden, to Canaan, to New Canaan in America, to New Eden) was a commonplace of the New England Puritan pulpit. It calls attention to the implications of the Puritans’ eschatology of errand—what we might call their American millennialism.

1 David E. Smith, “Millenarian Scholarship in America,” American Quarterly, 17 (1965), 537 (see also 530, 541–42); William Hubbard, The Happiness of a People (Boston, 1676), 61.
For though Hubbard and his colleagues believed the millennium would involve a drastic overturning, that overturning meant "metamorphosis" to them: a change in this world, and most dramatically in their New World. Their errand led not from earth to heaven (like the pilgrimage of the Plymouth settlers), but from lesser to greater glories on the American strand. As they conceived it, New Jerusalem would come not to abrogate their venture, but to complete it. The apocalyptic wonders were for them part of the latter-day "magnalia Christi Americana," and the millennium itself, by extension, part of the country's history. Whereas their European contemporaries expected the millennium to bring secular history to an end, the New England Puritans spoke of the millennium as the motivating force of their errand. America, in their view (like Eden, Canaan, and New Jerusalem), was intrinsic to the progress of the work of redemption. They acknowledged, of course, that New Jerusalem was different and all-too-distant from the New England church-state. But in the eye of prophecy, it was already present for them, as the harvest is implicit in the planting, the glorified in the justified saint, and the antitype in the figura. "Though there be in special one grand accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies," said William Adams on a fast-day in 1678, "yet there hath been a glorious accomplishment of it already," albeit a "partile accomplishment... wherein those... promises are fulfilled in their measure and degree." Adams was not just speaking for the mid-century clergy. With Hubbard, he was making explicit what the orthodox had believed from the start: in transforming the American wilderness, God was providing through their church-state "a type and Emblem of New Jerusalem," "a First Fruits of that which shall in due time be accomplished in the world throughout." As the theocracy foreshadowed New Jerusalem, so New Jerusalem would be the Good Old Way written large.

This parallel between Edwards and the Puritans reminds us (or ought to) that Edwards himself denied any substantial difference in this respect between himself and his predecessors. We know that he was influenced by Thomas Shepard's Parable of the Ten Virgins (1636), and in 1744 he made the legacy clear in complaining about the "slanderous" charges of Charles Chauncy, the leading spokesman for the Old Light orthodoxy. Chauncy had accused Edwards of having "often said that the millennium was already begun"; but the truth was, Edwards wrote, that he had seen the revivals as no more than "forerunners of those glorious times." Even

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at the peak of his enthusiasm, during the harvests of 1739–41, he had known (and stated in his Thoughts on the Revival) “that there would be many changes, revivings and intermissions, and returns of dark clouds and threatening circumstances, before . . . Christ’s kingdom shall be everywhere established.” Had not Thomas Shepard and all the “fathers”—John Davenport, John Cotton, Richard Mather, and others—spoken in much the same terms about the prospects in store for New England? No doubt such assertions of filiopietism were a source of Edwards’ appeal. The New Lights revolted not (as some have said) against paternal authority, but against a generation they thought had betrayed the founding fathers. No doubt, too, Edwards exaggerated his bonds with the past, much as the latter-day Puritans had exaggerated theirs with the theocracy, and as nineteenth-century evangelicals were to exaggerate their loyalty to Edwards. But that sense of continuity was itself part of the myth; the very discrepancy between assertion and fact attests to the persistence of Puritan rhetoric. This does not explain the discrepancy away, of course, and I will return to it later in the essay. But first it seems necessary, in view of current scholarship, to trace the development that Edwards suggests.

The crucial link is the emphasis on process. In contrast to European chiliasts, the Puritans and Edwardseans concerned themselves far less with the final event than with the design of gradual fulfillment. For both groups the time was always at hand, but somehow that was of secondary interest. The real issue was the figural meaning of the present, which is to say, the union of history and prophecy. What distinguishes Edwards’ approach is the greater consistency of its logic. The Puritans’ concept of errand, for all its internal coherence, is marred (from the standpoint of historic process) by its pre-millennialism. Their sense of prophetic fulfillment, leading upward from Eden to New Canaan, is blurred (if not undermined) by its reliance on an entirely extraterrestrial agency—some superhuman “shattering of the order of nature.” Edwards, by changing the scenario for this last act of the errand, welded the whole progression into an organic human-divine whole. That was his contribution. In cultural terms, it had enormous import for the course of American millennialism. But as a view of history, it simply drew out the implications of the outlook developed a century before. “Though there has been a glorious fulfillment of . . . prophecies already,” Edwards wrote in 1740, describing the chiliad in phrases that make the legacy unmistakable, “other times are only forerunners and preparatories to this,” as the exodus of Israel.

from Babylon "typified" the Reformation and the Great Migration. And what the Great Migration meant now seemed to him "gloriously visible." Christ, he announced, will have "the heathen for his inheritance," a "nation shall be born in a day," and Protestant America, climactically, will become another, greater Mountain of Holiness, "Beautiful as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, and terrible as an Army with Banners"—"Put on thy beautiful garments, O America, the holy city!"

