

**THE AMERICAN PURITAN JEREMIAD:  
THE RITUAL OF THE PURITAN ERRAND**

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**Abstract:** Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch are authoritative scholars in Puritan American Studies. Miller offers comprehensive histories of Puritan intellectual life and Bercovitch traces the ideological backgrounds and impacts of Puritanism on the formation and development of the U.S. This study will look at Miller and Bercovitch’s conflicting ideas on two fundamental assets of Puritanism: the jeremiad and the errand.

**Key Words:** Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Puritanism, the Puritan Jeremiad, the Puritan Errand.

**Amerikan Püritan Yeremiyadı: Püritan Misyon Geleneği**

**Özet:** Perry Miller ve Sacvan Bercovitch Amerikan Püritan Etüdleri’nin önde gelen isimleridir. Miller, Püritan entelektüel hayatının derinlemesine bir analizini yaparken Bercovitch, Püritanizm’in A.B.D.’nin kuruluşuna ve gelişimine ışık tutan ideolojik etkilerini inceler. Bu çalışmada Perry Miller ve Sacvan Bercovitch’in Püritanizm’in iki temel kavramı—yeremiyad ve misyon geleneği—hakkında birbiriyle çatışan fikirlerinin bir incelemesi yapılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Püritanizm, Püritan Yeremiyadı, Püritan Misyonu.

In “World War II and the Development of American Studies,” Philip Gleason explains the institutional organization of American Studies after the war as the effort to establish a coherent methodology for the study of the ‘exceptional’ American culture that was growingly nationalistic and patriotic. Since then, the relentless effort to define “America” has undergone serious changes. As Gene Wise suggests, paradigm shifts have continuously redefined the field, and methodological reconfigurations have resulted in subsequent labels such as American Puritan Studies, Myth and Symbol School, post-Cold

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War criticism, revisionist New Americanists, trans/post-nationalist American Studies, “Americas” studies, and most recently, Post-American Studies.

Within the field, many scholars have turned to Puritans for their analyses of American ‘identity.’ However, “to a degree rivaled in few other historical fields, modern Puritan studies have been mired in definitional confusion and disagreement” (Bozeman, 1986, p.235). The diverse interpretations of two seminal Puritan historians, Perry Miller (1905-1963) and Sacvan Bercovitch (1933-), as well the scholarly interest in the relationship between them could be a case in point. Perry Miller, one of the founding fathers of the field and a pioneer of Puritan American Studies, offers comprehensive histories of Puritan intellectual life. In what he calls the Puritan ‘errand into the wilderness,’ Miller locates the exceptional status of America. The Puritan errand begins on board the *Arbella* in 1630: John Winthrop, on the way to Massachusetts Bay where he will plant a colony, tells his fellow travelers that they are covenanted to God and that they have a mission to create a model of Christian perfection. In this famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” Winthrop states that “men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘the Lord make it like that of New England.’ For we consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” (Baym, 2007, p.158). For Miller,

*Massachusetts Bay was not just an organization of immigrants seeking advantage and opportunity. It had a positive sense of mission-either it was sent on an errand or it had its own intention, but in either case the deed was deliberate. It was an act of will, perhaps of willfulness. These Puritans were not driven out of England (thousands of their fellows stayed and fought the Cavaliers)-they went of their own accord (1952, p. 5-6).*

“Before Miller’s exposition, the idea of an exemplary Puritan mission was unknown. Early twentieth-century accounts of the Great Migration by Edward Channing, Herbert Osgood, Charles M. Andrews, and Charles and Mary Beard betray no trace of the concept” (Bozeman, 1986, p.231). As Murray G. Murphey clarifies, “Miller of course did not rediscover the Puritans; they were never lost, and scholarly writing about them is continuous through the nineteenth century” (2001, p.5). The genius of Miller is that he “redefined the field” by providing key emotional, religious, and intellectual insight to what were otherwise considered the Puritans’ “bizarre or perverse” behavior (Murphey, 2001, p.6, 9).

