1662

God's Controversy with New-England (1662, 1871)

Michael Wigglesworth

Reiner Smolinski, Editor
Georgia State University, rsmolinski@gsu.edu

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Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705), Puritan minister, popular poet, and physician, was born in Yorkshire, England. His parents moved to the Bay in 1638 and eventually settled in New Haven, Connecticut. Here, the famous teacher Ezekiel Cheever held sway over the progress of his young charges, preparing Michael for his entrance exam at Harvard College. He received his B. A. in 1651 and remained as tutor until 1654. Shortly thereafter he was invited to minister to the Malden congregation, was ordained in 1656, and served his parishioners for nearly fifty years. His lifelong struggle with ill health may account for his practice of medicine—even though most frontier clergyman of the period ministered to both soul and body. He married three times, and the last of his eight children, Edward Wigglesworth, became the first Hollis Professor at Harvard.

Today, Michael Wigglesworth is best remembered as a Puritan poet and diarist. The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth, 1653-1657 (1970) dates back to his years as tutor at Harvard. It is a psychological case study of the Puritan conscience at work. His best-known work The Day of Doom (1662) became a colonial bestseller and earned him the nickname “Mr. Doomsday.” A poem of 224 stanzas in ballad meter on the Second Coming and Judgment Day attracted so many readers that it sold more than eighteen hundred copies in the first year, an astounding achievement given the low population density of New England. His Meat out of the Eater or Meditations Concerning the Necessity, End, and Usefulness of Afflictions Unto God’s Children (1669) consists of a series of about twenty meditations on certain paradoxes in theology: the suffering of the saints and the prosperity of the wicked, strength out of weakness, light out of darkness, the fortunate fall, and so on.

Reprinted below is Wigglesworth’s manuscript poem God’s Controversy with New-England (1871)—courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Composed in 1662 on the occasion of a terrible drought, the poem is a versified jeremiad bewailing the backsliding of the rising generation. Thus, God uses nature’s drought as a secondary cause to punish the exsiccation of the spirit among the offspring of New England’s patriarchs, whose children were either unable (or unwilling) to accept the Half-Way Covenant (1662) governing church admission. More than that, God’s Controversy encapsulates the Federal Covenant between God and Saints, whose chastisement, paradoxically, is a sign of God’s loving kindness for the whole colony.

Reiner Smolinski
Georgia State University

God’s Controversy with New-England.
Written in the time of the great drought Anno 1662.

BY A LOVER OF NEW-ENGLAND’S PROSPERITY

Isaiah 5. 4.—What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wilde grapes?

THE AUTHORS REQUEST UNTO THE READER.

Good christian Read’ judge me not
As too censorious,
For pointing at those faults of thine
Which are notorious.
For if those faults be none of thine
I do not thee accuse:
But if they be, to hear thy faults
Why shouldest thou refuse.

I blame not thee to spare my self:
But first at home begin,
And judge my self, before that I
Reproove anothers sin.
Nor is it I that thee reproove
Let God himself be heard
Whose awfull providence’s voice
No man may disregard.

Quod Deus omnipotens regali voce minatur,
Quod tibi proclamant uno simul ore prophetæ
Quodq’ ego cum lachrymis testor de numinis irâ,
Tu leve comũedium ne ducas, Lector Amice.

NEW-ENGLAND PLANTED, PROSPERED, DECLINING, THREATNED, PUNISHED.

Beyond the great Atlantick flood
There is a region vast,
A country where no English foot
In former ages past:
A waste and howling wilderness,
Where none inhabited
But hellish fiends, and brutish men
That Devils worshiped.
This region was in darkness plac’t
   Far off from heavens light,
Amidst the shaddows of grim death
   And of eternal night.
For there the Sun of righteousness
   Had never made to shine
The light of his sweet countenance,
   And grace which is divine:

Until the time drew nigh wherein
   The glorious Lord of hostes
Was pleased to lead his armies forth
   Into those forrein coasts.
At whose approach the darkness sad
   Soon vanished away,
And all the shaddows of the night
   Were turned to lightsome day.

The dark and dismal western woods
   (The Devils den whilere)
Beheld such glorious Gospel-shine,
   As none beheld more cleare.
Were satan had his scepter sway’d
   For many generations,
The King of Kings set up his throne
   To rule amongst the nations.

The stubborn he in pieces brake,
   Like vessels made of clay:
And those that sought his peoples hurt
   He turned to decay.
Those curst Amalekites, that first
   Lift up their hand on high
To fight against Gods Israel,
   Were ruin’d fearfully.

Thy terrors on the Heathen folk,
   O Great Jehovah, fell:
The fame of thy great acts, O Lord,
   Did all the nations quell.
Some hid themselves for fear of thee
   In forrests wide & great:
Some to thy people crouching came,
   For favour to entreat.

Some were desirous to be taught
   The knowledge of thy wayes,
And being taught, did soon accord
   Therein to spend their dayes.
Thus were the fierce and barbarous
   Brought to civility,
And those that liv’d like beasts (or worse)
   To live religiously.

O happiest of dayes wherein
   The blind received sight,
And those that had no eyes before
   Were made to see the light!
The wilderness hereat rejoc’t,
   The woods for joy did sing,
The vallys & the little hills
   Thy praises echoing.

Here was the hiding, which thou,
   Jehovah, didst provide
For thy redeemed ones, and where
   Thou didst thy jewels hide
In per’lous times, and saddest dayes
   Of sack-cloth and of blood,
When th’ overflowing scourge did pass
   Through Europe, like a flood.

While almost all the world beside
   Lay weltering in their gore:
We, only we, enjoyd such peace
   As none enjoyd before.
No forrein foeman did us fray,
   Nor threat’ned us with warrs:
We had no enemyes at home,
   Nor no domestick jarrs.

The Lord had made (such was his grace)
   For us a Covenant
Both with the men, and with the beasts,
   That in this desart haunt:
So that through places wilde and waste
   A single man, disarm’d,
Might journey many hundred miles,
   And not at all be harm’d.
Amidst the solitary woods
Poor travellers might sleep
As free from danger as at home,
Though no man watch did keep.
Thus were we priviledg’d with peace,
Beyond what others were.
Truth, Mercy, Peace, with Righteousness,
Took up their dwelling here.

Our Governour was of our selves,
And all his Bretheren,
For wisdom and true piety,
Select, & chosen men.
Who, Ruling in the fear of God,
The righteous cause maintained,
And all injurious violence,
And wickedness, restrained.

Our temp’rall blessings did abound:
But spirituall good things
Much more abounded, to the praise
Of that great King of Kings.
Gods throne was here set up; here was
His tabernacle pight:
This was the place, and these the folk
In whom he took delight.

Our morning starrs shone all day long:
Their beams gave forth such light,
As did the noon-day sun abash,
And’s glory dazle quite.
Our day continued many yeers,
And had no night at all:
Yea many thought the light would last,
And be perpetuall.

Such, O New-England, was thy first,
Such was thy best estate:
But, Loe! a strange and suddain change
My courage did amate.
The brightest of our morning starrs
Did wholly disappeare:
And those that tarried behind
With sack-cloth covered were.

Moreover, I beheld & saw
Our welkin overkest,
And dismal clouds for sun-shine late
O’respread from East to West.
The air became tempestuous;
The wilderness gan quake:
And from above with awfull voice
Th’ Almighty thundring spake.

Are these the men that erst at my command
Forsook their ancient seats and native soile,
To follow me into a desart land,
Contemning all the travell and the toile,
Whose love was such to purest ordinances
As made them set at nought their fair inheritances?

Are these the men that prized libertee
To walk with God according to their light,
To be as good as he would have them bee,
Before the pleasures which a fruitfull field,
And country flowing-full of all good things, could yield?

Are these the folk whom from the brittish Iles,
Through the stern billows of the watry main,
I safely led so many thousand miles,
As if their journey had been through a plain?
Whom having from all enemies protected,
And through so many deaths and dangers well directed,

I brought and planted on the Western-shore,
Where nought but bruits and salvage wights did swarm
(Untaught, untrain’d, untam’d by Vertue’s lore)
That sought their blood, yet could do them no harm?
My fury’s flaile them thresht, my fatall broom
Did sweep them hence, to make my people Elbow-room.

Are these the men whose gates with peace I crown’d,
To whom for bulwarks I Salvation gave,
Whilst all things else with rattling tumults sound,
And mortall frayes send thousands to the grave?
Whilst their own brethren bloody hands embrewed
In brothers blood, and Fields with carcases bestrewed?
Is this the people blest with bounteous store,
By land and sea full richly clad and fed,
Whom plenty’s self stands waiting still before,
And powr eth out their cups well tempered?
For whose dear sake an howling wildernes
I lately turned into a fruitfull paradise?

Are these the people in whose hemisphere
Such bright-beam’d, glist-ring, sun-like starrs I placed,
As by their influence did all things cheere,
As by their light blind ignorance defaced,
As errors into lurking holes did fray,
As turn’d the late dark night into a lightsome day?

Are these the folk to whom I milked out
And sweetnes stream’d from Consolations brest;
Whose soules I fed and strengthened throughout
With finest spirituall food most finely drest?
On whom I rained living bread from Heaven,
Withouten Errour’s bane, or Superstition’s leaven?

With whom I made a Covenant of peace,
And unto whom I did most firmly plight
My faithfulness, If whilst I live I cease
To be their Guide, their God, their full delight;
Since them with cords of love to me I drew,
Enwrapping in my grace such as should then ensew.

Are these the men, that now mine eyes behold,
Concerning whom I thought, and whilome spake,
First Heaven shall away together scrold,
Ere they my lawes and righteous wayes forsake,
Or that they slack to runn their heavenly race?
Are these the same? or are some others come in place?

If these be they, how is it that I find
In stead of holiness Carnality,
In stead of heavenly frames an Earthly mind,
For burning zeal luke-warm Indifferency,
For flaming Love, key-cold Dead-heartedness,
For temperance (in meat, and drinke, and cloaths) excess?

Whence cometh it, that Pride, and Luxerie
Debate, Deceit, Contention and Strife,
False-dealing, Covetousness, Hypocrisie

(With such like Crimes) amongst them are so rife,
That one of them doth over-reach another?
And that an honest man can hardly trust his Brother?

How is it, that Security, and Sloth,
Amongst the best are Common to be found?
That grosser sinns, in stead of Graces growth,
Amongst the many more and more abound?
I hate dissembling shews of Holiness.
Or practise as you talk, or never more profess.

Judge not, vain world, that all are hypocrites
That do profess more holiness then thou:
All foster not dissembling, guilefull sprites,
Nor love their lusts, though very many do.
Some sin through want of care and constant watch,
Some with the sick converse, till they the sickness catch.

Some, that maintain a reall root of grace,
Are overgrown with many noysome weeds,
Whose heart, that those no longer may take place,
The benefit of due correction needs.
And such as these however gone astray
I shall by stripes reduce into a better way.

Moreover some there be that still retain
Their ancient vigour and sincerity;
Whom both their own, and others sins, constrain
To sigh, and mourn, and weep, and wail, and cry:
And for their sakes I have forborne to powre
My wrath upon Revolters to this present houre.

To praying Saints I always have respect,
And tender love, and pittifull regard:
Nor will I now in any wise neglect
Their love and faithfull service to reward;
Although I deal with others for their folly,
And turn their mirth to tears that have been too too jolly.

To thinking Saints I always have respect,
And tender love, and pittifull regard:
Nor will I now in any wise neglect
Their love and faithfull service to reward;
Although I deal with others for their folly,
And turn their mirth to tears that have been too too jolly.

For thinke not, O Backsliders, in your heart,
That I shall still your evill manners beare:
Your sinns me press as sheaves do load a cart;
And therefore I will plague you for this geare.
Except you seriously, and soon, repent,
Ile not delay your pain and heavy punishment.
And who be those themselves that yonder shew?
   The seed of such as name my dreadfull Name!
On whom whilere compassions skirt I threw
   Whilst in their blood they were, to hide their shame!
Whom my preventing love did neer me take!
   Whom for mine own I mark’t, lest they should me forsake! 270

I look’t that such as these to vertue’s Lore
   (Though none but they) would have Enclin’d their ear:
That they at least mine image should have bore,
   And sanctify’d my name with awfull fear.
Let pagan’s Bratts pursue their lusts, whose meed
   Is Death: For christians children are an holy seed. 275

But hear O Heavens! Let Earth amazed stand;
   Ye Mountains melt, and Hills come flowing down:
Let horror seize upon both Sea and Land;
   Let Natures self be cast into a stown.
I children nourisht, nutur’d and upheld:
   But they against a tender Father have rebell’d. 280

What could have been by me performed more?
   Or wherein fell I short of your desire?
Had you but askt, I would have op’t my store,
   And given what lawfull wishes could require.
For all this bounteous cost I lookt to see
   Heaven-reaching-hearts, and thoughts, Meekness, Humility. 285

But lo, a sensuall Heart all void of grace,
   An Iron neck, a proud presumptuous Hand;
A self-conceited, stiff, stout, stubborn Race,
   That fears no threats, submitts to no command:
Self-will’d, perverse, such as can beare no yoke;
   A Generation even ripe for Vengeance stroke. 290

Such were that Carnall Brood of Israelites
   That Joshua and the Elders did ensue,
Who growing like the cursed Cananites
   Upon themselves my heavy judgements drew.
Such also was that fleshy Generation,
   Whom I o’rewhelm’d by waters deadly inundation. 295

They darker light, and lesser meanes misused;
   They had not such Examples them to warn:
You clearer Rules, and Precepts, have abused;
   And dreadfull moments of others harm.
And my gospels glorious light you do not prize:
   My Gospels endless, boundless grace you clean despize. 300

My painfull messengers you disrespect,
   Who toile and sweat and sweale themselves away,
Yet nought at all with you can take effect,
   Who hurrie headlong to your own decay,
In vain the Founder melts, and taketh pains:
   Bellows and Lead’s consum’d, but still your dross remains. 310

What should I do with such a stiff-neckt race?
   How shall I ease me of such Foes as they?
What shall befall despizers of my Grace?
   I’le surely beare their Candle-stick away,
And Lamps put out. Their glorious noon-day light
   I’le quickly turn into a dark Egyptian night. 315

Oft have I charg’d you by my Ministers
   To gird your selves with sack cloth, and repent.
Oft have I warnd you by my Messengers;
   That so you might my wrathfull ire prevent:
But who among you hath this warning taken?
   Who hath his Crooked wayes, and wicked works forsaken? 320

Yea many grow to more and more excess;
   More light and loose, more Carnall and prophane.
The sins of Sodom, Pride, and Wantonness,
   Among the multitude spring up amain.
Are these the fruits of pious Education,
   To run with greater speed and Courage to Damnation? 325

If here and there some two, or three, shall steere
   A wiser Course, then their Companions do,
You make a mock of such; and scoff, and jeere
   Because they will not be so bad as you.
Such is the Generation that succeeds
   The men, whose eyes have seen my great and awfull deeds. 330

Now therefore hearken and encline your ear,
   In judgement I will henceforth with you plead;
And if by that you will not learn to fear,
   But still go on a sensuall life to lead:
I’le strike at once an All-consuming stroke;
   Nor cries nor tears shall then my fierce intent revoke.
Thus ceast his Dreadful-threatening voice
  The High & lofty-One.
The Heavens stood still Appal’d threat; 345
  The Earth beneath did groane:
Soon after I beheld and saw
  A mortall dart come flying:
I lookt again, & quickly saw
  Some fainting, others dying.

The Heavens more began to lowre, 350
  The welkin Blacker grew :
And all things seemed to forebode
  Sad changes to ensew.
From that day forward hath the Lord
  Apparently contended
With us in Anger, and in Wrath;
  But we have not amended.

Our healthfull dayes are at an end, 360
  And sicknesses come on
From yeer to yeer, becaus our hearts
  Away from God are gone.
New-England, where for many yeers
  You scarcely heard a cough,
And where Physicians had no work,
  Now finds them work enough.

Now colds and coughs; Rhewms, and sore-throats, 370
  Do more and more abound:
Now Agues sore & Feavers strong
  In every place are found.
How many houses have we seen
  Last Autumn, and this spring,
Wherein the healthful were too few
  To help the languishing.

One wave another followeth, 375
  And one disease begins
Before another cease, becaus
  We turn not from our sins.
We stopp our ear against reproof,
  And hearken not to God:
God stops his ear against our prayer,
  And takes not off his rod.

Our fruitful seasons have been turnd 385
  Of late to barrenness,
Sometimes through great & parching drought,
  Sometimes through rain’s excess.
Yea now the pastures & corn fields
  For want of rain do languish:
The cattell mourn, and hearts of men
  Are fill’d with fear and anguish.

The clouds are often gathered, 390
  As if we should have rain:
But for our great unworthiness
  Are scattered again.
We pray & fast, & make fair shewes,
  As if we meant to turn:
But whilst we turn not, God goes on
  Our fields & fruits to burn.

And burnt are all things in such sort, 400
  That nothing now appears,
But what may wound our hearts with grief,
  And draw forth floods of teares.
All things a famine do presage
  In that extremity,
As if both men, and also beasts,
  Should soon be done to dy.

This O New-England hast thou got 405
  By riot, and excess:
This hast thou brought upon thy self
  By pride and wantonness.
Thus must thy worldliness be whipt.
  They, that too much do crave,
Provoke the Lord to take away
  Such blessings as they have.

We have been also threatened 410
  With worser things than these:
And God can bring them on us still,
  To morrow if he please.
For if his mercy be abus’d,
  Which holpe us at our need
And mov’d his heart to pitty us,
  We shall be plagu’d indeed.
Beware, O sinful Land, beware;
And do not think it strange
That sorer judgements are at hand,
Unless thou quickly change.
Or God, or thou, must quickly change;
Or else thou art undone:
Wrath cannot cease, if sin remain,
Where judgement is begun.

Ah dear New-England! dearest land to me;
Which unto God hast hitherto been dear,
And mayst be still more dear than formerlie,
If to his voice thou wilt incline thine ear.

Consider wel & wisely what the rod,
Wherewith thou art from yeer to yeer chastized,
Instructeth thee. Repent, and turn to God,
Who wil not have his nurture be despized.

Thou still hast in thee many praying saints,
Of great account, and precious with the Lord,
Who dayly powre out unto him their plaints,
And strive to please him both in deed and word.

Cheer on, sweet souls, my heart is with you all,
And shall be with you, maugre Sathan’s might:
And whereso’ere this body be a Thrall,
Still in New-England shall be my delight.

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