Edwards' conviction that sacred history was reaching its apex in the New World seals his indebtedness to the Puritans. Without forgetting his very considerable borrowings from European thinkers—without forgetting either that his millennialism both antedates and postdates his hopes for the Awakening (and that eventually he may have lost faith in America's mission)—it seems safe to say that, at the height of his fervor, Edwards adopted wholesale the Puritan vision of the New World. For him as for his forebears, the "discovery of America" was not just an event in secular history, the opening of new territories to European Christians. It was the unveiling of some momentous truth, as an inspired exegete unveils the meaning of an obscure passage in scripture. In this hermeneutic sense, Edwards discovered America in scripture, specifically in the apocalyptic passage, Isaiah 66:19; and like his forebears, he proceeded to celebrate the golden age of the first planters as the millennial dawn. Given these premises, Edwards' view of the Awakening was a foregone conclusion. English millenialists like Moses Lowman helped him decide on particular apocalyptic dates; German Pietists like August Hermann Francke and English evangelists like George Whitefield heightened his sense of expectancy. But in the main his concept of the Northampton Millennium—including not only his account of things past and present, but also his forecasts of things to come (vast increases in population, ecumenism in faith, great piety, true liberty, general prosperity, and an expansion of scientific, moral, and religious knowledge)—derived from Puritan New England.

Especially revealing is Edwards' emphasis on trial. The familiar contrast between the Puritans' "cosmic despair" and the revivalists' "high cosmic optimism" simplifies the attitudes of both groups. As the earlier group had found a way out of despair so, conversely, the eighteenth-century Calvinists found ample opportunity to remind their audiences of the dangers before them—the "cataclysms," the "ferment and struggle," the "mighty and violent opposition" which would precede the overthrow of

Satan's kingdom. In these latter days, they explained, darkness and affliction were "always to be expected." Like the Puritan Jeremias, the Edwardseans fused threat and promise in making probation their overriding metaphor for the times. If it seemed that God was about "to forsake this land, and to bring most awful judgments upon it," then there was cause to rejoice. It was precisely through such a "time of testing" that Christ's American saints could (as it were) assert their right to make New England a "heaven upon earth." There are numerous parallels for such statements in seventeenth-century sermons—most strikingly perhaps, in the covenant-renewal ceremonies established during King Philip's War (1674–76). In both the Puritan covenant-renewals and the revivallist concerts of prayer, the clergy linked personal salvation and the progress of the work of the redemption with a unique American enterprise. And in both cases the ritual was based on the Israelites' covenant renewals under Joshua and Nehemiah. Then, God had led His people from captivity to Canaan; now, God was calling upon His people in New England to complete the liberation of the church. According to Cotton Mather, that call had first been answered by the Great Migration, with the Puritan Ark of Christ "victoriously sailing round the globe," changing geography into "Christianography." Exactly a century later, commenting on the Revolutionary period of trial underway in the United States, David Austin confirmed the promise once more in his "Advertisement" to Edwards' History of the Work of Redemption:

Though to the eye of unbelief, the Ark may seem, now, to be involved in tempestuous weather, and soon to be foundered through the probable failure of borrowed strength; yet, to the joy of the passengers there are those, who, looking through the mists of human or internal jurs, go hail the approach of MILLENNIAL DAY!

On the Ocean of the Millennium [our] ... Ark shall safely and uninterruptedly sail.5

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Austin was speaking directly to the fate of revivalism in the eighteenth century. His scorn for the sceptic's "unbelief" reminds us that since 1742 a growing number of Enlightenment liberals had been heaping contempt

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upon "enthusiasts" like himself. But the liberals failed to persuade. Austin's optimism, his sense of the apocalyptic "joy" aboard the American ship of state, recalls the continuing vitality of Edwardsian revivalism. And revivalism remained vital to the culture, I would suggest, because Edwards neither broke with the Puritans nor aligned himself with them, but molded their myth to fit the needs of his own times. From the perspective I have been advancing, his contribution was to make revivalism a force toward independence by making it part of the evolving typology of America's mission. This is (to repeat) a very limited perspective on Edwards' achievement; it reveals the provincialism of a brilliant mind, the capacity of a profound religious thinker to be misled by cultural afflatus into an astonishing arrogance, both on his own behalf and on behalf of his region and continent. Nonetheless, insofar as Edwards' arrogance reflects a set of widely shared beliefs it seems to me to illuminate some salient implications of his thought.

It indicates, first of all, that he drew out the proto-nationalistic tendencies of the New England Way. Edwards inherited the concept of a new chosen people, and he enlarged its constituency from saintly New England theocrats to newborn American saints. In fact, if not in theory, theocracy had meant exclusivism, the literal and direct continuity from elect father to (presumably) elect son. Revivalist conversion opened the ranks of the American army of Christ to every white Protestant believer. Whereas the Puritan covenant renewals called the children of New England to their filial obligations, the Edwardsian concerts of prayer sought to awaken all prospective American saints, North and South, to the state of their souls, the shortcomings of their society, and the destiny of their New World Canaan.