Sacvan Bercovitch, writing a couple of decades after Perry Miller, traces the ideological impacts of Puritanism on the formation and development of the U.S. “When Bercovitch first entered the field in the 1960s, American Puritan Studies was still largely dominated by Perry Miller's intellectual history of the ‘New England Mind.’ As a newcomer, Bercovitch published a number of essays that directly challenged Miller's authoritative work on Puritanism” (Delfs, 1997,

p.601). Following Miller's death, which coincided with substantial sociopolitical unrest, "social historians and student protesters began to attack his concept of a definable New England Mind. In view of increasing ethnic and political conflicts, his belief in a unified national character appeared hopelessly outdated" (Delfs, 1997, p.608). Further, as Bercovitch states, the tropes of Puritanism Miller established became too commonplace that Miller's definitions "have fostered a series of misrepresentations both of the jeremiad and of the Puritan concept of errand" (1978, p.5). In most of his discussions, Bercovitch tries to correct such misrepresentations and he revises Miller's ideas and definitions. In his Preface to *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch clarifies his position towards Miller

*In the earlier version of this study I muted my dissent because I was unwilling to join in the patricidal totem feast following Miller's death, when a swarm of social and literary historians rushed to pick apart the corpus of his work. It seems clear by now that the corpus remains pretty much intact, and that it will remain a towering achievement of the American mind. It is with a deep sense of gratitude for his achievement that I have tried to clarify my differences with Miller. (1978, p.xv)*

Before moving on to a discussion of these differences, we could have a close look at key points in Miller's discussions. In his 1956 classic *Errand into the Wilderness*, Miller established the basis of American exceptionalism by finding in the Puritan past "the realization of the uniqueness of the American experience" (1956, p.ix). In what he calls the 'New England Mind,' Miller found the unified national character of the U.S. Miller wrote that on board the *Arbella*, John Winthrop and the other entrepreneurs of the Massachusetts Bay Colony

*could see in the pattern of history that their errand was not a mere scouting expedition: it was an essential maneuver in the drama of Christendom. The Bay Company was not a battered remnant of suffering Separatists thrown up on a rocky shore; it was an organized task-force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions of Christendom. These Puritans did not flee to America; they went in order to work out that complete reformation which was not yet accomplished in England and Europe, but which would quickly be accomplished if only the saints back there had a working model to guide them. (1952, 14)*

Miller elaborates on the double meaning of the word 'errand' in order to explain his notion of the Puritan errand. Errand may mean that a superior orders an inferior to perform a task and expects the 'errand boy' to perform a service. The errand boy has no mission of his own; he merely satisfies the demands of his superior. The husband who buys something his wife had requested also performs an errand of this kind. Errand may also mean that a person is the

‘doer’ of an errand which he personally formulates; he has a self-appointed mission and works for himself. With this double meaning in mind, Miller discusses the category of errand to which the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony felt they performed. Were they “errand boys” or the “doers” of an errand? John Winthrop had announced *a* mission: the Massachusetts Bay Company was going to be the city upon a hill, they were going to build the city of God, and they were covenanted to God. So far, it seems that they were the ‘doers’ of the errand because they had a strict sense of the mission they had set out for. However, Miller explains that “this errand was being run for the sake of Reformed Christianity:” they wanted to “vindicate the most rigorous ideal of the Reformation, so that ultimately all Europe would imitate New England” (1956, p.12). Thus, the Puritan errand relied on the extent that their city on the hill was recognized as a successful religious venture by Europe: they relied on their mission being acknowledged, as if they were not the doers of an errand but rather were errand-boys who expected the recognition of a fulfilled mission, the appreciation of an accomplished errand.

The dual meaning of the errand began to matter for the colonists when some changes occurred in England by the time the second-generation came of age around 1660. Although the colony “made good everything [their governor] John Winthrop demanded,” the children of the first immigrants discovered that the lesson of the city upon a hill was rejected (Miller, 1956, p.13). England’s toleration for heresies for the sake of social stability destroyed the Puritan fight against Antinomians and Arminians. The mission to build a model for Reformed Christianity was thus destroyed. What the colonists required for their

*mission to be a success was that the eyes of the world be kept fixed upon it in rapt attention. If the rest of the world, or least Protestantism, looked elsewhere, or turned to another model, or simply got distracted and forgot about New England, if the new land was left with a polity nobody in the great world of Europe wanted—then every success in fulfilling the terms of the covenant would become a diabolical measure of failure. If the due form of government were not everywhere to be saluted, what would New England have upon its hands? How to give it name, this victory nobody could utilize? How provide an identity for something conceived under misapprehension? (Miller, 1956, p.12)*

New England’s need for an audience reveals the ambiguity inherent in the word errand. This ambiguity creates confusion over the mission of New England: Puritans were at once doers of their errand—they wanted to provide a model of Reformed Christianity, while at the same time they acted like errand boys by acting as the very mission they designated for themselves was ordered by England and they were expecting confirmation of the fulfillment of their mission. It might be suggested that they were errand-boys with a self-appointed

mission. However, in the face of England's toleration of heresies, "the errand of New England collapsed. There was nobody left at headquarters to whom reports could be sent" (Miller, 1956, p.14). Then, they had to acknowledge that they were not 'errand boys' anymore. The question, for Miller, is what they did with their failed errand, how they dealt with it.

The second-generation Puritans tried to make sense of their experiences by serious lamentations upon the failure of their errand. Miller writes, "the errand having failed in the first sense of the term, they were left with the second, and required to fill it with meaning by themselves. Having failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on the hill, they were left alone with America" (1956, p.15). Upon their disappointment of their so-called failed errand, the second-generation internalized the failure by turning inward and condemning themselves harshly in sermons for their sins.

At this point we could note how Sacvan Bercovitch interprets this process of internalization of failure through second-generations' self-condemnations Miller talks about. In *The American Jeremiad* (1978) Bercovitch refers to Miller's likening of the second-generation Puritans to a husband who is on an errand for his wife. While on the errand, the husband discovers that his wife has forgotten about the errand she requested from her husband. Like the husband, the Puritans, too, discover that England has forgotten her request from the colonies. For Bercovitch, this metaphor presents a difficulty. Hinting at a problem, or tragedy, in the internalization of the failure through a sudden shift in the notion of the errand, Bercovitch writes that the Puritans refused to acknowledge the mistake and persuaded themselves that their errand had nothing to do with England. The husband, rather than acknowledging the mistake, persuaded himself "that in fact *he is correct*" (Bercovitch, 1978, p.13). For Bercovitch, this reveals a problem because the husband "does not harbor that 'fantasy' in secret, but proudly declares it to others, and for sound, pragmatic reasons—reasons that conform to the 'real' course of 'events'—persuades them too" (1978, p.18). Instead of acknowledging the failed errand, the second-generation attributed their failure to the declension of their colonies, found the reasons of this declension in their letting go of their fathers' aims and religious ways of life, and condemned the commercial values the colonies came to stand for.

Returning to Miller's discussion of the second-generation's self-condemnations, we could look at his discussion of the transformation of the first-generation's days of fasting and humiliation into the self-condemning sermons of the second-generation. According to Miller, the first generation was content with days of fasting when wars, diseases, and natural disasters occurred and with days of thanksgiving when something made them happy. They had a ritual of responding to events that afflicted or rejoiced them. The contents of the

sermons of the first-generation were devised according to the nature of the event to which they responded. By the time the second generation came of age, however, rather than things to fast for or to rejoice at, the event that they unconsciously responded to was the failure of their errand in the first sense of the term. Miller notes that in 1652, the reasons of a fasting day included, for the first time, “sin” among the afflictions (like war, storms, and rains) of God’s wrath (1953, p.28). Until then, Miller explains, deprivations were regarded to be the “results” of sins they had committed and the sermons relied heavily on the misfortunes they faced. But now, they focused not on the results of sins but on sins themselves. In other words, the Puritan sermons catalogued their “spiritual failures and moral deficiencies” as reasons of their failed errand to build the city on the hill, but not their failure in their being left alone, or dismissed, by England as Bercovitch suggests.

Another point of departure between the two historians is the notion of the jeremiad. Miller argues that through their self-castigations in political sermons, second and third generation Puritans created a unique literary form; the Puritan American Jeremiad (1953, p.29). Although, as will be discussed below, the jeremiad is something they brought from the Old World, they completely transformed it and made it “a way of conceiving the inconceivable” (Miller, 1953, p.31). Between 1660 and 1690, the jeremiads appeared in print as they were the only works that had a domestic market and they were “the foremost published utterances” (Miller, 1953, p.30). Miller mentions Michael Wigglesworth’s *God’s Controversy with England* (1662), Samuel Danforth’s *A Brief Recognition of New England’s Errand into the Wilderness* (1670), Increase Mather’s (who is the father of Cotton Mather) *The Day of Trouble is Near* (1673) as some examples of the printed jeremiads in circulation (Miller, 1953, p.30).

Structurally, the Puritan jeremiad has three parts; the doctrine, the reasons, the applications (Miller, 1953, p.29). The doctrine part proposes that the addressees are “pursued for their sins” and the text is supplied by verses of Isaiah or Jeremiah. The reasons part explains the position and duties of the addressees. The final part, applications, or, uses, is the most important part, “the real substance of the discourse” of the jeremiad (Miller, 1953, p.29). Here, the preacher enumerates in detail the reasons that have led to the vengeance of God in the first place. Among the myriad of sins listed are fornication, lack of hygiene, drunkenness, hypocrisy, usury, luxury, cock-fighting, rudeness among the young, a general lack of good manners, and lack of faith. The preacher proposes a guideline for reformation and demonstrates how they would inescapably go to hell (with detailed, knowing descriptions of how they would suffer there). During these sermons, the preacher was free to, in fact expected to, embellish his eloquence with his imagination to maximize the effect of his sermon. This literature of self-condemnation, for Miller, channeled the outrage

of their disappointment over their abandonment by England towards themselves and they created the jeremiad, the most “uninhibited and unrelenting documentation of a people’s descent into corruption” (1956, p.8). Through these jeremiads, they were able to blame the colony’s moral and spiritual corruption as the reason that the city on the hill the first immigrants had envisioned as “a beacon to mankind had degenerated into another Sodom” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.5).

Having discussed the outlines of Perry Miller’s notions of the errand and the jeremiad, the rest of the paper will look at Sacvan Bercovitch’s interpretations of the errand and jeremiad. According to Bercovitch, the Puritan concept of the errand entails a fusion of secular and sacred history. In his 1993 work *The Rites of Assent*, Bercovitch refers to the ideological function of the errand which transformed the migration from England to New England into a migration from a depraved Old World to a New Canaan. The concept of errand thus prophesied the newness of the New World because the Puritans used the biblical myth of exodus and conquest to justify their errand into the wilderness, or their “imperialism before the fact” (Bercovitch, 1993, p.32). The “state of unfulfillment” the errand emphasized contributed in significant ways to the American Revolution, to the Jacksonian democracy, and various myths that have defined America. “The jeremiad’s lamentations over the growing discrepancy between fact and ideal became both a means to reaffirm the ideal and a way to urge the community forward toward an envisioned correspondence of fact and ideal and thus fostered the American’s sometimes naïve trust in progress and process” (Shuffelton, 1982, p.233). In this way, Puritanism made out of the concept of errand a myth of America based on continual progress: a progress that had “the glory of the millennium”, a free enterprise had “the halo of grace” (Bercovitch, 1993, p.43). Ultimately, the errand created the *Great Seal* of the United States: ‘God prospered this undertaking; it shall be the new order of the ages.’ The jeremiad locates the nation’s *raison d’être* “simultaneously in the promises made to the fathers and its own envisioned future salvation” (Shuffelton, 1982, p.234). Bercovitch traces the rhetoric of the jeremiad well into the eighteenth and nineteenth century:

*In the Great Awakening, he argues, the concept of the chosen people was extended from the New England theocrats to all American saints; in the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolution, the sacred errand of redemption was expanded into a secular/sacred errand of political liberty; in westward expansion and the Civil War, the American mission of liberty and progress was forcibly extended over peoples and regions which had neglected their responsibilities toward fulfilling America’s destiny. (Halttunen, 1980, p.160)*

For Bercovitch, the Puritan errand, say, into the New Canaan, has led to a distinct Puritan rhetoric: the jeremiad. The New England Puritans, in their

sermons, transformed the jeremiad that originated in the European pulpit in both form and content. The traditional mode of the jeremiad, the European jeremiad, was a lament over the ways of the world. Bercovitch illustrates his notion of the Puritan jeremiad through the change of the original content of jeremiad. The European jeremiad is the traditional mode of the lamentation “over the ways of the world. It decried the sins of ‘the people’—a community, a nation, a civilization, mankind in general—and warned of God’s wrath to follow. Generation after generation, from the medieval era through the Renaissance, Catholic and then protestant audiences heard the familiar refrain” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.7). In this traditional mode, jeremiad talked about the depravity of humanity, offered moral lessons, but, “held out little hope” for there were always bad times, or “the times were always bad” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.7).

In *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch defines the seventeenth-century Puritan jeremiad as a mode of public speech that reflects and affects particular psychological, social, and historical circumstances. The major change the Puritans bring to their jeremiads is that they use the jeremiad not only for moral lessons: the Puritan jeremiad functions as “a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public and private identity, the shifting ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.xi). By amounting to a ritual of progress, this rhetoric fashions the myth of America in literary and historical terms. In their histories, sermons, and dairies, the Puritans direct themselves toward the fulfillment of their destiny, the establishment of “the American city of God” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.9). For Bercovitch, it is important that the Puritans created affirmative energies out of the jeremiad’s traditional mode of complaining, because in this way, the jeremiad served to foster progress.

John Winthrop’s sermon on board the *Arbella*, for Bercovitch, is the first example of the Puritan jeremiad. Thus, unlike Miller, Bercovitch evaluates the jeremiad as the rhetoric of the first immigrants and not of later generations. In his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” Winthrop defines the prospects of the colonists’ venture, and makes a ‘prophecy of doom’ if ever they were to break the terms of the covenant with God which they were thereby entering. The subjects Winthrop touched upon, such as neglecting the duties to God in the covenant would lead to His wrath, when combined with other sermon topics like the fatal consequences of degeneration, succumbing to carnal pleasures, and leaning towards profit, comprised the rhetoric of the jeremiad.

For Bercovitch, the Puritan jeremiad relied a lot on the anxiety the badness of the times caused in order to affirm the errand. The jeremiads fostered “a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of the venture”; “it made anxiety its end as well as means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate. The very concept of



errand, after all, implied a state of *unfulfillment*” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.23). Bercovitch adds,

*from the start the Puritan Jeremiahs had drawn their inspiration from insecurity; by the 1670s, crisis had become their source of strength. They fastened upon it, gloried in it, even invented it if necessary. They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress. Crisis became both form and substance of their appeals. (1978, p.62)*

Bercovitch’s stress on the importance of the sense of crisis has typological reasons: it affirms their errand by re-affirming their position as the New Israelites through a continual allusion to Jeremiah’s calls to the Israelites to repent for their sins. In other words, Bercovitch’s typological reading of the first-generation’s jeremiads gives power to his thesis that these jeremiads affirmed the Puritan errand. In the Old Testament, Jeremiah laments that the chosen people of Israel had sinned and thus had been sent on exile. Although they had continued to sin and were threatened by further punishments, they remained chosen. Jeremiah announces that in case they repent, their exile will end and they will be restored to their land. Jeremiah heralds the Promised Land, the Canaan, to be blessed with abundances beyond imagination. Jeremiah’s excessive emphasis on repentance and spiritual transformation of the Israelites was interpreted by the Puritans to fit their own needs. They asserted that Jeremiah not only addressed the Old Testament Israelites but addressed also the “*spiritual* Israelites, the entire community of the elect, past, present, and to come” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.32). In this way, the Puritans declared themselves a chosen nation, New England the New Canaan, their secular venture in New England a sacred mission. Through the typological adaptations of the rhetoric of the errand, the Puritan jeremiad posited the story of Israel as the background of their mission. The American Puritan jeremiad announced that the Puritan colonies were fulfilling the repentance of Israel and deserved the promised land of America. “Over and again the colonial Jeremiahs portray the settlers as a people of God in terms of election, the body politic, and the advancing army of Christ” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.46). Considered this way, New England’s errand becomes verified typologically: in their jeremiads, they imitate not only Jeremiah’s calls to the Israelites to repent but also Jeremiah’s promise of the Canaan. Israel’s exodus defines the Puritan errand, “for the Puritans, the errand carried forward the biblical exodus” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.28). What Bercovitch defines as the “typology of America’s mission” grants “the nation a past and a future in sacred history, rendered its political and legal outlook a fulfillment of prophecy... and declared the vast territories around them to be their chosen country” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.140). Quite significantly, such a typological reading of the errand “identifies the community’s ‘true fathers’ not by their

English background but by their exodus from Europe to the American strand” (Bercovitch, 1978, p.6).

Miller’s conviction that the jeremiad belonged to the second-generation’s confusion over their errand stands in direct contrast to Bercovitch’s claims of the first-immigrants’ usage of the jeremiad as an affirmation of their fusion of sacred history with secular ventures in their errand. This difference is revelatory in the sense that it embodies the stance of both Miller and Bercovitch towards the Puritan errand. While Miller sees the errand as misconceived at the beginning and conceived fully later in the process of Americanization, Bercovitch sees the errand as it was outlined on board the *Arbella*. According to Bercovitch, the denunciations of backsliding were as strong in the first-generation sermons as Miller claimed to be in the second-generations’ self-condemnations. What matters more to Bercovitch is the jeremiad’s affirming character of the errand. Revealing their differing views on the content and function of the jeremiad, Bercovitch writes that, in their jeremiads,

*the Puritan clergy were not simply castigating. For all their catalogues of iniquities, the jeremiads attest to an unswerving faith in the errand . . . The most severe limitation of Miller’s view is that it excludes (or denigrates) this pervasive theme of affirmation and exultation. Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America’s first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. The essence of the sermon. . . is its unshakable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause. (1978, p.6)*

For Bercovitch, Miller stressed the dark side of the jeremiad, and, in such a view of the jeremiad’s message, missed how the cries of declension in fact revitalized the errand in a fusion of complaint and optimism. Yet, whereas Bercovitch sees the situation of crisis central to the power and continuation of the jeremiad, Miller sees it as a technical problem. Miller writes,

*the jeremiad could make sense out of existence as long as adversity was to be overcome, but in the moment of victory it was confused. It had always to say that the day of trouble may be ended. . . It flourished in dread of success; were reality ever to come up to its expectations, a new convention would be required, and this would presuppose a revolution in mind and in society. (1953, 33)*

In a way, considering the power a state of crisis gives to the jeremiad, Miller seems to make the same point Bercovitch makes. However, Miller differs from Bercovitch when he considers the achievement of success, which would entail a radical change in the topics of the sermons, as a problem to the continuation of the rhetoric. Bercovitch does not consider such a possibility since there are

always bad times and the Puritan rhetoric relies on a perpetual re-assertion of crisis to foster progress.

Here, we might discuss another difference between Miller and Bercovitch, which concerns how they judge the jeremiad's connection to the colonists' need of progress. In their varying interpretations of the jeremiad's relation to the errand, both Miller and Bercovitch make use of typology. For Bercovitch, the jeremiad affirmed the errand of the first-generation through typological allusions and necessitated continuity in their need for repentance on the way to the acquisition of the New Canaan. The jeremiads, for Bercovitch, advanced that "the future, though divinely assured, was never quite there" (1978, p.23). They aimed to direct "an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, and collectively toward the American city of God" (Bercovitch, 1978, p.9). Through lamenting their sins, the jeremiads reminded the colonists their divine mission. Although the Puritans came to the New World with the traditional form of the jeremiad that relied solely on lamentation, "from the start they sounded a different note" in their jeremiads: "theirs was a peculiar mission, they explained, for they were a 'peculiar people,' a company of Christians not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred historical design" (Bercovitch, 1978, p.8). Referring to the typological mission of the Puritans, Bercovitch writes, "their church-state was to be at once a model to the world of Reformed Christianity and a prefiguration of New Jerusalem to come" (1978, p.8). Bercovitch notes the differences between the traditional and Puritan jeremiad: "they revised the message of the jeremiad. Not that they minimized the threat of divine retribution; on the contrary. . . they qualified it in a way that turned threat into celebration. In their case, they believed, God's punishments were corrective, not destructive . . . their punishments confirmed their promise" (1978, p.8). The punishment of God, like His affliction, showed His mercy; the punishment and affliction were the "two kinds of 'providences'" that "opened out into the grand design of New England's errand into the wilderness" (Bercovitch, 1978, p.8). Therefore, through lamenting for their sins, jeremiads strengthened the belief that God had not abandoned them; as His chosen nation, they were to reform their sins, and fulfill their divine missions.

For Miller, the jeremiad was the ideal articulation of New England's tiny communities of the second- and third-generation in two ways, albeit paradoxically. First, the lamentation of the jeremiad fulfilled the need to remain faithful to their religious inheritance. Second, the jeremiad restated the Protestant ethic that was mistaken to corrupt piety. In fact, the Protestant ethic stressed that saint or pagan, anyone who works within "civil propriety," had a right to property. As John Cotton exemplified in his 1641 sermon, men should "devote themselves to making profits without succumbing to the temptations of profit" (Miller, 1953, p.41). Both civil life and religious life depended on faith

and the duties of Christians which included “devotion to business, accumulation of estates, acquisition of houses and lands” (Miller, 1953, p.52). Then, Miller seems to be making a similar point about the jeremiad that affirms progress: for Bercovitch, the first-generation affirmed their errand in the jeremiads by joining the sacred history with their secular mission; for Miller, the second- and third-generation, in a time of a so-called declension (it was in fact a time of socioeconomic change), were trying to find sacred excuses for their secular growth in commerce. Miller writes that the jeremiads were “profession of a society that knew it was doing wrong, but could not help itself, because the wrong thing was also the right thing” (1953, p. 51). The second-generation was either going to perish in the wilderness, or they were going to create a new errand to learn to commerce and not perish.

The paradox in Miller’s notion of the jeremiad is that the colonists were forced to trade to stay alive, and they honestly prospered in commerce, thereby satisfied the duties of Christians according to the Protestant work ethic. However, the fear was that business and riches would entail too much devotion to earthly matters and lessen piety, and would lead to luxury, the prime source of pride—which could arouse even in the most pious men. The declension of New England the second-generation lamented over was in fact the change the colonies were going through and their self-condemnations reminded the colonists to beware of the temptations of profit without condemning it. As Miller notes, “the people needed a method for paying tribute to their sense of guilt and yet for moving with the times. Realizing that they had betrayed their fathers, and were still betraying them, they paid the requisite homage in a ritual of humiliation, and by confessing iniquities regained at least a portion of self-respect” (Miller, 1953, p.51). For Bercovitch, in contrast, the jeremiad was the first-generation’s attestation to their unshakable faith in the errand and a celebration of God’s corrective punishments that confirmed their promise: jeremiads at once “sanctif[ied] an errand of entrepreneurs whose aim is religious, [and], legaliz[ed] an errand of saints whose aim is entrepreneurial” (Bercovitch, 1978, 22).

Before concluding, it is worth noting the how “the complex intellectual relationship between Miller and Bercovitch has been the topic of numerous essays. Many have portrayed Bercovitch as an antagonist of Miller’s or, worse, as a parricide” (Delfs, 1997, p.602). Dismissing such negative evaluation, in “*Anxieties of Influence: Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch*,” Arne Delfs suggests looking at Bercovitch as building on Miller’s ideas while going through what Harold Bloom calls the ‘anxiety of influence’— the young poet’s rather strained relation toward a predecessors, a futile effort to break from tradition. Rather than attacking Miller as some critics suggest, Delfs argues that Bercovitch’s “revisionist critique” of Miller proves to be “a sophisticated defense of Miller’s coherent view of Puritanism” (1997, p.602, 603).

In contrast, in a review of Bercovitch's *Puritan Origins and American Jeremiad*, Nina Baym argues that "he returns to the same documents that Miller used and, attempting to counter Miller's estrangement, produces precisely that reading of the Puritans against which Miller argues, turning them into the comfort-loving capitalists of the first Thanksgiving." (1979, 349-350). Similarly, in "*A People Blinded from Birth: American History according to Sacvan Bercovitch*," David Harlan takes Bercovitch to task for trying to "bury" Miller through "denial and negation" of his works on Puritans (1991, p.952). According to David Harlan, Perry Miller turned to Puritanism out of a personal existential quest and dissatisfaction with the period he lived in, and found "a redemptive discipline, a way of thinking against ourselves, even of transcending ourselves. . . . If it demanded harsh and unrelenting self-interrogation, it also knew the dangerous deceptions of self-reliance" (1991, p.949). Such a view of the past, of history, is the ultimate way to find meaning because Miller's example "provided a necessary corrective to the pleasing pretensions of American culture, and it gave us our best ideas about what we should value and how we should live" (Harlan, 1991, p.949). For Harlan, Bercovitch and other revisionary critics rewrite, recast American history, and they "no longer write out of a sense of gratitude for the past, especially when they come to the Puritans. They do not believe that American Puritanism has anything special or compelling to tell us about what we should value or how we should live" (1991, p.951).

One might argue, however, that the parallels Bercovitch draws between Puritan imagination and American ideology through the recurring rhetoric of the jeremiad continue to have resonances. For instance, Greil Marcus's *The Shape of Things to Come, Prophecy and the American Voice* (2006) could be seen as a continuation of the discovery of the nation through its symbols and imaginary structures as well as the jeremiad's warning tones. Bercovitch explains,

*What first attracted me to the study of Puritanism was my astonishment, as a Canadian immigrant, at learning about the prophetic errand of America. . . a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial boundaries -despite its bewildering mixture of race and genealogy -could believe in something called America's mission, and could invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest. (1979, 87).*

In his cultural studies book, Marcus seems to hear the same prophetic voice Bercovitch has heard. According to Marcus, there are three landmark speeches that created the American prophetic voice: John Winthrop's sermon on board the *Arbella*, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address (1865), and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address to the March on Washington (1963). As the nation's founding prophets, they told that America constantly needs to re-focus on its

exceptional mission, which is to fulfill its destiny as God's people, or risk total doom. They warned of ruin and damnation, of the danger America will face from within, and the urgency of renewing "the nation by leading it to finally keep the promises it had broken" (Marcus, 2006, p.31). Their prophecies "judge[d] the nation, call[ed] on each member to judge it in turn" (p. 34): a persistent sense of crisis in the service of sustaining "the metaphysically perfect idea" (p.33) of America by reminding citizens of the promises they have made both to themselves and God to create the nation. By constantly telling how these promises are betrayed, these figures act like prophets that warn of dangers and invite citizens to self-interrogation, self-judgment; they renew the promises, remind the hope and the ideals America stands for. One thinks of Barack Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention which sounds like yet another prophetic voice, another jeremiad, attesting to the continuation of the imaginary structure Bercovitch pointed out. "The American promise has been threatened once more" warned Obama, "this moment - this election - is our chance to keep, in the 21st century, the American promise alive. . . it is time for us to change America" (2008) In a prophetic manner, Obama told that "we must pledge once more to march into the future," a future that weaves together the fulfillment of promises made in the past and the betrayals of the present; crisis and progress; despair and hope.

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