

A Covenant of Dispossession and Genocide

Joseph Schechla

This essay summarizes an inquiry into the literary origins of the “national” mission and purpose of a colonial-settler society and its characteristic practice of land confiscation at the expense of indigenous peoples. Tracing the early writings of the colonial-settler society that became the United States reveals an ideological vehicle for the territorially acquisitive process. It affirms the continuous utility of the dispossession and genocide narrative of the Bible as a cardinal reference in the various writings of the period (1620-1774) for the colonists’ settlement and acquisition of indigenous peoples’ lands and natural resources. This period encompassed literary accomplishments, notably including Thomas Morton’s defiant *New English Canaan* (1637) and the colonies’ first epic poem, Timothy Dwight’s *Conquest of Canaan* (1774).

The period of the present inquiry encompasses historic events formative to the state ideology of the eventual United States of America, dating from the Puritan landing and establishment of Plymouth colony to the mobilization toward the American Revolution. The selection of writings and publications reviewed here, albeit not exhaustive, provides a glimpse into the civil religion that has driven processes of expansion and colonization in North America, but also offers traces of analogy to colonial ideology in other times, contexts, and continents.

The Question

Much of the scholarly production on colonization in the Americas has analyzed the intellectual heritage of settlers conquering land in fulfillment of historical models of aggressive acquisition. Francis Jennings recounts how latter-day expressions of Crusader rationale

motivated and justified colonization, especially illuminating the ways that the moralistic thought of the Latin American colonizers reflected their Catholic institutional loyalties (Jennings 3-14). By contrast, the conquest of North American territories has found rationale and inspiration in more-biblical antecedents. The early North American colonizers were distinctly "fundamentalist" and sought to develop a mission that was apart from Catholic and Anglican (Church of England) traditions. They felt that the Catholic and Anglican churches were decadent, opulent, and divorced from the moral lessons essential to Christianity. Therefore, in their reaction to the elaborate characteristics of Catholicism and Anglicanism, they sought to "revert" to deeper, Middle Eastern roots in order to build a more-purely guided society. For some, to do less would be to submit to an alternative that reified the "Anti-Christ" in the Apocalypse that St. John predicted in their King James Bible. Some historians have called the Puritans "Hebraics" for their (selective) emulation of Old Testament practices. While that analogy may be overstated, it partly arises from the early settlers' self-acclaim as the migrant people whom God had "chosen" for epic, civilizing purposes (Fingerhut).¹ As the protagonists in the colonization and land-grabbing process, the early-American colonizers' self-perception and, consequently, self-description are the principal subjects at hand.

Before lifting a cover on early-American ideology and conquest, it is fitting to acknowledge – and then set aside – another genre of social thought and its critics: the ideologues and analysts of Dutch Reform colonization of South Africa. While their subject is organically akin to this one, theirs is a well-traveled road. Retracing that route is instructive, but does not open new critical ground, except insofar as it might evoke the naturally rich comparative analysis. The present inquisitive process seeks examples of our written history in which actual visionary and literate persons dramatically affected the shape of land tenure and demographics of a continent. That heritage echoes in numerous events and developments in our currently endangered planet.

The Sources

The Scriptures of their religion provided the most influential literary antecedent to the early American settlers, guiding perceptions of

the new land, its indigenous inhabitants, and themselves. Foremost among those sources, the Hebrew Bible defies description as a single genre; it is an amalgam of ancient Middle Eastern writings and palimpsests containing myth, law, poetry, songs, putatively historical accounts, royal propaganda, and moral philosophy. The colonizers' selective invocation of biblical passages enjoins a people, whom a singular God has "chosen" and favored, to acquire the lands of others and eliminate the indigenous owners as a means toward the colonists' more civilized objectives. While the inherent license for such behavior constitutes what would be called "ethnic cleansing" today, the rationalization is not a straightforward task. The Hebrew Bible also poses moral dilemmas and portrays often-contradictory behavior – both sacred and profane – of its characters. The biblical compilers also conveyed warnings to the reader not to be ungrateful for the bounty acquired in the colonization process:

And when the Lord your God brings you into the land which he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you, with great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you [out] of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall fear the Lord your God ... lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deut. 6.10-15; *cf.* 6.18-19)

By colonizing the lands of Canaan in which the Israelites are alien, according to Scripture (Gen. 17.5-8), and where the Amalekites, Perizzites, Hivites, Girgashites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Hittites constituted the indigenous inhabitants of historic Palestine (Numbers 1.1-10.10), Leviticus (19:33-34) forbids the persecution of resident aliens and other abuses. Leviticus also lays down a warning of severe penalties for deviation from a path of justice (Lev. 26: 32-39 and Deut. 7.1-11). For example, Yahweh threatens:

Joseph Schechla, "A Covenant of Dispossession and Genocide"

I will devastate the land ... and you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land will be a desolation, and your cities a waste ... You shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall devour you....