In effect, Edwards expanded the Puritans' tribal genetics of salvation into a genealogy of the latter-day American church. The second- and third-generation clergy had extolled the emigrants as founding fathers, but they limited the legend perforce to the story of New England. Edwards freed the errand from the confines of regional theocracy. He rendered the legend of the founding fathers the common property of all New World evangelicals, and thus opened the prospect for expanding the Puritan past into a figura of the American Way. This accounts for the impression that many scholars have had of the relatively high optimism in the revivalist sermons. The Puritans also described their mission in terms of "Christ's mighty deeds in America." But they were committed to a regionally defined, doctrinally exclusive way of life; and for all their self-assurance they never quite managed to reconcile the restrictive and expansive tendencies of their thought. Edwards had no such conflicts. His view of history,
like his evangelicalism, was couched in terms of continuous and indefinite enlargement. He could afford to adopt a post-millennial view because he required no supernatural event to bridge the gap between an "enclosed garden" and the country at large, or between an outmoded past and a world-redemptive future. The New England Way was for him above all a shadow or type of the "union of love" that would knit together, as one city on a hill, all of Protestant America.

For if Edwards abandoned the Puritan belief in theocracy, he nonetheless retained the Puritan vision of personal/communal exceptionalism. As Alan Heimert notes, he differed from English revivalists, including Whitefield, by his emphasis on corporate mission. Edwards attacked the Separates for their spiritual pride, and the colonial Establishment for its lax method of church admission. The "middle way" he espoused was, like John Cotton's, an ambiguous union of extremes: it aspired simultaneously to absolute purity and to a full involvement in this world. In America, Edwards insisted, "the holy community must serve as a type of New Jerusalem" and hence as an earthly "instrument for bringing it into being." The Separates argued (as Roger Williams had against Cotton) that typologically there was a "plain Difference between the World and the Church." Edwards replied (as Cotton had to Williams) that the story of America was intrinsic to sacred history. The aim of the American church, as "a type of New Jerusalem," was not merely "the salvation of individuals, but of society," since the society, in this case, was by definition engaged in "the forwarding of the Work of Redemption."6

I invoke the parallel now to stress the change from 1640 to 1740. We have often been told that Edwards' position in the culture was a transitional one. Undoubtedly it was, if we add that the transition marked not so much the end of an old order as the unfolding of a new stage of growth in colonial society. According to Perry Miller, Edwards was a modernist in spite of himself—the first American to recast Puritanism into "the idiom of empirical psychology"—and thus a central figure in the movement toward the values of liberal free enterprise. There is a good deal of evidence for this view; but even more to support the case for Edwards the traditionalist—the orthodox Calvinist who sought passionately to curb the threat of modernism by all means at his disposal, including the ideal of christic selfhood. In direct opposition to Locke, he main-

tained that true individuation was not a self-contained, empirical process but a public and spiritual commitment. Regeneration for him depended on conformity through grace to “a principle of oneness that is manifested . . . as identical multiple units of generic consciousness.” What brings together these two sides of Edwards’ thought, at least during the period of the Awakening, was his effort to link regeneration to the destiny of the New World. American Protestants, after all, had a special role to play in God’s plans. For them above all other peoples, conversion, rebirth, and “generic consciousness” were manifested typologically, through the correspon-
dence (which Edwards never tired of explaining) between personal fulfillment and social harmony. The result, however unintended, was that he went further than his predecessors in adjusting the Puritan vision to the norms of his age. Recent historians of religion have observed that Edwards’ “ethics were prudent and flexible applications of the early Puritan tradition to the settled life of mid-eighteenth-century Massachu-
setts,” that his chief followers “tended to espouse a . . . radically egalitarian, libertarian, and fraternal view of . . . social and political life,” and that his theology proved flexible enough for them to “empower the theory of a nation.”

Edwards should not be burdened with all the sins of his disciples, of course; but in this case we cannot entirely dissociate his thought from theirs. By implication, it seems clear, his long labor to wed Calvin and Locke issued in the union of eschatology and self-interest under the canopy of American progress.

