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Predetermined Puritans: The Colonists' View of King Philip's War

In 1675, war between the colonists of New England and their Native American counterparts erupted. Many armed engagements between the colonists and the Indians broke out during this conflict, known today as King Philip's War. The results of these engagements fluctuated between colonist and Native American victories. The colonists experienced massive casualties in battle. Indian raids resulted in damaged or destroyed villages. Of course the Indians endured similar defeats, and they experienced far more casualties. These kinds of results are expected during war. However, the colonists had a peculiar way of viewing the results. The New England colonies were dominated by Puritan culture. Consequently, many of the colonists viewed the events in their lives through a Puritan lens. If someone was struck by misfortune, Puritans believed that such occurrence was a punishment from God. Likewise, any event that the Puritans found favorable was a result of God's benevolence or mercy. The events of King Philip's War were not exempt from this interpretation either. During King Philip's War, the New England Puritans believed that their hardships and successes were the results of divine providence.

The colonists of New England suffered many devastating raids and setbacks during the war, and they believed that the divine providence of God brought forth their suffering. An account of the war, "A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England," by Increase Mather demonstrates such interpretations. Mather's account is set on the idea that the numerous routs suffered by the English were the result of God's judgement. The first engagement of the war that Mather writes about is the Indian attack on Swansea, where nine English men were killed that day. Prior to the attack, the colonists underwent a day of "solemn Humiliation" in which they fasted and prayed. The colonists were concerned about a possible attack by Metacom, or King Philip, in response to the trial and execution of three Wampanoag Indians.[[1]](#footnote-1) Mather further explains that the why the raid happened. He writes:

Thus did the *War* begin, this being the first english blood which was spilt by the Indians in an hostile way. The Providence of God is deepy to be observed, that the sword should be first drawn upon a day of humiliation, the Lord thereby declaring from heaven that he expects something else from his People besies fasting and prayer.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Mather believes that the raid was the result of God's will for the colonists. According to his reasoning, the colonists' lives were not completely in accordance with God's desires. As a result, God either caused or allowed the raid to happen.

Mather further illustrates his notion of divine providence as he writes about another engagement between the English and the Indians. He describes a group of colonist soldiers that were on their way towards King Philip's territory. As the colonists were on the move, they were ambushed by a group of Native Americans. The Indians' escaped into swamps, and rainy weather hindered the English from pursuing them.[[3]](#footnote-3) Mather uses the convictions of one of the soldiers to support his point that God was causing the misfortunes of the colonists, he writes:

An awfull Providence happened at this time: for a souldier (a stout man) who was sent from *Watertown*, seing the English *Guide* slain, and hearing many profane oaths among some of our Souldiers (namely those Privateers, who were also Volunteers) and considering the unseasonableness of the weather was such, as that nothing could be done against the Enemy; this man was possessed with a strong conceit that God was against the english, whereupon he immediately ran distracted, and so was returned home a lamentable Spectacle.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rather than viewing the situation as the result of natural events, the soldier and Mather believed that God's divine intervention was the sole cause. The notion that the Indians acted alone and the rain just happened was apparently not up for consideration.

The convictions of Mather are displayed at a deeper level when he describes another attack by the Native Americans. The Indians around the Connecticut River pretended to be allied with the English. Mather states, however, that they were suspected to be secretly allied with King Philip. When their treachery was confirmed, soldiers were sent to apprehend their arms. However, the suspected Indians launched an attack from hiding as the English were looking for them.[[5]](#footnote-5) Mather describes the results of the conflict:

How many Indians were slain we know not, but nine English fell that Day, wherein this Providence is observable, that those nine men which were killed at that time belonged to *nine several Towns*, as if the Lord should say, that he hath a controversie with every Plantation, and therefore all had need to repent and reform their ways.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Mather thinks this coincidence is the result of divine intervention. He believes that because nine of the men killed belonged to nine several towns, the whole New England area is not under the grace of God. Also, Mather confirms that God has a reason for intervening against the English when he states that everyone needs to repent. He is under the assumption that the colonists are being punished for their sinful ways.

