

# LAYING CLAIM TO A CHRISTIAN AMERICA: THE RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF THE *LIGHT AND THE GLORY* TRILOGY

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines *The Light and the Glory*, *From Sea to Shining Sea*, and *Sounding Forth the Trumpet*—a trilogy of historical narratives written by Peter Marshall and David Manuel—to elucidate their rhetorical structures. Special attention is given to the way the narratives adhere to the structure of the American jeremiad as defined by Sacvan Bercovitch and how they are informed by what Nicholas Guyatt calls “apocalyptic providentialism.” Revealing the narrative structures allows us to see how the authors merge God’s salvation history with the secular history of the United States and, thereby, treat American history as sacred. By understanding historical narratives such as the ones constructed by Marshall and Manuel, we can better understand how a large portion of the United States population understands themselves and their nation’s role in history.

Keywords: American Exceptionalism, Christian America, Christian Right

## INTRODUCTION

The question of American exceptionalism has been a part of American discourse since at least 1782 when J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur famously asked, “What is an American?” and suggested that somehow arriving within the borders of the new nation transformed the newcomer into a new person. The idea of American exceptionalism appears in many guises. It fueled official government policies such as Manifest Destiny and American relations with the Philippines. As historian David Noble in *The End of American History* (1985) has demonstrated, the claim controlled the narratives of some of the nation’s most distinguished historians in the nineteenth and more than half of the twentieth century. And in some form or another, the discourse of America’s exceptional identity can be found in the speeches of presidents as otherwise diverse as John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barak Obama. The political implications of the discourse continue to be analyzed by historians, sociologists, and political scientists and while the discourse seems to be fading at times, it always seems to reemerge.

American Protestants have been especially drawn to the discourse and have added a particular theological dimension to the conversation. The conviction that the American nation-state has a particular relationship with the God of Abraham, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, was a staple of the public culture of the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Historian Mark Noll calls Christians who engaged in the rhetoric “proprietary Protestants”—“those groups who saw themselves as the protectors of an American Christian heritage and the builders of a distinctly Protestant society” (1992, 287). The decline of Protestant cultural influence and political engagement in the twentieth century led David Moberg, in his landmark study *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern* (1977), to document the growing political disengagement of evangelical Christians in the light of their emphasis on personal evangelism. Even as scholars were absorbing Moberg’s analysis, evangelical Christians were reversing course again, and re-engaging with American politics, albeit with a different agenda than their predecessors. That political engagement, begun in the late seventies, shows no signs of waning.

Theologically informed claims of American exceptionalism have been central to the work of these politically engaged evangelical Christians—commonly called the Christian Right—who are motivated by a belief that America is in some way a Christian nation that has lost its way and must be called back to its Christian identity if it is to thrive and play the role in history God has given it. Central to the task of motivating Christians for political engagement was a telling of American history as the history of a Christian nation.

“The American Bicentennial,” John Fea has written, “offered an ideal moment for the Christian Right to put forward a revisionist narrative of the founding of the United States that placed God at the center” (2011, 55). One of the most enduring narratives begun in the wake of the Bicentennial is contained in a trilogy by Peter Marshall and David Manuel. Starting in 1977, Marshall and Manuel began what few other American evangelicals have attempted—an extended providential narrative arguing that American history is best understood as a part of God’s providential history, that (as they so often assert in the three volumes) God has a plan for America. *The Light and the Glory* (1977), *From Sea to Shining Sea* (1986), and *Sounding Forth the Trumpet* (1997) can be seen as representative examples

of providential American history: they share a set of common assumptions with other texts in the genre,<sup>1</sup> draw on typical historical source material, and have remained incredibly popular—writing in 2011, Fea reports that the first book in the trilogy “has sold close to one million copies, and for many evangelicals it is the only history book they have ever read. Though it was first published over thirty years ago, *The Light and the Glory* continues to be a fixture on the bookshelves of American evangelicals” (2011, 58). Indeed, in recent years new, revised, and repackaged editions have been released.

The political activity of the Christian Right has been studied extensively in books such as *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* by Michael Lienesch (1993). Rather than duplicating that work, this essay examines the rhetorical forms used in the trilogy written by Marshall and Manuel that have provided a rationale for the political involvement of evangelical Christians through the twists and turns of the American political scene since the late seventies. Their close adherence to the rhetorical structure identified as the American jeremiad provides them with the form needed for a narrative in the long tradition of theologically informed American exceptionalism. They imagine a national identity formed, not by historical circumstances, but by the promises of God, promises so certain that no historical developments can alter them. In addition, the apocalyptic providentialism that informs their narrative allows them to condone and at times even embrace tremendous violence without feeling a responsibility for that violence.