From this perspective, Edwards’ post-millennialism was indeed a major advance upon the Puritan vision. By opening the future to human control, he adapted the belief in process to the needs of an enterprise that had grown beyond the limits of a particular region or religious sect. The Bay theocrats had joined secular to sacred history, and posited a continual increase of material/spiritual blessings. Edwards made the spiral of redemption synonymous with the advance of mankind. In doing so, Cushing Strout has shown, he “provided an exit from the harsh confines of Calvinism [he] expounded and paved the way for . . . new Arminian theologies of belief in the free will and moral strivings.” The historical ironies this involved may be more strongly stated. Edwards sanctified a worldli-

ness he would have despised and lent support to new ideologies that linked American striving with scripture prophecy, economic reform with the work of the spirit, and libertarian ideals with the approach of New Jerusalem. Thus his use of commercial imagery ("to live unto God . . . is the business and . . . the trade of a Christian") became a mainstay of Yankee pietism. Thus his figurative view of economics (the increase in colonial trade "is a type and forerunner" of the time when the whole world "shall be supplied with spiritual treasures from America") reappears in countless promotional tracts. And thus the Awakening he inspired, as Richard Bushman has shown, encouraged "worldly ambition and resistance to [conservative forms of] social authority"—a middle-class upsurge that resulted in territorial expansion, "increased economic opportunities," a "multitude of new traders who called for currency issues," and a rising demand for democratic self-government, all of this sustained and augmented by the sense that it reflected some grand providential design—in Edwards' words, "the rising of a New Heaven and a New Earth in the New World."8

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Let me repeat that, here as elsewhere, the effect was something very different from the intent. Undoubtedly, Edwards differed in many ways from Revolutionary Calvinists, "like Abraham Keteltas . . . [who] welcomed to the cause of God anyone who would take up the sword against the anti-christ of British tyranny." The revivalists were addressing "bands of pious saints," or potential saints, in the hope of "promoting the kingdom," whereas the radical Whigs were mobilizing citizens for political ends.

(Nathan O. Hatch, "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly, 31 [1974], 409). Nonetheless, a common pattern may be discerned. The striking cultural fact is that civic oppression should take the form of Antichrist, while at the same time the crusade to "drive back the forces of darkness" should assume such specifically American implications that ministers like Keteltas could see "American society as the model upon which the messianic kingdom would be based" and vaunt republicanism as "the cause of . . . heaven against hell" (Hatch, "Origins," 409; Abraham Keteltas, God Arising and Pleading His People's Cause [Newburyport, Mass., 1777], 30). See also Robert Middlekauff, "The Ritualization of the American Revolution," in The National Temper, Lawrence W. Levine and Middlekauff, eds. (New York: Harcourt. Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), 103, and Nathan O. Hatch, The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977). Regrettably, Prof. Hatch's book appeared too late for me to use in this essay.
Edwardsean revivalism was only one of several factors in this development, of course. My point is not that it caused later events, but that it provided a framework for harnessing the Puritan outlook to the conditions of a new age. Its impact appears, for example, in the revision of the concepts of Adamic naturalism and *translatio imperii*, “the Westward course of empire.” Traditionally, the return to nature meant a static condition (whether pastoral or utopian); whereas the “Westward course of empire” implied a cyclical view of history, the recurrent rise and fall of civilizations. In Enlightenment America, these conflicting views were absorbed into a wholly progressive outlook, and transformed into alternative modes of cultural affirmation. When colonial writers sang of a New World paradise, they were not thinking of Adam’s garden. They envisioned the new end-time Eden, where a gathering of new Adams would complete God’s grand design. Far from being nostalgic or primitivist, their paradise was to be the result of a series of reformations in history, and therefore a fulfillment of social as well as spiritual norms. And if by other standards “Eden,” “paradise,” and “God’s design,” as they repeatedly used these terms, were merely metaphors for secular achievements, for Americans they also served as reminders that here, as nowhere else, the secular was infused with special teleological meaning.

The same teleology was imposed upon the classical concept of *translatio imperii*. Edwards (following the Puritans) had recast this into a variation of Daniel’s apocalyptic scheme of the “four empires,” and by and large it was the Puritan-Edwardsean version that the eighteenth-century colonists adopted, transferring their proof-text as they did so from scripture to the story of America. The westward star of empire meant much more to them than the movement of civilization from East to West. It signaled the “complete fulfillment” of “the various ancient prophecies.” It was the morning star heralding the triumphant sun/Son that (in Edwards’ words) would “rise in the West, contrary to the course of . . . the world.” And this holds true for everything that *empire*, *West*, and *fulfillment* evoked in eighteenth-century America. Libertarianism was not just a better way of life, but “the long-promised glory”; the prospects of free trade and open competition called to mind the “beauties of IMMANUEL’S LAND”; Westward expansion promised the endless bounty of “the kingdom of the latter days.” It was not a matter of attaining innocence, more land and wealth, the refinements of high culture. These were tangible proof of something greater. Elsewhere, such advances might make (temporarily) for a good society. In the New World, as a mid-century English traveller marveled, the “course of empire” entailed a new “idea,
strange as it was visionary," that at some approaching "destined moment . . . America is to give law to the rest of the world."\(^9\)