Listening (Selectively) to Voices

According to the history attributed to the legendary Moses,² Israel made a vow to Yahweh and said: "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." Yahweh listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so that place was called Hormah. (Num. 21.1-3). Then Yahweh reportedly spoke to Moses, saying,

You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess.... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides: they shall trouble you in the land where you are settling. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them. (Num. 33.50-56)

Moses is quoted as advising his followers against hubris, but, nonetheless, reinforces contempt for the indigenous ones:

When Yahweh thrusts them [the enemy] out before you, do not say to yourself, "It is because of my righteousness that Yahweh has brought me to occupy this land"; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that Yahweh is dispossessing them before you.... (Deuteronomy 9.1-5)

The act, therefore, becomes degraded from genocide or serial homicide to the rather more-benevolent "malecide"; that is, eliminating that which is unjust or unrighteous. By way of further rationale, Moses (the presumed author of Deuteronomy³) urges against allowing the indigenous people to survive:

You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as Yahweh your God has

commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against Yahweh your God (Deut. 20.16-18) when Yahweh your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them ... for that would turn your children away from following me, to serve other gods.⁴

Massachusetts Bay Puritans

The Puritans were not a theological monolith, but formed a Protestant spectrum of Presbyterians, Baptists, Levellers, Separatists, nonseparating Congregationalists (Independents), and Diggers, among others. They were commonly interested in more than the Scriptures and the content of their Sunday sermons for their own sake. Rather, they became dedicated to applying those oral lessons as a guide to acceptable and righteous behavior throughout their week. They also used these moral tenets to rationalize otherwise forbidden conduct (Salisbury 13-20).

Land, including the illicit acquisition of land and other properties, remained a constant temptation. However, their normally wrathful God would be sufficiently pliable to forgive such transgressions, especially for His Chosen.

Between 1629 and 1640, when their cause declined in England, more than 20,000 Puritans emigrated to North America with this opportunity squarely in mind. It was the call to battle that quickened their spirits, and they were convinced that at least moral warfare had to be waged in the civil realm against the forms of corruption they felt were afflicting England. John Fiske has observed that they were animated with “the desire to lead godly lives and to drive out sin from the community” (Fiske 147). Their hope was that with the successful completion of such a war, the millennial kingdom promised in Revelation would surely arrive within their lifetime.

The character of the seventeenth-century Puritan leader John Endicott (Massachusetts Governor, 1629-30) lives on in the short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” which

appeared in his *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). Hawthorne, retrospectively, has Endicott harkening to Old Testament analogies, approving a colonial bride of a marital couple as fit "to become a mother in our Israel," and referring to the Massachusetts Bay colony as "New Israel." A full century after Endicott lived, Hawthorne wrote of the zealot in the aftermath of then U.S. President Andrew Jackson ordering his troops to track down Seminole (indigenous Florida) women and children so that they could be "captured or destroyed," and the Baltimore *Niles Weekly Register* chorused the hope that "the miserable creatures will be speedily swept from the face of the earth." Publication of Hawthorne's literary renditions of the colonial-period in *Twice Told Tales* also preceded by one year the ghastly Trail of Tears (1838), by which U.S. forces forcibly marched untold thousands of evicted Cherokee people to their banishment and death, confiscating all of their ancestral lands for colonial expansion.

The spiritual and ideological leader of the early seventeenth-century Puritans, John Winthrop, Sr., contemplated such a rationale even as he voyaged from England to his new Massachusetts Bay home and governorship (1630). Leading the "Great Migration," he already acquired fame and following by having recorded and disseminated his own vision to build in the new colony a "New Jerusalem," the "City on the Hill" that would be the subject of emulation for all mankind. He sanctified that end – to justify interim means – by imagining a compact with the Puritan God:

Thus stands the case between God and us. Wee are entered into Covenant with Him for this worke. Wee have taken out a Commission. The Lord hath given us leave to *drawe our owne Articles....* (Winthrop 294; emphasis added)

A distinctive sense of mission to redeem the entire world marked the first generation of immigrants in New England. The Puritans derived from Revelation their dualistic worldview and their belief that, as in the Old Testament, violence would inaugurate God's kingdom. They thought of themselves as standing in the succession of Christian warriors and martyrs that John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* had delineated from the Bible down to sixteenth-century England. As Winthrop Hudson explained,

The New England story was viewed as a continuation of John Foxe's narrative of the pitched battles between Christ and Antichrist that had marked the course of human history from the beginning. (Hudson 7)