The conviction of New England as a whole is represented when Mather presents a council meeting in Boston. After describing more Indian attacks he states:

This fire which in *June* was but a little spark, in three months time is become a great flame, that from East to West the whole Country is involved in great trouble; and the Lord himself seemeth to be against us, to cast us off, and to put us to shame, *and goeth not forth with our Armies*. Wherefore the Magistrates of this Jurisdiction, earnestly called upon the Inhabitants thereof, to humble themselves before the Lord, and to confess and turn from transgression.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Mather is not the only one that believes divine providence has taken hold in the war. The whole community has subscribed to the notion that God is punishing them. In this part of the narrative, a council has been called to determine how the colonists will regain the grace of God. The council calls for another "Day of publick Humiliation, with Fasting and Prayer, throughout this whole Colony" in order to start a "thorough Reformation of what ever hath been, or is an Image of jealousie before the Lord to offend the eyes of his Glory."[[8]](#footnote-8) This jurisdiction required all of the colonists to observe the day of prayer and fasting.[[9]](#footnote-9) The council believed that a widespread revival would appease God.

The committee went further with their efforts. They established moral laws to keep the colonists in check.[[10]](#footnote-10) The laws called for "suppression of those proud Excesses in Apparrel, hair, & c. which many (yea and the poorer sort as well as others) are shamfully guilty of."[[11]](#footnote-11) The council also agreed that "a due testimony should be borne against such as are false Worshippers, especially Idolatrous *Quakers*, who set up Altars against the Lords Altar, yea who set up a Christ whom the Scriptures know not."[[12]](#footnote-12) The laws also addressed excess drinking, swearing, and oppression by merchants.[[13]](#footnote-13) By reforming their ways, the English hoped that God would show his favor upon them.

Despite the colonists' attempt to acquire safety through reformation, "God's punishment" was still prevalent. Mather describes another blow for the English. The English amassed an army of about fifteen hundred men to pursue the Narraganset, the largest body of Indians in New England according to Mather.[[14]](#footnote-14) Before the army set off to "execute the vengeance of the Lord upon the perfidious and bloudy Heathen," the Churches in the area underwent another day of "Prayer and Humiliation."[[15]](#footnote-15) It is ironic that Mather says the army was assembled to exact the vengeance of God upon the Indians considering that God "used" the Indians to exact vengeance upon the colonists. Nonetheless, the English built their army and observed their day of prayer to glorify God. To the disappointment of Mather, the Indians successfully raided a group of colonists during such actions. Mather states:

This day of Prayer and Humiliation was observed *Decemb. 2d.* when also something hapned, intimating as if the Lord were still angry with our Prayers; for this day all the houses in *Quonsickamuck* were burnt by the Indians.

The colonist attempt to please God and they are still suffering from Indian attacks. Rather than contemplate whether or not God is actually intervening, Mather believes that the colonists are still under God's judgement.

The idea that the Indian attacks were the result of God's wrath remained prevalent among the colonists even after the war concluded. "The Warr in New-England Visibly Ended," a report by a colonist with the initials R.H., proves that the colonists stayed true to their convictions. R.H. states:

We have been, and still are ready to put different Reflections upon the Murders and Spoils that have been made upon us by this destructive War: Various are Men's Thoughts why God hath suffered it, all acknowledge it was for Sin; many wish there hath not been some Leaven of that Spirit in the Provocation for which we left Old England. I am in great Pain while I write, to remember how severe some of us have been to Dissenters, making Spoil without Pity, but God is teaching us Moderation.[[16]](#footnote-16)

R.H. is saying that the colonists collectively agree that their sins were a major cause of King Philip's war. He also points out specifically that the treatment of dissenters should not go unnoticed. Overall, he believes God is teaching them a lesson. The colonists were deeply under the conviction that divine providence caused their misfortunes. The only way they could turn their situation around was if they lived thoroughly under God's principles.

Just as the colonists attributed their defeats to divine providence, they believed God was the source of their successes against the Indians. In "A New and Further Narrative of the State of New-England," N.S. (presumed to be Nathaniel Saltonstall) thanks God for the English victories against the Indians. He concludes "with hearty Thanks to Almighty God for our late Successes against this bloudy enemy" that the colonists "may shortly once again see Peace and Safety restored."[[17]](#footnote-17)

Mather, of course, provides his reasoning for the successes of the English. As noted earlier, the colonists experienced numerous devastations after their reformation. However, Mather regards the reformation as the turning point of the war. He writes:

For that day when there was a vote passed for the Suppression and Reformation of those manifest evils, whereby the eyes of Gods Glory are provoked amongst us, the Lord gave success for our Forces, who that day encountred with the *Indians* at *Hatfield*.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Mather continues to say that the English only lost one man in the fight and that the area had little disturbance by Indians after the Hatfield engagement.[[19]](#footnote-19) The occurrence reinforces Mather's belief that repentance will lead the colonists to victory.