I don't know precisely to what extent the Edwardsians were responsible for that strange, visionary idea. What seems clear is that they sanctioned the union of sacred history, local progress, and spiritual self-fulfillment, and so established the terms in which Yankee Americans could usurp the types of scripture for national ends. In the long view, the Great Awakening, for all its apparent failure as a religious movement, succeeded in making the evangelical mode central to the culture. In an immediate sense, its concept of mission fed into the rhetoric of the French and Indian War. The result was a triumph equally for English foreign policy and for American millennialism. Extending the old techniques to accommodate commercial and territorial aspirations—clothing imperialism as holy war—the mid-eighteenth-century clergy summoned the colonists to an Anglo-Protestant errand into the Catholic wilderness. The French were "the offspring of that Scarlet Whore"; French Canada "the North American Babylon"; and the invasion itself a "grand decisive conflict between the Lamb and beast," preview of Armageddon. From the siege of Louisbourg (1745) to the Peace of Paris (1763), all of New England, as Nathan Hatch has shown, was gripped in "millennial optimism." Hatch, noting the infusion of new concepts, claims that this "civil millennialism" marked a radical departure in colonial eschatology. His claim is no more valid, I believe, than that which has been made for Edwardsian post-millennialism; but he is right about the mood of the times. Liberals and revivalists from Massachusetts to Virginia, including Edwards' old antagonist Charles Chauncy, joined in chorus. The downfall of French Canada, they predicted, would bring a "most signal revolution in the civil and religious state of things in this world"; victory meant nothing less than "the accomplishment of the scripture-prophecies relative to the Millennial State."\(^10\)

Significantly, Edwards himself adopted essentially the same view of the war. From his wilderness exile at Stockbridge he exulted in every hopeful

\(^9\) William Smith, Works (Philadelphia, 1803), 2:170 (see also 2:171–73); Jonathan Edwards, Images or Shadows, 92; Thomas Frink, A Sermon Delivered at Stafford (Boston, 1757), 4–5; and A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency (Boston, 1758), 30; Jonathan Mayhew, A Sermon Preach'd (Boston, 1754), 34; Michael McGiffert, The Question of '76 (Williamsburg, Va.: Institute for Early American Life and Culture, 1977), 10.

\(^10\) John Burt, The Mercy of God (Newport, R. I., 1759), 4; Nathaniel Appleton, A Sermon Preached (Boston, 1760), 36; Samuel Davies, Sermons on Important Subjects (Philadelphia, 1818), 257–58; Hatch, "Origins," 417; Jonathan Mayhew, Two Discourses (Boston, 1759), 61; Charles Chauncy, Marvellous Things (Boston, 1745), 21.
scrap of news. His "Account of Events Probably Fùlling the Sixth Vial"—fulfilling, that is, the last of the prophecies before those concerning the advent of New Jerusalem—includes reports culled from a host of local newspapers in Boston and New York. Nothing, it would seem, was too petty, too flagrantly secular or self-seeking, to contribute to his calculations. The capture of French ships, increases in New England's "trade and acquisitions," signs of commercial, military, and moral decline in France, political "distress" in French Canada, the (piratical) seizure of French stores of gold, provisions, merchandise, and armaments—every fact that touched upon the war was pregnant with prophetic meaning, as much an image or shadow of things to come as was any fact of scripture. "The late wonderful works of God in America," Edwards wrote to a Scottish correspondent after the battle of Cape Breton, were hastening the completion of the divine plan. They bespoke "an extraordinary spirit of prayer given the people of God in New England, with respect to this undertaking, more than any public affair within my remembrance." Clearly, "the Most High has made his hand manifest, in a most apparent and marvelous manner . . . it being perhaps a dispensation of providence, the most remarkable in its kind, that has been in many ages . . . and a great argument . . . that we live in an age, wherein divine wonders are to be expected."\[1\]

Edwards' enthusiasm about the French and Indian War is a striking testament to the continuities between revivalist and civil millennialism. But the war contributed in its own right toward broadening the scope of the rhetoric. The revivalists had enlarged the errand to include the visible saints not only of Massachusetts but of all the English colonies. The established clergy from 1745 to 1763 went further still. In mobilizing the "patriotic inhabitants of Protestant America," they associated "our Sion" with "our Colonies" in a wholly secular sense. The basis of their plea was not only religion but specifically the civic traditions of Anglo-America—not only Protestantism, that is, but English libertarianism. To some extent, this issued in a heightened sense of loyalty to "the mother country." Britain was the source of colonial liberties, and the writings of this decade continually celebrate that legacy. But as Paul Varg has observed, they also speak over and again of America and Americans, and increasingly they extol "the founding fathers, who left England" in order to enjoy "the blessings of freedom" in a "New Canaan of Liberty." A Canaan of Liberty! The phrase offers a convenient index to the growth of the myth.

