

***The 1690s:
The War, the Witch, and the Lord's Table***

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Coming into the third generation after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, the Puritans had formed their own colonies of their Mother country of England. Their area of Massachusetts grew into the surrounding areas, forming the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and spread into New Hampshire, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania. With ever-expanding territory, and with more people arriving in every ship, the once-small group of Puritans needed a system of government according to their religious beliefs.

The Puritans sought to live, simply, as God would have called the nation of Israel, and by conjunction themselves, to live. Amidst two polarizing opinions on both sides of the Atlantic, they sailed between the cliffs of the English Church and the whirlpools of European government. In doing so, their attempt to create a pure theocracy yielded positive results for a while. However, as always comes with that which is new, growing pains threatened to fracture their system at its core.

Amidst the Puritan difficulties on the west side of the Atlantic, the kings adjacent to the Puritan “downtown” London had concerns of their own. William III of Orange watched as Charles II of the Hapsburg empire grew senile with each passing epileptic seizure. Charles II’s most threatening problem was not his epilepsy however -- he did not have a son to succeed his throne. Louis XIV, from his palace outside Paris, had his eyes on the same threat. Louis XIV whispered to his advisors to begin mobilizing his army. He saw an opportunity to expand the French empire, and he was going to take it. He brought his armies to the borders of France along the Spanish Netherlands, the Rhineland, and Catalonia, and fighting broke out.

Louis XIV eyed the Spanish Hapsburgs for expansion to the east and to the south. William III of Orange saw a dying king to the south. Charles II saw no one to succeed his throne in any cardinal direction. And yet, each of these kings were looking at each other over the head

of another empire -- the Holy Roman Empire. Leopold I anxiously watched as the surrounding kings circled and eyed each other over his borders. To mitigate potential disaster, Leopold I sends envoys to William III with a proposal. To protect the Holy Roman Empire from the fearsome French, Leopold I and William III work together to choose another king to succeed the dying and senile Hapsburg.

They decide together on Charles II's remote grandson, Philip, in the last years of the decade. Thinking that resolves the war, the three countries sign a treaty (a "partition") to divide the continent into usable and peaceful land. Unfortunately with the turn of the century however, Philip died of smallpox, and the countries moved into another war, the War of the Spanish Succession.

As the empires of Europe battled for power, five thousand miles away, in an insignificant suburb of Massachusetts known as Salem Village, a combination of fear, confusion, and anger shook the colonies with more force than anyone could have ever anticipated. Despite its popularity as a historical event, the facts surrounding the Salem Witch Trials remain surprisingly unclear to this day, with too much room for speculation and interpretation. The event itself only lasted for one year, beginning in 1691 and ending in 1692, but its repercussions were felt throughout the colonies. Since then, many historians have tried to solve this unintentional mystery story, resulting in conflicting—often contradictory—explanations of the evidence. Even so, most historians agree that a man named Samuel Parris was at the center of this fiasco.

Originally a Harvard student, Parris quit his college career in hopes of going into business. That, however, did not go well for him, and Parris quickly found himself searching for a pulpit to preach from. Desperate for a job, Parris settled in Salem Village. Unlike the Puritans of his day, who emphasized preaching to the glory of God, Parris was primarily doing it for the

money. Still, Parris had some redeeming qualities. His sermons were reportedly very focused on condemning sin and striving after righteousness, which earned him two thumbs up from his Puritan associates.¹

Things started to get weird when his eight year old daughter and eleven year old niece started to have fits. The two children were seen by the local doctor, but he was unable to help them and suggested that the kids were being afflicted by an evil hand. Making matters worse, other girls in the neighborhood were starting to have fits as well, which convinced Parris to reach out to the North Shore Association of Ministers. This board of Harvard graduates came to Salem Village to question the girls, demanding the names of every witch that tormented them. While they were on trial, the girls became hysterical, but eventually, three “witches” were identified: a female tramp, a woman who had been skipping Sabbath meetings by “calling in sick,” and a slave from Parris’ own household named Tituba. Tituba spent a considerable amount of time with the kids, and was accused of practicing witchcraft with them. Desperate for answers, Parris whipped Tituba until she had identified six more witches, some of whose descriptions were laughably vague. For example, Parris now knew that there was “a woman in a hood” and “a man of Boston” secretly lurking around Salem Village practicing witchcraft.² Still, a couple of names were given, which gave Parris and the other ministers the confidence they needed to proceed.

