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“STREAMS OF SCRIPTURE COMFORT”: MARY ROWLANDSON’S TYPOLOGICAL USE OF THE BIBLE

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Mary Rowlandson’s Indian captivity narrative is saturated with references to the Bible. In her account of the ordeal (about twenty thousand words), Rowlandson draws on Scripture more than eighty times in the form of direct quotations, allusions to biblical characters, or echoes of biblical phrases.¹ These frequent references to the Bible are used to interpret her experience typologically and thereby to provide spiritual lessons for herself and for the Puritan community as a whole. She presents what occurred during her captivity in the language of spiritual autobiography and gives evidence of God’s sovereignty and grace, and of her own place among the elect. She also views her captivity broadly, as a type of the Puritan experience in the New World, and as an emblem of the soul victimized by Satan.

Rowlandson generally recounts the events of her captivity in a vigorous and homely style, combining close observation with simple, direct expression. However, when she pauses to consider the significance of a particular detail, her style becomes more elevated as she employs biblical quotations and metaphors to convey her meaning. This pattern emerges early in the narrative. The opening paragraph, describing the Indian attack on her home town of Lancaster, contains no clear reference to Scripture. The only biblical echo, and a rather oblique one, is her mention of “the smoke ascending to heaven” from several burning houses. Yet, when in the second paragraph she interrupts her account to reflect upon the death of her sister, Rowlandson adopts familiar biblical language and quotes the Bible directly: “I hope she is reaping the fruit of her good labors, being faithful to the service of God in her place. In her younger years she lay under much trouble upon spiritual accounts, till it pleased God to make that precious Scripture take hold of her heart, 2 Cor. 12:9. And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee” (p. 4).

This variation of style recurs throughout the narrative. After describing day-to-day episodes of her captivity with only occasional reference to Scripture, Rowlandson stops to generalize about the events she

has related in sentences replete with biblical quotations and echoes. The closing passage of the account, in contrast to the opening passage of about the same length, incorporates more than a dozen biblical allusions in summing up the abiding lessons of her experience.²

Rowlandson's narrative is first of all a testament of personal salvation. Like most other Indian captivity narratives of the Puritans, it contains many elements of spiritual autobiography.³ Richard Slotkin, in *Regeneration Through Violence*, best explained the relationship between the two genres: "Indian captivity victimization by the wilderness was the hardest and most costly (and therefore the noblest) way of discovering the will of God in respect to one's soul, one's election or damnation."⁴ Rowlandson's narrative clearly illustrates how captivity could become the occasion for rigorous examination of one's soul. The majority of the verses quoted in the narrative concern her anxiety about divine judgment and her attempts to find assurance in Scripture about her salvation.⁵

Rowlandson reports that she was given a Bible during her third "remove" (the name she gives to the Indians' temporary encampments). As one might expect, she is most drawn to the verses that offer assurances of God's sovereignty and providence. However, the Bible is a two-edged sword for Rowlandson, bringing "streams of Scripture comfort" but also conviction of her sins. The verses she focuses upon reveal in her mind the characteristic Puritan ambivalence between assurance of God's faithfulness and doubt about one's own salvation.

Rowlandson's spiritual crisis begins early in the third remove, on the first Sabbath she spends with the Indians. Being among the "merciless heathen" on a day of worship makes her painfully conscious of her abject condition. She berates herself for ever having taken the Sabbath for granted: "I then remembered how careless I had been of God's holy time; how many Sabbaths I had lost and misspent, and how evilly I had walked in God's sight; which lay so close unto my spirit, that it was easy for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off the thread of my life, and cast me out of his presence forever" (p. 9). These self-recriminations seem rather hyperbolic, since Rowlandson never admits to anything more heinous than misspending her Sundays.⁶ But she is not really confessing her own wickedness as much as she is describing the Puritan view of unregenerate man. If she is *not* among the elect, then she is incapable of goodness. The passage articulates her misgivings about her fate as a captive but also about the fate of her soul.