The Puritans had justified the errand by reference to the Israelite exodus. Eighteenth-century Americans justified both the Israelites and the Puritans by reference to their own progress. And having done so, they invoked the example of the Bay emigrants in order to inspire their countrymen to still greater deeds. "Liberty was the noble errand of our fathers across the Atlantic"; they "set the seas and skies, Monsters and savages, Tyrants and Devils at Defyance, for the sake of liberty." So adapted and revised, the legend of the Puritan founders belonged unequivocally to all white Protestant colonists. As "the children of Israel [were] led out of Egypt," cried Theodorus Frelinghuysen of New York in 1754, "So [were] our Ancestors brought over from Europe to this land." And as "God Almighty gave them the Land of the Heathen," so now He intends to give French Canada to the forces of Protestant America.\(^1^2\)

The message was repeated steadily through the war years, and it was accompanied, as of old, by the figural rhetoric of probation. During the last, critical stage of the conflict, the ministers tended to mute their threats. But no sooner was peace declared than they resumed the lament in full force. The battles just past, they warned, did not resolve the issue. Far from it: the real crisis had only begun. Like the revivalists, they saw evidence wherever they looked of degeneracy, and the thunder of their moral complaint continued into the Revolutionary era. Popery, corruption, delicacies and luxuries abounding, rampant lust, gaming, idleness, and intemperance—all the "enormities" enumerated by the Synod of 1679 and the sermons of 1740 returned in the orations of the 1760s and 1770s.

The cause was independence now, not British-American Protestantism; the social ideal a republic, not an Enlightened monarchy. And of course the enemy assumed another, subtler, and more pernicious form. The English King, rather than the French, was now the instrument of the Scarlet Whore; England rather than French Canada was the modern Babylon; the danger within came from European fashions and royal agents rather than from Indians, Jesuits, or heretics.

And yet the rhetoric, while dramatically enlarged in its applications, has essentially the same structure. Never did the voice of Jeremiah sound more loudly in the land than in the springtime of the republic. It may be the "Will of Heaven," wrote John Adams on the eve of independence,

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that “Americans shall suffer Calamities still more wasting and Distresses yet more dreadful. . . . The Furnace of Affliction produces Refinement, in States as well as Individuals.” That was July 3, 1776. Not long before, he had heard a minister predicting that God would “come with a vengeance” upon the land—and “the whole prophecy,” Adams told his wife, “filled and swelled the bosom of every hearer.” He knew that in saying this he was not instructing but confirming Abigail in her faith. She herself had comforted him often enough about the ambiguities of God’s wrath with His chosen. Both of them realized that, by “the intention of Heaven,” it was through “all the gloom,” by means of “blood and treason,” that the nation’s “deliverance [would] be wrought out . . . as it was for the children of Israel.” Declension, doubt, political and economic reversal—as they detailed the affictions of God’s Country it all amounted once again to the “day of Israel’s trials.” Both of them could endorse the promise, emblazoned in rough print on a Vermont Thanksgiving broadside, that “God would yet make us glad, according to the Days wherein we have been afflicted, and the Time in which we have seen Evil.”

The Vermont broadside is characteristic of a host of civic as well as clerical writings—treatises, orations, pamphlets—which, having detailed every local iniquity, sound an urgent summons for covenant renewal and concert of prayer. And as Gordon Wood has observed, it was a summons that generated millennial frenzy out of the very process of self-doubt. Increasingly during the 1760s and early 1770s, patriot leaders drew on the image of a “chosen band, removed from the depravations . . . of Europe,” going forth to receive “the heathen . . . for an inheritance and these uttermost parts of the earth [for] a possession.” Increasingly, they invoked what they construed to be the libertarian legacy of the Puritan founders. And increasingly, they spoke of the emerging conflict for independence in apocalyptic terms. When in 1774 Thomas Jefferson revived the fast-day ritual, he noted with some surprise that “the effect thru’ the whole colony was like the shock of electricity, arousing every man & placing him erect.” He learned the lesson well enough to return to those rhetorical devices on other important public occasions, from his exhortations during the Revolutionary era to his Second Inaugural Address. Tom Paine must

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have learned the same lesson, to judge by his otherwise startling recourse
to that language in Common Sense. I refer to his use of biblical precedents,
to his emphasis on providence, and above all to the figural blueprint he
presents for American exceptionalism, with due emphasis on the landmarks
of early New England christianography: a fallen Old World (harboring a
Romish Antichrist), an Egyptian England (in bondage to a "hardened,
sullen-tempered pharaoh"), and a New Canaan charged "by the design
of Heaven" with "the cause of all mankind."14