Preserving the continuum, preachers such as John Davenport, John Cotton, Increase Mather and Cotton Mather, and Thomas Hooker worked on the task of building a holy and invincible commonwealth. In 1646, after threatening the Narragansett people into a conciliatory pact of land transfer to the English colonists, Puritan leaders claimed to express the common will and destiny of the colonists such that

...all the Colonies (as they may) would collect and gather up the many speciall providences of God towards them, ... how his hand hath bene with them in laying their foundation in church and common wealth, how he hath cast the dread of his people (weake in themselves) upon the Indians ... that history may be compiled according to truth with due weight by some able and fitt man appointed thereunto. (Pulsifer 83)

In outright war, the colonists followed the Old Testament precedent by claiming God to their victorious side. Recording the Puritans' second great war of conquest, Reverend William Hubbard authored his *Narrative of the Indian Wars in New England*, reportedly in 1675. The next year, Hubbard submitted his manuscript to the Massachusetts governor and council-appointed Censorship Committee for their approval, and it was published in Boston and London two years later. Recounting the cruel expedition against the Narragansetts, Hubbard wrote that, "the subduing or taking so many, ought to be acknowledged as another signal Victory, and Pledg of Divine Favour to the English" (Hubbard).

Another Puritan writer, Reverend Increase Mather, published a *Brief History of the War* almost in parallel (published at Boston and London, 1676). The latter author, who rivaled Hubbard for local influence and criticized the latter for hubris, nonetheless similarly concluded that "The Lord God of our Fathers hath given us for a rightful Possession" over the land of the "Heathen People amongst whom we live" (Green 29).

He also stated that, apparently without reason or injury, the indigenous people had acquired some sort of "jealousies" in the process. Mather explained the long passivity of the host population, saying that it

must be ascribed to the wonderful Providence of God, who did (as with Jacob of old, and after that with the Children of Israel) lay the fear of the English and the dread of them upon all the Indians. The terror of God was upon them round about. (Jennings 183)

Mather's account, full of his own hubris, troubled the Massachusetts Bay Governing Council out of its concern rather to portray the New England colonists as the aggrieved and defensive party – and, therefore, morally superior – in the conflict with the indigenous peoples over land. That was not out of moral compunction so much as material interest, as Mother England was the financing party in "King Phillip's War."

The spectrum of social thought did not stop at the debates between and among Hubbard, Winthrop, and Mather, but involved more-liberal writers such as Roger Williams, who questioned the scriptural justifications for land grabbing and ethnic cleansing. That chronicler contained the spectrum of colonial social thought by concluding indigenous spirituality to be "devil worship," but also emphatically denounced the Massachusetts Puritans'

depraved appetite after the great vanities, dreams and shadows of this vanishing life, great portions of the land, land in this wilderness, as if men were in a great necessity and danger for want of great portions of land, as poor, hungry, thirsty seamen have, after a sick and stormy, a long and starving passage. This is one of the gods of New England, which the living and most high Eternal will destroy and famish. (Bartlett 342)

Williams' more critical viewpoint and more subtle pursuit of territory did not prevail, neither in that era nor since. The traditions acceptable to the dominant Puritans in that part of the colonized country have provided the cultural and pedagogical context for the training of generations of historians and social thinkers across succeeding centuries.

Thomas Morton

Almost since his first arrival in the New World, Thomas Morton exemplified the dreaded “thorn in the side” of the colonizers, since that Englishman took to trading with the indigenous peoples – including in guns and spirits – and transferred firearm and other technology to them. For these “crimes” he was tried summarily and deported to England, from whence he later returned. In the process (mid-1630s), he authored *New English Canaan*. The work is an antithesis to the Puritan’s cant of conquest and their racist characterizations of the indigenous peoples as the “New Canaanites” with an ideological vigor renewed from other English colonizers subjugation of the Irish on similar pseudoreligious and pseudolegal grounds (Canny).

Of course, the colonizers and their expansionism were effectively unchallenged by Morton or any other material force. William Bradford, no less, asserted that “the country [*sic*] could not bear the injury he did.” However, more than trading firearms and spirits to the Indians, Morton’s polemical pen threatened “the country’s” moral undoing. He had challenged the colonists’ (esp. Endicott’s and Winthrop’s) moral presumption that the Puritans were “God’s chosen.”

Not unlike some anti-Zionists of the current era, Morton enjoined conscientious compatriots quickly to repair to

a spiritual Canaan (the living Lord), which is a land of large liberty, the house of happiness, where, like the Lord’s lily, they toil and grow in the land flowing with sweet wine, milk and honey ... without money. (Drinnon 31-32)

Eventually published in Amsterdam in 1637, *New English Canaan* purveys an upbeat human spirit and lighthearted rendition of life with the indigenous peoples undergoing their erasure from the “New Israel.” That literary product and its respect for the new land and its indigenous peoples were the essential ingredients of an exceptional colonizer’s attempt at achieving sense of place, which his compatriots ultimately rejected and never achieved. The work itself was banned in North America, but was belatedly recovered by John Quincy Adams at an 1825 Berlin book auction and repatriated.