Hunting down these suspects was a fast and inaccurate process, one that was fueled more by suspicion than it was by evidence, and ended with a lot of innocent people getting hurt or killed. By fall of 1692, nineteen people had been hanged, two dogs were executed, and an old man named Giles Corey was pressed to death with rocks. Additionally, eight others were on

¹ Marion L. Starkey, *The Congregational Way* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 105.

² Starkey, 106.

death row, fifty others were awaiting sentences, and 150 others were in jail awaiting trial.³

Beyond these simple facts, however, few things have been confirmed.

Perhaps the most important question that still needs to be answered is: “What caused the young girls to have fits?” Cotton Mather, a Puritan cleric and historian that was present during the witch trials, wrote on it afterwards, stating that it was clearly the work of the devil. This was, of course, the common belief at the time, but even still, Mather went down in history as the “bad guy” of the story. Despite saying what everyone was thinking, Mather underestimated the suave of his contemporary and nemesis, Robert Calef. These two men did not get along, which is why Calef insisted that “Mather and his fellow ministers had encouraged the witch mania as part of an effort to drive the people of Massachusetts back to the church.”⁴ This explanation caught on with alarming speed, and for the next two and a half centuries, Mather, Parris, and the other ministers received most of the blame for what had happened. Among other things, they were accused of 1) trying to fill the village meetinghouse, 2) trying to get more church members/elders, and 3) trying to increase their own salaries.⁵ Parris’ sketchy background as a minister made him an easy target for these accusations, but Mather’s actions and character were eventually vindicated. In 1956, a historian named Samuel Eliot Morison reviewed his files, only to find that Mather “had kept a cool head in dealing with the witches and spoke out against excesses during the trials.”⁶ As a result, historians stopped blaming Mather and started looking for better explanations.

With the help of modern science and technology, two more theories formed, but the latter ended up disproving the former. The first was announced in 1999 by a woman named Laurie Carlson. According to her, the actions and characteristics of the Salem girls could all be

³ Robert Detweiler, "Shifting Perspectives on the Salem Witches." *The History Teacher* 8, no. 4 (1975), 597.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Franklin G. Mixon Jr. "Weather and the Salem Witch Trials." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2005), 241.

⁶ Detweiler, 598.

attributed to a mosquito-borne illness called encephalitis. Caused by viral infection, this illness led to inflammation in the brain, which would explain the girls' "melancholia/delirium, hallucinations, mania, etc."⁷ Despite having scientific evidence to back it up, Carlson's theory quickly fell apart at the onset of additional information—namely, weather analysis. In 2004, a woman named Emily Oster published a paper in which she pointed out that the witchcraft trials took place during a "period of lower than average temperatures known to climatologists as the 'little ice age.'"⁸ Obviously, with freezing temperatures, there would be no mosquitos, so Carlson's theory of encephalitis lost most—if not all—of its traction.

The addition of weather considerations caused a lot of historians to realize just how harsh the living conditions were in 1691. More people started to look at the Salem Witch Trials from an economic perspective, knowing that the severe cold would have led to food shortages or perhaps even famine. Two historians, by the names of Franklin Mixon and Len Treviño tried to reinvigorate an older theory from 1974 which basically said that the Salem Witch Trials were an attempt by the west side of Salem Village to stop the east side from aligning with the "economic, political, and religious interests of (the contiguous) Salem Town."⁹ Mixon and Treviño based this theory on a map that was drawn by the 1974 theorists, which "demonstrated" that the accusers all came from the west and the accused all came from the east. This theory, however, lost most of its credibility when Ray Benjamin (2008) examined the principles used to identify people's locations on the map, faulting it for being "highly interpretive and considerably incomplete."¹⁰ In other words, the story was not as black and white as the map suggested.

⁷ Mixon, 241.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Karlsen, Carol F. "Salem Revisited." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 65, no. 3 (2008), 492.