No doubt these Enlightenment heroes capitalized on the work of the
"black regiment," that "numerous, learned and respectable body," as the
Revolutionary historian David Ramsay described the New England
clergy, "who had a great ascendancy over the minds of their bearers.
They connected religion and patriotism, and in their sermons and prayers
represented the cause of America as the cause of Heaven." To varying
degrees, most of the leading Revolutionaries—not only the clerics but such
disparate political thinkers as Washington, Hamilton, Sam Adams, David
Humphreys, and Elias Boudinot—responded in similar fashion. Their
appeals for unity, sounded from military camp, scholar’s study, and politi-
cal platform, affirm the same typology of mission: the Hebrew exodus,
New England’s errand, America’s destiny. Athens and Rome offered a
variety of practical incentives or warnings for the republic. As before,
sacred history provided the controlling metaphors. Recent historians
have reminded us that the first proposals for the Seal of the United States,
submitted by Franklin and Jefferson, featured Moses leading the chosen
people; it might be added that the symbol adopted instead was widely
interpreted in just this way. "If any should be disposed to ask," said
Edwards’ disciple David Austin, "what has become of the eagle, on whose
wings the persecuted woman [Rev. 12:14] was borne in to the American
wilderness, may it not be answered, that she hath taken her station upon
the Civil Seal of the United States’? So indeed it was answered (to no
one’s surprise) by Samuel Sherwood on the eve of revolution. Invoking
the same text from Revelation, Sherwood proceeded to link this to the
Corresponding commemorative and proleptic passages in the Old Testa-
ment: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you
upon eagles’ wings. . . . Now therefore . . . ye shall be unto me. . . . an

14 Gordon Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1789 (Chapel Hill:
Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), esp. 107–08, 414; David Griffith, Passive Obedi-
ence Considered (Williamsburg, Va., 1776), 14; Jacob Duché, The American Vine
(Philadelphia, 1775), 26; Thomas Jefferson, Writings, P. L. Ford, ed. (New York,
1892–99), 1:11; Thomas Paine, Common Sense, N. F. Adkins, ed. (New York: Liberal
Arts Press, 1953), 27, 3, 23.
holy nation" (Exod. 19:4-6), and "shall mount up with wings as eagles" (Isa. 40:31). Then, making explicit the figural import of all three texts, Sherwood announced to his election day audience of May, 1776:

When that God, to whom the earth belongs, and the fulness thereof, brought his church into this wilderness, as on eagles' wings by his kind protecting providence, he gave this good land to her, to be her own lot and inheritance forever. He planted her as a pleasant and choice vine; and drove out the Heathen before her. He has tenderly nourished and cherished her in her infant state, and protected her amidst innumerable dangers. . . . God has, in this American quarter of the globe, provided for the woman and her seed. . . . He has wrought out a very glorious deliverance for them, and set them free from the cruel rod of tyranny and oppression . . . leading them to the good land of Canaan, which he gave them for an everlasting inheritance.\(^{15}\)

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_The Church's Flight into the Wilderness_ was the most popular and inflammatory sermon of 1776, the clerical counterpart of Tom Paine's _Common Sense_, and far more representative than _Common Sense_ of what was to become the dominant culture of the new nation. The figural outlook it sets forth is a telling example of both continuity and change. Almost a century and a half before, in the spring of 1630, John Cotton had chosen the same texts (from Exodus, Isaiah, and Revelation) to instruct the _Arbella_ passengers about their venture into the New World. But whereas _God's Promise to His Plantations_ uses the authority of tradition (the standard view of the eagle as Christ) to justify the venture, Sherwood takes that justification, rather than the tradition behind it, as his authority. Ultimately, he appeals not to church tradition, and not even to the Bible, but to the American experience; and in doing so he virtually reverses the hermeneutic process—turns figuralism inside-out. Sherwood's authority is the country's progress, his text the Puritan past, his exegetical framework the prophecies of America's future. Hence the ease with which he interprets the eagle as the Puritan spirit of liberty, _figura_ of the spirit of '76. The radical Whigs, he is saying, are the children of promise, as Joshua was the heir to Moses: it is all one grand spiral of fulfillment from theocracy to democracy. Though he includes the Reformation and forecasts the millennium, as Cotton does, Sherwood describes the main redemptive events in terms of the growth of colonial society. The sacred point of origin is the Puritan settlement; its climax, the impending war of independence.

In 1670, celebrating the fortieth year of New England's travails in the wilderness, Samuel Danforth had similarly posited a figural unfolding from the Great Migration toward a new heaven and new earth. But Danforth's pre-millennial view precluded a secular process of fulfillment. Edwards had opened the way for identifying American progress with the work of redemption, but the Great Awakening was only one more landmark in the unfolding drama of the New World. The development of the Anglo-American colonies, as Edwards conceived this, stretched indefinitely into the age of the spirit. For Sherwood and his compatriots, the concept of mission took on a distinct, self-enclosed American form. Drawing out the logic of their forebears to a conclusion undreamt of by Danforth or Edwards (much less by Cotton and Winthrop), they announced that the long-promised, eagerly awaited apocalyptic moment had arrived with the American Revolution. The patriot Whigs, "acting for the benefit of the whole world and of future ages," were sounding the same clarion call "as that of the heavenly host that announced the birth of the Savior." The Revolution, they explained, marked the full and final "accomplishment of the magnalia Dei—the great events . . . designed from eternal ages to be displayed in these ends of the earth . . . to the end of time"; the "independence of the United States of America is not only a marked epoch in the course of time, but it is indeed the end from which the new order of things is to be reckoned. It is the dividing point in the history of mankind; it is the moment of the political regeneration of the world." Appropriately, the July Fourth tradition began with an oration of 1778 (delivered in Charlestown, South Carolina) which defined "the Revolution as the beginning of a new age in human history."  