Parallel to these literary events were the 1636 massacres and genocide of the Pequot people in present-day Connecticut by the same Massachusetts Bay colonists. The protagonist and putative “hero” of the events, Captain John Mason, later recorded his version in *Brief History*

of the Pequot Wars. This contribution to the state ideology is indelibly characterized in haunting terms that echo the genocide and dispossession narratives of Deuteronomy and Exodus: "...the Lord was, as it were, pleased to say unto us, The Land of Canaan will I give unto thee though but few and Strangers in it" (Mason: Part II, para. 16). He continued: "What shall I say? God led his People through many Difficulties and Turnings; yet by more than an ordinary Hand of Providence he brought them to Canaan at last" (Mason: Part II, para. 23).

Racism on scientific grounds was finding its home in English academia, including The Royal Society's Sir William Petty, author of *The Scale of Creatures* (1667-77) (Doob). Such ideological complements to established racist civil religion bolstered the war effort in New England by dehumanizing the indigenous peoples and whomping up racist enthusiasm, material aid, and investment for the colonial enterprise.

America's Homer

Perpetuating a pedigree of Puritan values, Reverend Timothy Dwight followed in the footsteps of his father, John Dwight, and grandfather, Jonathan Edwards. The former emigrated to Massachusetts from England in 1635. Rev. Dwight was trained in the Hebrew Scriptures and ordained pastor of Congregational Church, Greenfield Hill, Fairfield Township CT. Later, he became the fourth president of Yale College (1795-1817).

Dwight had the audacity to pen an 11-volume epic poem of the (U.S.) American experience, entitled, *Conquest of Canaan*. Audacious in its failed attempt at poetry, it earns an "A" for his attempt to weave an epic national narrative out of a racist and avaricious re-enactment of biblical myth.

Conquest of Canaan sought to fuse the colonial American experience to a divinely inspired – although ahistoric – Hebrew conquest of Canaan.⁵ With a similar, but far-less-ironic title than Morton's, Dwight weaves his verses in a new direction: toward the national "American Revolution" effort. With bigger monarchist fish to fry, the author guides his miniscule readership to biblically based megalomania as a chosen race to "exercise dominion over the earth," and even more explicitly, Dwight's allegory cast the new America as Israel, and England as Pharaoh (Egypt) in an updated version of Exodus, with George Washington playing the role of Joshua [*sic*] leading the children of Israel into

the promised land and triumphing over the “fiendish, wolflike Canaanites” (indigenous Americans). Dwight’s poem identified “America” as “the last stop on the westward march of empire ... the sole heir apparent of *Israel’s mission to found an empire, and to rule a world*” (Dwight; emphasis added).

Conclusion

Literary symbolism and imagery in the early colonies reflected a strong mental connection to the narratives of ancient Israel. Deriving inspiration from these passages – in particular, the dispossession and genocide narratives – guided the new Americans to contemplate biblical narratives at their source in order to re-imagine – and even to re-enact – religio-national myths, ultimately, to displace the biblical Holy Land with the American New Jerusalem. However, in founding the republic, as such, the “founding fathers” struggled with the dilemma over Israelite, Athenian, and Roman historical antecedents as models for their new polity. In retrospect, it can be said that they chose, as do their successors, to integrate all of these models, despite their diversity. Any momentary vacillation between and among these models often derived from tactical responses where material interests were at stake.

At the end of this review period, Benjamin Franklin had proposed to the Continental Congress a Great Seal of the confederation that depicted a heroic image of Moses lifting his staff to divide the Red Sea, with Pharaoh depicted as inundated by the rushing waters. Thomas Jefferson preferred a more abstract and seemingly naïve image of children led through a wilderness by a cloud and a pillar of fire, portraying a scene from the legendary – if ahistoric – Exodus. In the late 1700s, a standard allegory from the American pulpit had clergy regularly referring to the newly formed United States as the “American Israel” (Grose 5). The analogy remained variously subtle and ingrained through succeeding generations. “The Old Testament is truly so omnipresent in the American culture of 1800 or 1820,” observes Perry Miller, “that historians have as much difficulty taking cognizance of it as of the air the people breathed” (Miller [a]). Nonetheless, this ideology and its literary tradition have woven a fabric of belief among new and old colonists alike, that their enterprise – with “Israel” as sacramental model – is divinely blessed and unchallenged, with all the human, material, environmental, and moral losses it has caused to indigenous peoples and the wider world.

Habitat International Coalition, Egypt