An elucidation of two rhetorical forms—the jeremiad as defined by Sacvan Bercovitch in his influential *American Jeremiad* (1978) and what Nicholas Guyatt calls apocalyptic providentialism in *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (2007)—can help explain both why the works reached their original audience and why they have remained popular and influential among millions of evangelical Christians in America.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the work of David Barton and his Wallbuilders.com website, Rus Walton. *One Nation Under God*. 1975. Washington: Third Century, and Richard G. Lee, ed. *The American Patriot's Bible*. 2009. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

## THE RHETORICAL FORM OF THE JEREMIAD

Numerous studies of the various forms of American exceptionalism have relied upon the groundbreaking scholarship of Sacvan Bercovitch. For those making the argument that the United States is an exceptional nation, the jeremiad seems an inescapable form; scholars, therefore, have looked for evidence of the rhetorical structure in narratives of exceptionalism. Like others before them, Marshall and Manuel employ the rhetorical structure throughout their trilogy.

Bercovitch, studying Puritan election day sermons, found a three-part rhetorical structure. The minister would proclaim the promise by reminding the people they were chosen by God for a covenantal relationship and did not act merely by their own volition. The declaration of the promise was followed by the articulation of declension, of a moral falling away from the life they should be living as a community in covenant with God. In this section of the sermons, the preacher provided examples of the society's moral failures. The jeremiad concluded with a prophecy assuring the people that they were not abandoned by God, that if they would change their behavior, they would once again embody the promises of God. Bercovitch argues that the articulation of the promise is so strong that no articulation of declension leads to the questioning of the covenant. In this sense, the structure is liminal—in its beginning, we find its ending.

According to Bercovitch, the self-understanding evident in the jeremiad helped establish social discipline and justify the expansion of the colony. With a mission to fulfill, the people could be called to task for behaviors seen as falling short of God's expectations for them. The jeremiad also supported a progressive ideology that built a self-understanding of the people as moving toward a telos, toward the fulfillment of history.

Bercovitch also argues that the Puritan jeremiad eventually became a national, American jeremiad. National leaders modified the nature of the promise by redefining the qualities of the "city upon a hill" but maintained the jeremiad's basic rhetorical structure. Where John Winthrop and the early Puritans saw themselves as providing an example of a truly Christian community for the Church of England to follow, later Americans would claim that political liberty and free enterprise were the key elements of the "city" and that

the witness was meant for other nations to observe. David Noble has argued that the form of the jeremiad, built on the promise that the United States is an exceptional nation whose history is distinct from the history of other bourgeois nation-states, controlled the writing of American academic historians throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth (1985). Each generation altered the definition of the promise but maintained the jeremiad's rhetorical structure.

#### THE TRILOGY AS AN AMERICAN JEREMIAD

Fea has noted that writers of providential history such as Marshall and Manuel adopt a prophetic self-understanding, believing the historian "is not unlike the Old Testament prophets who reminded Israel of God's history of faithfulness to them in the hopes that the people might turn to God and repent of their sins in the present and the future." Such writers "fuse the stories they tell about the American past with this kind of prophetic insight" (2011, 62). One way to accomplish this is to borrow the rhetorical structure the Puritans adapted from the Hebrew prophets, a practice in evidence throughout the trilogy. Before writing about various historical figures, they cast their own work in the form of a jeremiad.

Marshall and Manuel begin their first volume by reminding their readers of their understanding of the promise of America. Until the early Sixties, they claim, America was viewed by people all over the world as a model society, that the name "America" "by itself would evoke a feeling of warmth" and that "the response of the majority of people on earth was deeply positive." They claim that, "Abroad, we were the free world's policeman; an encouraging older brother to those young nations struggling to achieve democracy; and the hope of all people still in bondage." By echoing the words of Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity," they provide an example of how a Puritan jeremiad can be adapted for the nation. Winthrop wrote that the eyes of the entire world were on the Puritans of New England. Marshall and Manuel argue that until the mid-fifties, this was true not for a small community of Puritans but for the American nation-state itself. The post-World War II economic prosperity that fostered the expansion of suburban life and promoted the nuclear

family as an ideal is presented as the fulfillment of the American Dream and the promise of America. “In a word, *optimism* summed up America. The American Dream was about to come true” (1977, 13). Writing from the mid-seventies, Marshall and Manuel see declension all around them threatening the promise of the American Dream on the brink of its fulfillment. They write, “And then, with a suddenness that is still bewildering, everything went out of balance” (1977, 13).

In spite of what they see as more than a decade of chaos, Marshall and Manuel hold to a basic assumption about American life. As they did their research, their “basic presupposition—that God had a definite and extremely demanding plan for America—was confirmed, albeit in a number of surprising ways.” The declension they see in American society has not altered their belief in the promises of God for America. Their overarching American exceptionalism echoes Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*: “In truth, this book is not intended to be a history textbook, but rather a search for the hand of God in the different periods of our nation’s beginnings” (1977, 22).

In order to both fully articulate God’s promise to America and emphasize what is at stake if America does not return to its Christian roots, Marshall and Manuel identify four “veins” of America’s identity all reflecting an aspect of God’s promise to the nation. “*First, God had put a specific ‘call’ on this country and the people who were to inhabit it*” (1977, 22; emphasis in original unless noted). God influenced the decisions made by people all over the world to immigrate, not only during the colonial period, but all through the history of the nation. God’s involvement was, and presumably continues to be crucial because “God was making His most significant attempt since ancient Israel to create a new Israel” (1977, 22-3).

The second aspect of the call of God on America illustrates Bercovitch’s claim that the jeremiad can be used as a tool for social control—the promise requires obedience. Marshall and Manuel echo this insight: “*Second, this call was to be worked out in terms of the settlers’ covenant with God, and with each other*” (1977, 23). A covenantal tradition is central to American social life and, therefore, an absolute marker of identity. Faltering

social relations between Americans threaten to bring the judgment of God down on the nation as a whole.

“God did keep His end of the bargain (which is the third major theme), and He did so on both an individual and a corporate basis” (1977, 24). This third theme carries with it two intriguing elements. Firstly, although Marshall and Manuel do not address other nations, their implied theology would suggest that God deals with other nations corporately as well. Other evangelical Christian works, both before and after *The Light and the Glory* (especially prophecy belief narratives such as those of Hal Lindsey) explicitly identify a national role for other nations. Secondly, Marshall and Manuel seem to place the nation-state in the position of the Christian church. The existing corporate covenant is with the American nation-state rather than (or perhaps in addition to) with the Christian church. This theme will be developed more fully when we turn to the use of apocalyptic providentialism in the trilogy.

As they conclude their statement of God’s promise to America, they proclaim, “And so, this was the final major theme we found: that when a group of people, no matter how small or ordinary, was willing to die out to their selfish desires, *the life which came out of that death was immeasurable, and continued to affect lives far into the future*” (1977, 26). Because the promise is secure and permanent, the declension, no matter how severe, is not the last word.

Exemplifying how the jeremiad structure can be adapted to national rhetoric, Marshall and Manuel open their third volume, *Sounding Forth the Trumpet*, by arguing that the sense of promise articulated by the early Puritans was still in place for the signers of the Declaration of Independence: “They sensed that He had a plan for this country, just as He has a plan for each individual’s life, and that He had shown them how to construct a free, representative Government that would enable them to preserve and maintain a moral society with liberty and justice for all” (1997, 11). The language of “liberty and justice for all,” would, of course, be wholly foreign to the Puritans’ sense of God’s promise. For Marshall and Manuel, however, the new language is a different expression of the same promise of an

exceptional, even sacred, America set apart for a chosen people called to fulfill a sacred destiny.

Generations of Christian America proponents have cited the influence of the Puritans on an American identity. Marshall and Manuel, as noted by Lienesch, do the same (1993, 142); however, they also offer a significant variation on the jeremiad by pushing God's promise to America all the way back to Columbus, a key character in their narrative. Repeatedly reminding their readers that "Christopher" means "Christ bearer" and drawing on Columbus's study of biblical prophecy later in his life, Marshall and Manuel claim for the explorer divine inspiration: "He had long been convinced that God had given him a special, almost mystical mission: to carry the Light of Christ into the darkness of undiscovered heathen lands, and to bring the inhabitants of those lands to the holy faith of Christianity" (1977, 31). This rhetorical move allows their largely evangelical Christian readers to claim as their own the Catholic tradition embodied in some of the earliest European explorers. By pushing the idea of a Promised Land back into the fifteenth century, Marshall and Manuel create a remarkable sense of continuity between the Catholic explorers and the later English settlers. Regardless of their differences, both were used by God to "raise the curtain" and establish American space and American time as sacred because it is a crucial part of God's providential, saving work in the world. By radically reimagining the work of Columbus, their narrative moves close to what Annette Kolodny calls a fiction of American prehistory (2003).

But to make their grand claim about the promise of America, Marshall and Manuel must account for the gap between Columbus and seventeenth-century Pilgrims and Puritans. As they put it, "Here we were faced with one of our first real dilemmas. If God had truly been working His purpose out for America to be what the first Puritans would call the New Israel, then how could He have let everything in the New World go to seed so badly for a whole century?" (1977, 67). In a move that would surely have shocked the Puritans, the authors celebrate the work of the Catholic missionaries of the sixteenth century. In the conflict between the savage indigenous people and the money-loving conquistadors, only the Catholic missionaries were working to further the "true" work of

Columbus to introduce the Gospel to the “New World” and prepare the way for the Pilgrims and Puritans.

Pushing the promise back to the time of Columbus and the Catholic missionaries leads them to see evidence of declension in the era of exploration as well. No evidence of declension is too strong to shake Marshall and Manuel’s sense of God’s divine call on the life of Columbus. Any failures on Columbus’s part—and they acknowledge many—can be seen as tests sent by God to strengthen his resolve and faithfulness. The lure of riches provides one of the earliest temptations. Satan is said to rule over the western hemisphere unchallenged prior to the arrival of Columbus, but the “Light of Christ” had established a “beachhead.” In response Satan “chose the one instrument which almost never failed: the love of money” (1977, 42).<sup>2</sup>

In this episode we see a paradox that runs through the trilogy: The abundance of natural resources in the Western Hemisphere is evidence of God’s blessing and providential plans. Yet the lure of greed and the desire for wealth constitutes a major temptation for God’s Chosen People. Indeed, present in the earliest “discovery” of the Promised Land, greed becomes the foundational temptation.

In their final comment on the career of Columbus, Marshall and Manuel imagine another scene. Having established Columbus as the “Christ-bearer” charged with lifting the veil from the Promised Land, they cannot allow him to die a failure. Consequently, Marshall and Manuel imagine a death scene for the explorer during which he confesses his failure—admits he allowed other interests to corrupt his holy task of opening the Promised Land and bringing the Gospel to the Native Americans—is absolved by God and dies. Following the jeremiad structure, the failures of Columbus’ life are not the last word. He too receives the prophetic promise that his work has not been in vain. God’s promises will be fulfilled.

Having established the basic rhetorical structure of the trilogy, Marshall and Manuel repeat the pattern as they examine later historic events. Their demonstration of the

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<sup>2</sup>The corruption of greed will play a crucial role in another exceptionalist narrative of American prehistory, *The Book of Mormon*.

transition between an earlier Puritan jeremiad and a national jeremiad is of particular interest.

Marshall and Manuel see the Great Awakening as central to the drive for independence and the self-understanding of people in the American nation-state. The Great Awakening is viewed as a political as well as a religious revival: “Through the almost universal, almost simultaneous experience of the Great Awakening, we became aware of ourselves as a *nation*, a body of believers which had a national identity as a people chosen by God for a specific purpose: to be not just ‘a city upon a hill,’ but a veritable citadel of Light in a darkened world” (1977, 251). In the Great Awakening, they see the vehicle by which Winthrop’s vision of a covenantal community of Christians became the vision for the founding of a nation-state. While Bercovitch would posit the transition as a move from a Christian vision to a secular, national vision, Marshall and Manuel see a continuance of the vision from a small Christian community to a Christian nation. The American jeremiad is characterized as a continuation of the Puritan jeremiad rather than a break with it.

In their treatment of the Great Awakening, Marshall and Manuel place evangelical Christians at the center of the culture. If the culture of the mid-twentieth century, with which Marshall and Manuel are at odds, does not recognize the centrality of evangelical Christians, it is because that culture has strayed from truly American ideals, the most important of which is what they call “the Covenant Way of life.” Straying from this ideal will become a major expression of the declension threatening the promise of America.

Because a desire for the Covenant Way of life is part of the promise of God, its absence signals declension; however, the promise cannot be finally lost. “It is a hunger so deeply engrained in the American national psyche that it can never die, although it can go fast asleep and lie dormant for years. God reawakened that desire in the 1740s—and what He has awakened once, He can reawaken again” (Marshall and Manuel 1977, 240). The call for reform completes the jeremiad structure. If the declension is addressed, the nation will finally achieve its destiny. Thus, the providential history includes a prophetic call to renewed faithfulness.

Predictably, the major cultural crisis Marshall and Manuel deal with after the founding of the nation is the problem of slavery. Pulling back from the broad sweep of *The Light and the Glory*, each of their following volumes deals with a much more limited time span. *From Sea to Shining Sea* deals with the years 1787-1837, while *Sounding Forth the Trumpet* deals with 1837-1860. The shorter time frames disincline them from indulging the grand rhetorical flourishes that mark their first volume. What they retain is a conviction of America's exceptional status, a belief in the overwhelming activity of God in historical events, and a focus on the centrality of religious revivals in American historical developments. These themes can be found as they turn their attention to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the build-up to the Civil War.

The existence of slavery presents the major declension in the history of the United States. "How could things have come to such a pass?" Marshall and Manuel ask. Unwilling to accept a form of the Southern rationale for slavery that defended the institution by claiming Africans were being introduced to civilization and Christian faith, Marshall and Manuel are equally unwilling to allow the acceptance of slavery to uproot their entrenched American exceptionalism. So the troubling question remains: "If God did have a plan for America, if He had brought the First Comers [the Puritans] here and set before them a table in the wilderness, if He had lifted them up as a city on a hill for the whole world to see—how had the weed of slavery become so deep-rooted?" (1997, 296-7). They find the cause of the declension in national disobedience checked only by another wave of religious revivals.

In addition, the declension of slavery is seen as offset by an ever-expanding freedom and liberty made possible by Western expansion and informed by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. While writing about the opening of California to American settlers, they reveal the theology behind their historical interpretation and display a continuing inclination to hallow American space. "Before God," western settlers "had an obligation to keep the portion of North America that He intended them to have free from foreign entanglements." If they failed, "the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who would come thirsting for freedom in perhaps the only land left on earth where true freedom could be found" would find no home (1997, 163). Illustrating the rhetorical power of the jeremiad, Marshall and

Manuel lay claim to California—especially in the name of protecting the land from the corruption of the Old World represented by European and Russian colonial interests. The land had to come into the Union as land free from slavery in order to make the United States what it was meant to be. As a land of liberty, it could welcome immigrants from the Old World in the confidence that they could be socialized into a life of freedom and American values. Finally, the jeremiad structure allows for Marshall and Manuel to embrace American history as a history moving towards a telos. The telos is both temporal (a land of ever-increasing liberty and freedom) and eternal (a land available for God to work out his providential plans for worldwide evangelization). The exceptional status of the United States is obvious for Marshall and Manuel when they contrast the United States with Mexico and consider what might have happened to California.

Marshall and Manuel begin their section on Mexico and its relation to the United States by reflecting on the providence of God and the discovery of gold. The Gold Rush is cast as part of God's promise to America. "When one considers the discovery of gold in California in terms of God's timetable for America, one is struck once again by His incredible timing. Had the discovery come three years earlier, when California was still the property of Mexico and there was no war to indicate the situation might ever change, it would have drawn a preponderance of Mexicans north, rather than Americans west" (1997, 255). This would have undercut God's plan for America, for the Mexican nation-state, while it may have had some democratic elements, was not a democracy based on "Judeo-Christian faith." Catholic missionaries may have had a role to play in the sixteenth century exploration of what was to become the United States, but Catholic Christianity apparently could not provide the basis for a vibrant Christian nation. While the Mexican nation might have positive attributes, it is not a nation of promise. "For unlike young America, young Mexico did not have a strong, dynamic Christianity at its core, and perhaps the greatest lesson of history is that, without a durable Judeo-Christian faith to establish, nurture, and regenerate corporate moral standards, no democracy can last" (Marshall and Manuel 1986, 257). All historical analysis flows from the promise of a chosen land at the heart of the jeremiad structure.

The rhetorical structure of the American jeremiad precedes and undergirds the analysis of Marshall and Manuel. The failures of Columbus and the Puritans are read as a temporary declension among God's people who will eventually reawaken to the promises of God and return to their covenantal relationship. No failure is too great to lead the authors to question the promise of God. What holds true for the Puritans holds true for the trilogy's readers. Regardless of the chaos present in American society in the late twentieth century, God's promise is certain: If the chosen American people will return to God, they will again inhabit the promises of God in a chosen land. American readers of the trilogy can take comfort in knowing their nation has not been abandoned by God (for the promise is still in place) and receive a call to action (for their nation must be called back to righteousness if the promises of God are to be fulfilled).

#### THE RHETORICAL FORM OF APOCALYPTIC PROVIDENTIALISM

Marshall and Manuel's trilogy employs a second rhetorical form, apocalyptic providentialism, as the term is used by Nicholas Guyatt. In the introduction to his study of providential historical thought in Britain and its American colonies, Guyatt distinguishes between three types of national providentialism. While proponents of "judicial providentialism" argue that God judges nations according to their actions in this world with no implications for the age to come, advocates of "historical providentialism" believe that God prepares particular nations to complete a role in history. Advocates of the third strand, "apocalyptic providentialism," claim that God prepares nations for their roles and that Christian scripture holds the key to understanding the roles various nations are destined to play (2007, 85). While Marshall and Manuel rarely dwell on matters of biblical interpretation, their sense of a providential destiny for the United States infuses their work from start to finish with apocalyptic providentialism.

The trilogy exhibits three aspects of apocalyptic providentialism worthy of closer examination. The first envisions history as part of a cosmic battle between good and evil, in this case between God and Satan. The second understands the actions of a righteous nation as foreordained by God. This leads to the third aspect: violence done in a righteous

cause is finally beyond question because it is part of the inscrutable will of God leading to what Robert Jewett has termed “cool zealotry.”

#### THE TRILOGY AS A WORK OF APOCALYPTIC PROVIDENTIALISM

History as cosmic battle is best illustrated when the trilogy addresses the Salem Witchcraft trials, an episode Marshall and Manuel claim is central to the history of the United States even though it occurred decades before the nation’s founding. “The Bible makes it clear,” they write, “that there are only two sources of supernatural power: God and Satan. And in the spiritual realm, as in geopolitics, there is no such thing as a power vacuum: where Light reigns, darkness is banished. But when Light dims, the shades of night gather in the wings, waiting” (1977, 235). At Salem, “Satan would lose a concentrated attack of demonic spirits which in virulence has never been equaled in American history, before or since” (1977, 234-5). Given the relatively small number of deaths associated with the trials compared to events such as labor riots or anti-war protests (not to mention the Civil War), Marshall and Manuel’s claim about the demonic aspect of the trials seems strange; it does, however, make sense as a prime example of history as a cosmic battlefield.

The treatment of the Revolutionary War, while conveyed in less intense prose, also displays their vision of history as a cosmic battle. Citing the social disruptions of the Sixties and early Seventies as evidence of a moral decline in the United States, Marshall and Manuel demonstrate a high regard for social order. Consequently, the American Revolution poses a dilemma. Should not the colonists have honored the King of England and submitted to his authority? As they begin to examine the Revolutionary War, they claim divine authority for their interpretation. They write: “[T]he Holy Spirit went on to show us why America *had* to resist—why, for them to do anything less would have been the gravest disobedience. This part of the revelation began with a verse of Scripture coming to Peter [Marshall]’s mind, which when he looked it up, was Galatians 5:1, and which proved to be the key to all that followed: ‘For freedom, Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’” (1977, 254). Stopping short of identifying England

as an agent of Satan, they place the rebellious colonists as agents of God acting in history in their rebellion against England.

Marshall and Manuel buttress their belief that American independence was the absolute will of God by citing evidence of God's intervention on behalf of the colonists: "And yet, if it *was* God's will for America to break forcibly with her mother country, then there should be ample evidence of His not only having supported her endeavors, but also His having directly intervened on her behalf—as dramatically and conclusively as He did in the days of the Old Testament" (1977, 270). Having embraced the promise of American freedom as a promise given from God, they predictably find the evidence to confirm their beliefs.

Marshall and Manuel even claim that God repeatedly altered the weather to further the cause of the colonists. When Henry Knox needed to bring artillery from Ticonderoga to Cambridge, he decided to use sleds. "And Divine Providence provided the necessary snow." And when George Washington was moving troops from Brooklyn to Manhattan by boat, God sent a thick fog to hide the soldiers from the British. Marshall and Manuel even find the providence of God at work when nothing happens. "But the greatest evidence of how much the grace of God was involved was the fact that nothing went wrong. No chance slip of the tongue, no wandering Tory passerby, no lowing ox or breaking cart spoiled the perfect surprise" (1977, 298, 315, 299). These examples are evidence of the extreme view advocated by Marshall and Manuel regarding God's intervention in the events of American history. As Fea has noted, in passages such as this in providential histories, "The lesson learned from this event was an obvious one: God had intervened on behalf of the American army. Washington may have suffered a defeat at Long Island, but God, through the storm, had saved the Continental Army" (2011, 66). In the cosmic battle between the only two sources of power in the universe, the United States is unquestionably aligned with the righteous actions of God.

Fea summarizes histories written in the vein of apocalyptic providentialism well: "The specific study of American history illuminates best God's true plan for the ages. The history of the United States is more important than any other era or region on the globe,

save that of ancient Israel.” For those embracing this providential view, God, having chosen America as the home of a new Israel, “has ever since reserved for it a special place in his design for his creation. The growth of the United States as a twentieth-century superpower and the world’s great defender of democracy and freedom confirm this assertion” (2011, 60-61). Events in American history are foreordained, linked as they are to the nation’s role in God’s providential work. The nations of Europe were places of corruption, befouled by fallen human institutions; the western hemisphere was not. Thus, according to Marshall and Manuel, America became “obviously the right place—virginal, wild, as yet untainted by the godless corruption that had befouled the known world and peopled with savage heathen who had never heard the Gospel and whose hearts therefore were not hardened to it.” This is, on the one hand, a call to evangelize Native Americans. But they also must be conquered. “To be sure, this heathen would be used by Satan; the New World had yet to be won from him;” “But if God was with them,” Marshall and Manuel write of the Puritans, “all the powers of hell could not prevail against them” (1977, 153).

Because the United States is characterized as a righteous nation whose thriving is foreordained, its actions, by definition, are righteous. But this creates an interpretive problem: How are we to understand and even condone violent actions? The displacement of Native Americans provides one of the great challenges to the trilogy’s interpretation of history. While Marshall and Manuel never celebrate the harsh treatment of the native population, they consistently present it as necessary for God’s ultimate plan.

Fusing the violence done by agents of the nation-state with the providence of God controls how the authors present that violence. They begin by claiming that Americans of European descent did not bring violence to the world of Native Americans but merely replaced one expression of it with another. “The lives of these Indians,” they write, “were an unending tableau of fear and hatred of other tribes, and a dawn-to-dusk struggle for survival” (Marshall and Manuel 1977, 76).

The trilogy’s narrative can be compared to others written by what Australian scholar Alan Lawson calls “settler cultures”, such as the dominant culture of Australia where the conquerors now exist side by side with members of a supplanted indigenous population.

Lawson finds that, in Australian culture, narratives persist that argue the violence of the invading culture “is a minor part of a longer history of violent dispossession founded by indigenous peoples themselves” (2000, 20). Taken together with its apocalyptic providentialism, the trilogy’s settler culture perspective helps explain the claims of pre-existing violence among the indigenous population.

Even when the violence is seen as pre-dating European settlement, Native Americans pose a greater rhetorical problem than nearly anything else in the history Marshall and Manuel strive to relate. For the treatment of Native Americans creates a theological problem. If the Europeans were called to convert indigenous people to Christian faith, why were so many confrontations violent? Exhibiting the third aspect of apocalyptic providentialism, the trilogy downplays the violence as necessary in the accomplishment of God’s greater good.

Marshall and Manuel ask the rhetorical question, “Did God want the Indians pushed off their hunting grounds and herded into reservations?” Considering the suffering resulting from the displacement, the obvious answer would seem to be no, but Marshall and Manuel cannot embrace this perspective without acknowledging moral failure by the righteous nation-state. Consequently, they back away from the confidence they exhibit elsewhere regarding God’s plan for America: “These were not easy questions to answer, and only an arrogant fool would claim to be sure of knowing God’s complete plan and intent.” Nevertheless, they do assert confidence in knowing that God wishes all to be saved thereby suggesting that the reservation system may have been part of God’s long-range plan to bring salvation to the indigenous population. They close the discussion of the treatment of Native Americans by reminding readers of God’s sovereignty. “In America the system was not working for the black man, and it was not working for the red man, either. But one day it would; God was on His throne. It might take far longer than it should have and far longer than some would like, but one day His will would prevail” (1997, 169). Their embrace of apocalyptic providentialism forbids them from calling the actions of God’s agent in history into question, yet they are uncomfortable fully justifying the violence. Thus, they fall back to the inscrutable will of God.

The scholarship of Robert Jewett, especially his concept of cool zealotry, can help explain the position taken by the trilogy regarding violence and elucidate why the approach resonates with evangelical Christian readers. “Cool zeal,” according to Jewett, suggests “that faithfulness to the righteous cause provides the sole model for responsibility” (1984, 179). Seen through the lens of cool zealotry, the founders of the American nation-state had only two choices. They could either disobey God and not fight a war with England, or they could obey God. Naturally, if they chose to obey God, God and not the colonists was ultimately responsible for the violence both of the war itself and the eventual expansion of the American nation made possible by independence. This basic stance toward violence pervades the trilogy. Time after time, violence is condoned as essential to the accomplishment of God’s ultimate plan for America.

## CONCLUSION

In their long narrative of the history of America from Columbus to the eve of the Civil War, Marshall and Manuel embrace a narrative of national promise, declension, and the repentance that repeatedly renews the promise. Along the way, the violence done by the righteous nation is presented as part of God’s great plan for salvation. But, from the very beginning of their first volume, they present a message to their contemporaries. Believing God’s promise of a national covenant with the United States is still intact—yet seeing evidence of declension everywhere they look—they strive to call their readers to the kind of revival they believe will renew the covenantal relationship with God and avoid national catastrophe. Nowhere is their commitment to the structure of an American jeremiad more in evidence than when they are addressing their contemporary audience with the peril they perceive.

Despite all of the evidence of declension they see around them, Marshall and Manuel, late in the first volume, reaffirm that the United States is a land of promise. In the midst of writing their book, they have found “that despite the spiritual decline, God made certain that those same covenant promises which He made to our forefathers when He brought them here, would always be a viable possibility in the United States of America.”

Writing on behalf of their fellow citizens they assert, “we Americans would still be able to avail ourselves of those promises, and re-enter a covenant relationship with Him *as a nation*” (1977, 336). The promise has been affirmed, but evidence of declension remains. After reviewing the revivals of 1858 in their history of the coming of the Civil War, Marshall and Manuel write, “One thing more: It has been said that if we don’t learn from our history, we will be condemned to repeat it. In spirit America in 1998 is so like America in 1858 that the overtones are chilling.” In the eyes of the Supreme Court in 1858, they report, slaves had no rights. They draw the parallel to the denial of rights to the unborn in legalized abortion: “But abortion is no more a part of God’s plan for America than slavery was, and those who favor it today are as deliberately blind to evil as those who favored slavery in 1858” (1997, 12). In spite of the declension, voices of renewal are present in the culture. Marshall and Manuel heard the voices in 1986 but surely would also find them in 1997 and today. “Today prophetic voices can again be heard, warning of personal and social evils, which if left unrepented of, will bring a fresh judgment of God upon our beloved land” (1986, 404). At the end of their third volume, they give full voice to the evidence of the declension they perceive:

Now, as the century draws to a close, men and women of vision are again seeing signs and wonders, indicating that God’s judgment, so long deferred, is close at hand. In the twelve years since we penned *From Sea to Shining Sea*, the moral standards of our society have deteriorated precipitously. The litany is all too familiar—soaring illegitimacy, divorce, and drug abuse. A blight of pornography has seeped into every corner of society. And the monstrous slaughter of the innocent unborn continues unabashed. (1997, 521)

Just as serious for Marshall and Manuel, Christians in America tolerate these evils. “In the face of such callous indifference,” they write, “God could not bless us indefinitely and now the grace has begun to lift” (1977, 354). What they sensed in 1977 persisted throughout the trilogy.

True to the structure of the jeremiad, in spite of the great declension they see around them, Marshall and Manuel declare it is not too late to renew the national covenant. “Once again,” Marshall and Manuel write late in their second volume, “America stands, like Nineveh, at the crossroads of mercy and judgment. If we Christians will hear and heed in

time, God's plan for America will yet be fulfilled. And He will crown her good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea" (1986, 406). In this rhetorical formation of the prophetic call of a renewed covenant, Marshall and Manuel once again place evangelical Christians at the center of the culture and the destiny of the United States. Although the language of the volume is nationalistic from start to finish, the nation can only be renewed by those Christians who both recognize the nation's destiny and are willing to intervene. In Marshall and Manuel's construction, the land can only be healed if its true center, a modern incarnation of "proprietary Protestants," will recognize its identity and call their fellow citizens to fulfill its calling. If the evangelical Christians at the center of American culture will recognize their position, overcome their malaise, and repent on behalf of the nation-state, a crisis may be averted. "Hopefully it will reverse our downward slide into a new Dark Age. Even if it does not, it will prepare us for what we must go through" (Marshall and Manuel 1997, 12).

The trilogy attempts to do prodigious rhetorical work. To call the nation back to its true center, they must call Christians to recognize and embrace their identity as the unacknowledged leaders of the nation-state. The narratives that result from this call are part nostalgia—an earlier, more pristine culture is celebrated—and part combative—a crusade is needed for Christians to once again assume their rightful place in the culture. Throughout, the most crucial modes of identity are those of the individual believer obedient to Christ and the Christian citizen upon whose faithfulness the health of the nation-state rests. The level of violence needed to achieve God's plan is undetermined, but that violence can always be condoned, can always be seen as necessary, if it functions to achieve God's purposes in history.

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