Another explanation offered in the twentieth century was that of Vernon L. Parrington. According to his analysis, the Salem Witch Trials were the direct result of Puritanism. Massachusetts, he argued, had become a stifling environment—a place where “every unfamiliar idea [was] likely to be seized upon as evidence of the devil’s wiles.”¹¹ With so much emphasis being placed on morality, it is easy to see how a situation that may have been caused by demonic activity could have had a snowball-effect in the community. Even if witchcraft was actually being practiced in Salem Village, the response was clearly fueled by hysteria more than it was by a desire to combat evil practices. Others, like Julian Franklyn, take it one step further, and put most of the blame on the little girls. “The children engaged in a conscious fraud and the overzealous ministers must share the blame for encouraging the children by taking them seriously.”¹² Many historians agree with Franklyn that the girls were only pretending to have seizures, and that they took great pleasure in holding “the whole adult world of their environment at their mercy.”¹³ Some historians go halfway, suggesting that the girls may have initially faked their symptoms, but as time went on, they only “persisted in their accusations for fear of being found out.”¹⁴

Despite all the scattered pieces of evidence that have been collected over the years and all the various theories that have been worked up, no one knows for certain as to what exactly happened in Salem Village that year. Perhaps the devil’s greatest accomplishment in the matter was turning people against their neighbors and hiding himself away in the shadows.

While the rampant superstition of the Salem Witch Trials stood in high contrast to the Enlightenment movement of empiricism and scientific data, the Puritan thinkers still held to their

¹¹ Detweiler, 598.

¹² Detweiler, 598.

¹³ Detweiler, 599.

¹⁴ Ibid.

religious and theological intellectual discourse. As would have been natural for them, this applied to religion as well. Noting this dichotomy, Michael Crawford says this:

"Although the disappearance of witchcraft prosecutions, the popularity of the writings of Enlightenment thinkers, and the interest of the educated in scientific experimentation reflected a lessening of expectation of supernatural intervention in daily life, eighteenth-century Britons and Americans were still highly religious."¹⁵

These highly religious Puritans conversed and contemplated with one another on many topics within religion. Their heritage from the European churches and from John Calvin, combined with a strict adherence to Scripture, led to many disagreements. While many of the prominent perspectives occurred prior to the decade of 1690-1699, several still permeated the thought patterns of thinkers and theologians of that decade.

For example, William Perkins, an English theologian of the sixteenth-century, was the “great theoretician of the preparationist theory,” even before Puritans landed at Plymouth.¹⁶ Conversion, for Perkins, had ten distinct stages. One of these stages, and perhaps the most telling of a real conversion was humiliation. “The feelings [of humiliation],” observed Perkins, according to Laurence, “directly reflected the actual condition of [the pilgrim’s] soul.”¹⁷ After preparation (the plowing of the ground in a potential believer’s heart) *humiliation*, according to Perkins, was the determining factor in knowing a church attendee’s salvation.

Similar to Perkins, Richard Hooker believed there was “an order to God’s proceedings.”¹⁸ For salvation, Hooker believed, there were “chronological phases...in order to prove that regeneration was not a precipitate or instantaneous frenzy.” Perkins would agree, except Hooker

¹⁵ Michael J. Crawford, "Origins of the Eighteenth-Century Evangelical Revival: England and New England Compared." *Journal of British Studies* 26, no. 4 (1987), 376.

¹⁶ David Laurence, "Jonathan Edwards, Solomon Stoddard, and the Preparationist Model of Conversion." *The Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 3/4 (1979): 270.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953, 57.

continued the logic to its conclusion. Essentially, within the context of predestination and the other *salutis*, God could take away the soul's resistance so it could receive Him, or in other words, an extreme form of prevenient grace.

Despite the Puritans' Calvinist leanings, Hooker was viewed as *Arminian* by some. William Pemble thought Hooker to be "cheapening grace," and that with God's initiative to take away the soul's resistance, He was cheapening His own grace.¹⁹ The responsibility and works of conversion under Hooker's theology fell, according to Pemble, too heavy on the believer's part and less on God's.

John Cotton, on the other hand, was later known as the "expositor of the New England Way."²⁰ Cotton disagreed heavily with Hooker. A radical Calvinist, Cotton believed that, at least at the soul's first encounter with the Savior, there were "no steps to the Altar." Christ as the Godhead did the work in a man's heart for His purpose, for His glory, and solely by Himself. Anne Hutchinson, after seeing Cotton's strong principles of faith without works, saw Cotton as the only theologian in New England who was properly preaching the Covenant of Grace. Logically, for Hutchinson then, every other theologian was preaching the Covenant of Works, and her accusations eventually led to her new real estate in Rhode Island.