We can trace the development of this figural scheme through the patriotic addresses of the Revolutionary and Federalist periods—Nicholas Street's *The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness* (New Haven, 1777), Samuel Langdon's *The Republic of the Israelites an Example to the United States* (Exeter, N. H., 1788), Abiel Abbot's *Traits of Resemblance in the People of the United States of America to Ancient Israel* (Haverhill, Mass., 1799). In all of these state-of-the-covenant messages, and countless others like them, such terms as "acting over," "example," and "resemblance" denote a biblical reality

thrice removed. For the Puritans the errand carried forward the biblical exodus; for Edwards, the revival brought to fruition the Puritan errand; for the Whig preachers, the Revolution unveiled the meaning of exodus, errand, and revival. The flight of Noah, the wanderings of Abraham, the desert march of Israel, the formation of the early church, the revolt of Luther and Calvin against Rome: to all this the Revolution stood as antitype. Like the Incarnation, it marked a qualitative change in the spiral of human history. A new era had begun with the discovery of the New World, and the Revolution confirmed it, precisely as Christ had confirmed the new era of faith. In doing so, He had invoked the authority of scripture, but it was His mission that defined and explicated the prophecies. Such too was the relation between Old and New Israel. Now that the Americans had fulfilled the covenant, their magnalia Dei would continue, in the image of the Revolution, “to the end of time.”

It would be another generation or so before the typology of America’s mission could be fully rendered—before Washington could be enshrined as savior, his mighty deeds expounded, his apostles ranked, the Judas in their midst identified, the Declaration of Independence compared to the Sermon on the Mount, the sacred places and objects (Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, the Liberty Bell) properly labeled. It would take several decades for the Constitution to be duly ordained (in Emerson’s words) as “the best book in the world” next to the New Testament, and for the Revolution to be “indissolubly linked” (as John Quincy Adams put it) with “the birthday . . . of the Savior,” as being the social, moral, and political correlative of “the Redeemer’s mission on earth” and thus “the first irrevocable pledge of the fulfillment of the prophecies, announced directly from Heaven.” But the pattern was well established by the end of the eighteenth century. And fittingly enough, a key figure in its establishment was Edwards’ grandson, Timothy Dwight, a leading member of the black regiment, signer of the Declaration of Independence, Enlightenment intellectual, Connecticut wit, libertarian, Calvinist, and patriot Whig. “This great continent,” Dwight exclaimed, “is soon to be filled with the praise, and piety, of the Millennium; here, is the stem of that wonderful tree whose topmost boughs will reach the heavens.”

The period is now on the wing in which “the knowledge of the LORD shall fill the earth as waters fill the sea.” . . . Another sun, rolling around the great Centurial year will, not improbably, have scarcely finished his progress, when he shall see the Jew “reingrafted into the olive, from which he was broken off.” . . . Think of the manner in which God bare your fathers in this land on eagles wings. Recal[1]l[1] their numerous deliverances. . . . A work,
thus begun, and thus carried out, is its own proof, that it will not be relinquished.17

Dwight expressed these hopes most fully in his epic poem, The Conquest of Canaan, which builds on constant crises and “trials” (backsliding, treachery, holy war) toward a celebration of the New World republic—America, the second “blissful Eden bright,” “by heaven design’d.” Dwight’s hero is Joshua; his subject, the battle for the biblical Canaan. But the action itself, he makes clear, is part of a grand process culminating in the Revolution. The Israelite leader serves by comparison (as harbinger of a “greater dispensation”) to reveal Washington as the Christ-like “Benefactor to Mankind,” directing a “more fateful conflict” on “new Canaan’s promised shores.” Ultimately, that is, Israel’s conquest of Canaan finds its vindication, its epic-heroic quality, in what it tells us of America’s mission.

To nobler bliss yon western world shall rise,
Unlike all former realms.

Here union’d choice shall form a rule divine;
Here countless lands in one great system join;
The sway of Law unbrokè, unrivall’d grow.

Some twenty years later, Washington’s successor to the role of the American Joshua, John Adams, contemplated the meaning of that more fateful conflict. He decided, in a justly famous passage, that the motives behind the Revolution “ought to be traced back for Two Hundred Years, and sought in the history of the Country from the first Plantations. . . . This produced, in 1760 and 1761, AN AWAKENING AND A REVIVAL OF American Principles and Feelings, with an Enthusiasm which went on increasing till in 1775 it burst out in open violence.”18 Adams’ use of the Great Migration as precursor of the War of Independence is a significant testament to the secular-sacred typology developed through the eighteenth century. Significantly, too, his key terms remind us, whether by intention or not, of the Northampton millennium: enthusiasm, awakening, revival.*


* The themes and ideas discussed in this essay are developed in greater detail in my book, The American Jeremiad (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming).