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THE PILGRIMS: THE UNTOLD STORY

The only authentic, true history of the Pilgrims who came to New England in 1620 was penned by their governor of 30 years, William Bradford. His priceless, handwritten history of Plymouth Plantation was lost and thought destroyed in the American Revolution. Amazingly, a copy was found many years later in a London library and returned to Massachusetts with great fanfare. Senator George Hoar from Massachusetts spoke that day saying that the Bradford history is, “the most precious manuscript on earth since the story of Bethlehem. This is the only authentic history of ... the most important political transaction that has ever taken place on the face of the earth....”¹ The following is a brief summary of their incredible story.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, in the late 16th century, a quiet revolution was taking root in minds and hearts of the people of England. For the first time in history everyday people were reading and studying the Scriptures in their own language. Bibles were open on the counters of shops and its words discussed in the marketplace and in the streets. Groups gathered in countless cottages to listen to readings from the newly translated and available sacred text. The people began to question the arbitrary laws of the kings, queens and prelates who enforced their self-serving religion on them at the point of a sword.

Many of these newly awakened citizens wished that England would return to the freedoms and rights of the people as revealed in Scripture. The finest of these thinkers were centered at Cambridge University and were part of a “mighty brain trust” which was “one of the most intellectually equipped in history.”²

At Cambridge University, two of the future leaders of the Pilgrims became a part of this brain trust. John Robinson, who became the scholarly mentor/pastor of the Pilgrims, excelled at Cambridge. After eleven years he became the Dean of Corpus Christi college. William Brewster, after studying at Cambridge, accepted a position as assistant to the Secretary of Queen Elizabeth. Brewster was sent to Holland as a royal emissary and while there was given the keys to the city of Leyden.



Landing of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock. Note their colorful Elizabethan clothing.

However, soon after, a scandal erupted concerning the queen's beheading of her cousin. Brewster's superior, Elizabeth's secretary, was falsely accused and thrown in the dungeon. Brewster, realizing the corruption in the court, left

and returned to his home in Scrooby. He became the chief magistrate and genial overseer of a forty-room manor house and inn along the Old North Road, midway between Scotland and London.

Queen Elizabeth was shrewd and disciplined with a deep sense of duty to England. But she soon fell in lockstep with the other 16th century royal tyrants of Europe who had initiated a campaign to annihilate, exile or silence all the people who disagreed with them on religious matters. Millions of innocents were slaughtered as these tyrannical leaders attempted to stamp out faithful believers who were following the teaching of Scripture.

Elizabeth forced a severe law through Parliament in 1582 proclaiming it treason to worship anywhere but in the queen's Church of England. The penalty was death. She sent her archbishop to Cambridge demanding that all stu-

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dents and professors be silenced on matters of religion and freedom of expression. She arrogantly declared that such thinking by the students, was “a tender matter and dangerous to weak, ignorant minds.”³

Robinson and Brewster, as young students, observed in horror as leaders of the freedom movement at Cambridge began to be thrown in dungeons to die or were hung or drawn and quartered. Robinson continued his academic career trying to reform within the established order. But, over time, he realized he must stand for the truth of Scripture which put him in direct conflict with the crown and prelates. He resigned his post in 1603. He was then defrocked and forbidden to ever speak again in public.

Brewster had come to believe, like Robinson, that he and his family must stand on biblical principle no matter the cost. Brewster opened his manor house to the Robinson family and to others who were suffering persecution. William Bradford, a young man who had been orphaned, joined the Bible studies at the Brewster home. Bradford was mentored for the next thirty-five years by William Brewster. He became a gifted scholar, the historian of the Pilgrim saga and their governor in the New World for thirty years.

In 1603, Queen Elizabeth died without an heir, leaving James I to claim the throne. Sadly for the people of England, King James was more tyrannical than Elizabeth, especially in religious matters. James declared that he had a “divine right” to rule and claimed to be as God on earth.

The believers who met in secret by candlelight in William Brewster’s home had grown together with great love for one another and for God and His Word. In 1606 they all agreed to form a church following the New Testament model. “Shaking off this yoke of anti-Christian bondage and as the Lord’s free people [they] joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all His ways ... whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.”⁴

Daily the persecutions, initiated by the king, increased as dozens of the Pilgrims’ friends had been arrested and were starving in dank prisons. The king’s spies were now closing in on the Scrooby congregation. Robinson and Brewster knew that they would soon be locked up and would languish the rest of their lives in some foul dungeon or be killed.

The congregation knew they must flee. Heartbroken, in the fall of 1607, they sold their homes and possessions and secretly made their way several days through the woods to the harbor at Boston. They had hired a Dutch sea captain to meet them at his ship and take them to Holland. But the captain betrayed them and alerted the soldiers when they arrived. The



Mayflower II. Modern-day replica of the famed ship on which the Pilgrims sailed to the New World.

authorities stole their goods and “searched them, and rifled their persons for money, even to their innermost garments and the women beyond the bounds of modesty.”⁵ These innocent believers were paraded through the streets of Boston as common criminals. Then the leaders were imprisoned indefinitely. The women and children were left homeless without food or shelter.

After months in prison, the men were released. Knowing this reprieve was only temporary, the church immediately planned another escape for 1608. Once

again, they were betrayed as they came to meet another hired Dutch ship in the bay. But again, the English soldiers had been alerted to the attempted escape. They surrounded and captured the terrified women and children who were in small boats. Most of the Pilgrim men were already on the ship and were forced by the captain at gunpoint to sail into the North Sea.

The ship was caught up in a gigantic hurricane that swept hundreds of ships to the bottom of the North Sea off the coast of Norway. But after two weeks of horrific storms, the ship with the Pilgrim men aboard rose as it were from the grave. After another year, the English authorities, tiring of the Pilgrim women and children, sent them over to Holland. The families were united with great celebration in Holland, the only place on earth that allowed religious freedom.

In Holland, they chose to settle in the city of Leyden, home of Leyden University, the most prestigious and freedom loving university in the world at the time. Robinson and Brewster were employed at the University. Robinson taught theology and Brewster taught English to the diverse population. Here they became a part of a unique cadre of the finest scholars from every field of study who had been assembled from all over Europe. They were reasoning through the Bible in search of wisdom for every area of life. This was made possible because for the first time in the history of western civilization the original Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible, especially of the Torah, were being studied by Dutch scholars like Hugo Gortius and Peter Cunaeus. Cunaeus’s book, *The Hebrew Republic*, was published in 1617 in Leyden while he was a professor at the Leyden university. At that very moment, John Robinson was a scholar at the University as well. It is certainly no coincidence that the successful biblical strategy of the self-governing Hebrew republic, which was being modeled in Holland, was mirrored by the Pilgrims to create the world’s most successful “model republic.”

Most of the Pilgrims, though free to worship, were thrown into poverty. They were not members of the Dutch unions and so could not take any good jobs. They and their children took any job available to survive. They took comfort in having Pastor Robinson teach them, almost daily, the Bible and its

principles of freedom and constitutional, limited government modeled after the Ancient Hebrews. Bradford says that Robinson “taught them not only in spiritual matters but also in civil affairs.”⁶ He taught them how to become a body politic, conducting civil government through elected representatives as taught in the Scripture.

William Brewster, and his Scottish friend Thomas Brewer, began the Pilgrim Press, a clandestine publishing company. They printed great books that were banned in England and Scotland, so the people could learn the liberating power of Scripture. They published many books and smuggled them back into England in wine barrels. But King James had sent his spies into Holland, who ruthlessly tracked down the Pilgrims, especially Brewster. In 1619, the king’s troops broke into Brewster’s home and printing press. He and his family barely escaped. The press was destroyed. Sadly, Thomas Brewer was arrested and sent back to England, where he lingered for 14 years in a dungeon. He died soon after his release. William Brewster was able to make his way to England avoiding capture traveling from place to place one step ahead of the king’s troops. The next year he was able to hide on board the Mayflower and join the vanguard of the Pilgrims who sailed to America.

By 1619, the Pilgrims faced annihilation once again. The Dutch and Spanish were about to go to war again. All religious dissenters would likely be killed, especially groups like the English exiles. The leaders gathered and decided that they should find a place to colonize where they could be free to practice their faith and teach their children. At that very moment, the undeveloped continent of America opened up before them. Edwin Sandys, a member of Parliament and friend of King James, was able to convince the king that it would be wise to give the Pilgrims a charter to settle in the New World. Little did the king know that his charter given to his avowed enemies, the Pilgrims, would ultimately result in the triumph of liberty over tyrants like himself.

All those who chose to go knew that their decision would likely result in their deaths. Several settlements had been attempted, but only the Jamestown Colony had succeeded in 1607 but with casualties of 90%. The Pilgrim response was to declare: “though

they should lose their lives in this action, yet might they have the comfort of knowing that their endeavor was worthy.”⁷

John Robinson knew he must stay behind in Holland to care for the hundreds of believers remaining. But he sent the leaders he had prepared all those years, to be the vanguard, the pioneers of lasting liberty in the New World. Bradford records their final moments together at the dock in Holland. “But the tide which stays for no man called them away ... and their reverent pastor, falling down on his knees, and all with him, with watery cheeks commended them with most fervent prayer to the Lord and His blessing. Then with mutual embraces and many tears, they took their leave of one another — which proved to be the last leave for many of them.”⁸

On September 22, 1620, after several false starts, the Mayflower, a tiny former wine ship, left Plymouth, England, bound for what is modern day New York. The little ship was almost immediately swallowed by storms in the North Atlantic. The main beam cracked, and the captain told the people to prepare to meet their God. But one passenger had brought a giant building jack that was hoisted into place just in time to save the ship. After a sixty-six day voyage, the little ship took refuge at the tip of Cape Cod. They attempted twice to go around the Cape and head south, but fierce gales drove them back.

On November 11, all the men on board signed a new plan of government because they were outside of the king’s charter. It was a covenant with God and with each other to set up a “civil body politic.” It was called the Mayflower Compact. The compact began, “In the name of God, Amen.” Here in the wilderness, a self-governing republic, under God, was created. It was founded upon biblical concepts including equal rights, private property and the election of godly leaders. The world would never be the same.



The First Thanksgiving.

Realizing that they must settle on the Cape or sail back to England where they were outlaws, William Bradford led a dozen men down the Cape in a small boat to look for water. After many days searching for a place with water and fertile land, the men were shipwrecked on an island off the coast. Since the next morning was the Sabbath, they had a worship service and

dedicated the day to the Lord. Then on Monday, with a broken sail and missing oars, they paddled into an unknown little harbor just three miles inland. Upon landing they saw a clear fresh stream beside an abandoned village. Later they discovered that the place had been the village of the Pawtuxet Indians who had been wiped out by a plague a few years before. The scouts made their way back to the Mayflower. Then on Christmas day, 1620, all the settlers began work on their first building in Plymouth.

That first winter was horrific. At one time, only six people could walk, nursing the rest, who lay deathly ill and freezing cold. They buried the dead in a common grave to avoid revealing their weakness to possible enemy attacks. By March nearly half of them had died. But despite their grief, they remained strong in faith and charity. A plague broke out among the sailors on the Mayflower, which had stayed through the winter to help the Pilgrims. The women, most of whom died themselves, cared for the sailors to their peril. One dying sailor said, "We let each other lie and die like dogs but you care for one another like true Christians."⁹

Amazingly, a native American, who had been captured and taken to Europe where he had learned English, walked into their camp in the spring of 1621. His name was Tisquantum, or Squanto as the Pilgrims called him. He brought the chief of the Wampanoag tribe, King Massasoit, to meet with the Pilgrims. They concluded a treaty of peace, based on equal rights and justice between their peoples. The treaty lasted for 50 years with mutual respect. That fall, of 1621, the Pilgrims had a harvest festival and invited Massasoit. He came with 91 braves and some venison.

However, Plymouth remained on the verge of extinction until 1623. The Pilgrims needed merchant investors to help finance the mission. The final contract with these investors was signed after they sailed to Plymouth. It obligated the settlers to work in common fields and send much of their production back to England. This communal living plan led to low productivity and near starvation. (Socialism has always failed.)

In the Spring of 1623, newly elected Governor, William Bradford, immediately abandoned the failed socialist system and assigned each family their own plot of land to farm themselves. Bradford says, "So every family was assigned a parcel of land ... This was very successful. It made all hands very industrious."¹⁰ The lazy could no longer

live off the labor of their diligent neighbors. The crops flourished as each family worked their own land.

Bradford then exposes the philosophy of socialism through the ages. "The failure of this experiment of communal service ... proves the emptiness of the theory of Plato and other ancients ... that the taking away of private property, and the possession of it in community, ... would make a state happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God."¹¹ Bradford calls the plan that had been imposed on them a "communistic plan of life." (This was centuries before Karl Marx initiated the modern communist movement.)

Suddenly, in July and August the rain stopped. The corn began to wither before their eyes. Famine was eminent. They declared a day of fasting and prayer asking God for His help. Their crops were revived, saving the colony. It was at this time that William Bradford declared a Day of Thanksgiving to be observed every year. From that day forward, the colony never again experienced famine.

Thousands of immigrants would follow the Pilgrims to New England in the coming years. Many would prosper and their names still shine in the pantheon of the miracle that is America. But the foundations of freedom and prosperity, including faith, a constitutional republic, free enterprise and biblical character had been set in place by these incredible yeomen from Scrooby, England.

— Marshall Foster

¹ Hoar, George F., *The Return of the Manuscript of Bradford's History* (Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, 1895)

² Bartlett, Robert M., *The Pilgrim Way* (Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1971) p. 32

³ Ibid, p. 27

⁴ Willison, George F., *Saints and Strangers* (Kingsport Press, Inc., Kingsport, Tenn., 1945) p. 49

⁵ Bartlett, Op. Cit. p. 80

⁶ Brown, John, *The Pilgrim Fathers of New England* (Pilgrim Publications, Pasadena, Texas, 1970) p. 124

⁷ Bradford, William, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, (Reprinted by The Vision Forum and Mantle Ministries, 1998), p.23

⁸ Ibid., p. 50

⁹ Ibid, p. 78

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 115

¹¹ Ibid, p. 115



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