Mather provides another account to support his notion that God was the source of the English victories. He recounts a joint march between forces from Boston and Connecticut. The forces lost their way and were eventually ambushed by Indians. However, the Indians retreated toward North Hampton.[[20]](#footnote-20) The retreat was followed by an English victory, in which Mather attributes to God. He states:

The Army following them thither, missed of the main Body of *Indians*. Nevertheless, there was a singular providence of God ordering this matter, for the relief of those *Western Plantations*, which otherwise, in probability had been cut off.[[21]](#footnote-21)

After Mather provides this assumption, he reveals that the Indians were surprised by a town full of soldiers at North Hampton. Many Native American casualties followed.[[22]](#footnote-22) To Mather, the Indians' defeat at North Hampton was not a coincidence. The massive amount of troops did not just happen to be there. According to him, the situation was pieced together by God.

The colonists even believed God intervened in events that could have resulted in hypothetical defeats. Mather describes an instance in which the Connecticut army was returning to their quarters after a triumph against a group of Indians. A group of soldiers was separated from the rest of the army during a snowstorm.[[23]](#footnote-23) Mather suggests:

Had the enemy known their advantage, and pursued our Souldiers (and we have since heard that some of the *Indians* did earnestly move, that it might be so, but others of them through the over-ruling hand of Providence would not consent) when upon their retreat, they might easily have cut off the whole Army: But God would be more gracious to us. Here then was not only a *Victory*, but also a signal *Preservation*, for which let the Father of mercyes have eternal Glory.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Mather is predicting what could have happened. He believes that the whole army could have been cut off because there was a snowstorm and some soldiers were led astray. Mather concludes that God prevented this from happening and that this occurrence was a victory in itself.

The English gave God credit for their successes provided by Native American allies as well. Mather depicts an event in which the Pequods, Monhegins, and the Indians of Ninnegret confronted Native American allies of King Philip. Quanonchet, a significant sachem involved in the Narranganset War, was captured by one of Ninnegret's men. The Monhegins, Pequods, and Ninnegret's men collectively joined together in the shooting and decapitation of Quanonchet.[[25]](#footnote-25) Mather then states, "So that there was a gracious smile of providence in this thing, yet not without matter of humbling to us, in that the Sachem was apprehended not by English but by Indian hands."[[26]](#footnote-26) Even when the victory is the result of actions by Native Americans, Mather believes that God's divine providence is present.

Mather presents another instance in which God "used" Native American allies to help the colonists. He writes about an occasion when a group of magistrates, deputies, and teaching elders observed a day of humiliation in Boston. The next day good news for the colonists came to Boston. An attack on Indian adversaries by the Mohawks resulted in the liberation of English captives.[[27]](#footnote-27) Mather writes:

And so it was now; for the very next day after this, a Letter came from *Connecticut* to *Boston*, informing, that God had let loose the *Mohawks* upon our Enemies, and that they were sick of Fluxes, and Fevers, which proved mortal to multitudes of them.[[28]](#footnote-28)

To Mather, this triumph was not the sole result of Mohawk initiative. He believes God set them loose upon the enemy.

The colonists also believed it was possible for God to use the enemy to benefit the English. In "The Present State of New-England," N.S. provides an example:

In this same Week, King Philips Men had taken a Young Lad alive about fourteen Years old, and bound him to a Tree two Nights and two Days, intending to be Merry with him the next Day, and that they would Roast him alive to make Sport with him; But God over Night, touched the Heart of one Indian so that he came and loosed him, and bid him run *Grande*, (i.e. run Apace) and by that Means he escaped.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The providence of God is illustrated yet again. There is no consideration that the Indian had his own convictions. Instead, N.S. believes that God pressed the Indian to set the captive free.

King Philip's death was no exception to the idea of divine intervention in the war. In the letter by R.H., he provides an account of King Philip's end. According to him, an Indian guide and a Plymouth man came across a hostile Indian by chance. The Plymouth man shot and killed the Indian, who was identified as King Philip. In reference to the coincidence, R.H. states that "the Providence of God wonderfully appeared."[[30]](#footnote-30) He believes King Philip's death was brought about by divine intervention.

The colonists of New England concluded that both their defeats and victories were the result of divine intervention. When the Indian raids started, the English believed they were being punished by God for their sins. They decided to collectively change their ways to appease God, and they attributed their victories to God's approval of their reformation. Many colonists did not look at natural causes as the determine factors of the war. Every minor and significant event was interpreted by a Puritan view of the world.

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