One of the almost dynastic families of the Puritan colonies were the Mathers. Richard Mather pastored a church in Dorchester, New York, later famous for its controversy on baptism amidst small local revivals. His brother Eleazer Mather pastored the church of Northampton, which he would later pass into the hands of Solomon Stoddard. Cotton Mather observed the Salem Witch Trials and wrote *Wonders of the Invisible World* in 1692.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ All references in this paragraph are from Miller, pages 58-59.

²¹ Detweiler 597.

Perhaps one of the more famous Mathers of this time period was Richard's son, Increase. Increase Mather was a highly respected lecturer who taught his church on Wednesday nights, in addition to serving as president of Harvard College.²² Increase feared that the country was "in danger of divine desertion," and that, in order to rectify this under the national, covenantal theocracy the Puritans had, the teaching of "God's prophets were the covenants' lifelines."²³ Mather originally disagreed with the Halfway Covenant, but after holding a synod in 1692 to determine its validity, Mather believed in its use.

Solomon Stoddard, grandfather to Jonathan Edwards, entered the stage against a backdrop of theologies, which featured the soliloquies of Hooker, Pemble, Cotton, and Mather in the echoing in the back of the theater. Unfortunately, as Stoddard looked out from his pulpit however, his congregation was thinning in both numbers and general piety.

To solve this problem, and to theoretically answer the question of church polity hovering over the colonies, Stoddard took down fences--specifically, the fence around the Lord's Table. The sacrament of communion, in Puritan circles, was seen typically as only received by believers, or, to use the Puritan vocabulary, the regenerated. However, similar to every pastor, Stoddard did not know the regenerate from the unregenerate. Thus, in order to lead more of the presumably unregenerate into a prime spot to be regenerated, Stoddard opened the Lord's Supper to all those sitting in his pews. His desire was perfectly natural. Not only at his pastoral level, but at the level of his own Christianity, Stoddard craved to see more of the regenerated in his church. The taking of the Lord's Supper, then, would be a *converting* measure, as opposed to a measure for the *converted*.

²² Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 102.

²³ Stout, 110.

With the newly-opened fences, working in tandem with the legalism of the Puritan's national covenant, Stoddard believed he had prepared the potential regenerate as much as he was able. *Preparation* (the combination of the national covenant, Puritan moral law, and the open invitation to the Lord's Supper) "was like a series of dance steps," for Stoddard. "A pilgrim learned and practiced [the dance steps] by himself. He might dance alone for an hour, a week, or a lifetime, But at some moment every believer discovered that he danced no longer, that Christ had chosen to become his partner."²⁴ "Common grace," as Stoddard himself said, "is the picture of sanctifying grace."²⁵ Stoddard trusted that those in his congregation would know, and would have assurance that they were saved.²⁶

Despite Edwards' disagreements with Stoddard, Stoddard's beliefs were not well respected within the Puritan community. Stoddard's focus on the unconverted souls in his congregation, and on the preacher's sermons catered to the unconverted, was unlike many of his contemporaries. As one may imagine, Jonathan Edwards too would later disagree with his grandfather on several points.

To admire history, one must look at the thinkers and ideas of the various epochs. Seeing that we have done this, there were some additional events between the years of 1690-1699 that still affect us today. For example, merchants trade coffee for the first time outside of the port of Mocha, which caused the Muslim monopoly on this precious good to crumble. Coffee can be spread now throughout the world! Additionally, the clarinet is invented. Japan breaks out into a measles epidemic. William Penn founds Pennsylvania in 1696. Jean-Baptiste Coignard publishes the first edition of *La Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* in 1694. John Flamsteed sights Uranus for the first time. And, on the high seas, the Golden Age of Piracy begins. While all of

²⁴ Laurence, 279.

²⁵ Stoddard, as quoted in Laurence, 279.

²⁶ Laurence, 280.

these events technically happened before Jonathan Edwards even existed, they are still helpful in considering the world into which he was born.

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