The tension between trusting God and doubting her own worthiness is intensified later in the third remove. When she is given a Bible that had been taken as plunder, Rowlandson opens it to a passage that

heightens her apprehension: "So I took the Bible and in that melancholy time it came into my mind to read first the 28 chap. of Deut., which I did. And when I had read it my dark heart wrought on this manner: That there was no mercy for me, that the blessings were gone, and the curse came in their room, and that I had lost my opportunity" (p. 14). As a minister's wife, Rowlandson must certainly have considered herself a Christian at the time of her capture. Yet here again she interprets her suffering as a result of divine judgment. As she continues, however, she is reminded that she can be saved by humbling herself before God: "But the Lord helped me still to go on reading till I came to chap. 30, the seven first verses, where I found there was mercy promised again, if we would return to him by repentance" (p. 14). This represents a turning point in the narrative. By admitting her spiritual complacency and recognizing the need for repentance, Rowlandson re-enacts her conversion experience. The rest of the narrative emphasizes the process of sanctification, depicting God's special providences in preserving her life, and her own efforts to encourage others to "wait on the Lord." She mentions her own sinfulness later in the narrative but consistently interprets her captivity as chastisement from God rather than evidence of condemnation.

This emphasis on chastisement is obviously intended as a lesson not only for Rowlandson herself, but for the Puritan community in general. The attack on Lancaster was part of King Philip's War, perhaps the most serious threat the colonists had faced up to that time. Increase Mather and other Puritan divines explained the Indian uprising as a sign of God's displeasure, exhorting their congregations about the dangers of "backsliding."⁷ Rowlandson's didactic interjections echo this concern, identifying her trials with those of the Puritan settlement at large. To make this wider application possible, Rowlandson, in David Minter's words, "uses the very familiar Puritan device of introducing Biblical references and allusions that link the experience and fate of an individual to the experience and fate of a people."⁸ This technique is evident in Rowlandson's discussion of the Deuteronomy passage. She begins by speaking in the singular ("There was no mercy for me") but draws her final conclusion in the plural ("There was mercy promised if we would return to him by repentance").

Of course, the use of Scripture in spiritual autobiography is not uncommon. As George Starr noted in his discussion of Defoe, "The spiritual autobiographer naturally found himself thinking 'what oft was thought' and since he felt that it had been 'ne'er so well express'd' as in the Bible, he was content to employ the same imagery and turns of phrase."⁹ The unusual aspect of Rowlandson's use of Scripture as an aid

to expression is her heavy reliance on the Old Testament. Of her numerous Biblical references, fewer than one tenth are from the New Testament; in fact, the name of Jesus Christ is never directly mentioned in her account.¹⁰ One might expect a devout Christian to describe her adversity in terms of "taking up one's cross" or "sharing in Christ's suffering," but Rowlandson chooses Old Testament motifs instead. This peculiar paucity of New Testament references is due primarily to the conscious identification of the New England Puritans with the Old Testament Hebrews. Ursula Brumm, in a discussion of Puritan typology, remarked that "the ever-present type for the New England Puritans' view of their own destiny was the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt into the wilderness and then to the promised land."¹¹ They chose the Children of Israel, rather than Christ, as their paradigm, because they were reluctant to identify the elect with Christ, preferring, in Sacvan Bercovitch's words, a model of "the ego in progress" rather than of "a perfected soul."¹² They saw themselves prefigured in the Old Testament, God's Chosen People building a nation out of a wilderness and pitting their faith and strength of will against an unpromising land filled with hostile and godless enemies.

Rowlandson illustrates this habit of mind by the way she consistently identifies with well-known Old Testament heroes. She borrows the words of Job six times to express her own affliction, often prefacing her quotations with such phrases as "And now I may say with Job."¹³ Most frequently she quotes King David, the Hebrew monarch who was ever threatened by hostile enemies both from within and without. Nearly a third of all Rowlandson's references are from the Psalms, as apparently she found in the Psalmist the most eloquent spokesman of her personal grief and despair and also her hope for eventual deliverance.¹⁴

Even while drawing these analogies between herself and the great Hebrew exemplars of faith, Rowlandson avoids appearing too presumptuous. She repeatedly introduces the biblical quotations with modest qualifiers such as "I hope it is not too much to say with Job" or "I hope I can say in some measure as David did." The author indicates by these phrases that her experiences are only a dim reflection of the biblical prototypes, and that she is not complacently self-assured about her own election.

Among the many Old Testament characters that Rowlandson cites in relating her own plight, several were themselves captives during some part of their lives. She mentions Joseph once, sold as a slave to the Egyptians; she also identifies with Samson, who was blinded and bound by the Philistines; and she refers three times to Daniel in the Babylonian Captivity.¹⁵ This identification with the cycle of biblical captivities presages the eventual outcome of Rowlandson's story. The biblical accounts

demonstrate that God is faithful and does not abandon his children forever. Rowlandson quotes the promises of deliverance given to Israel and her leaders, and she applies these promises to her own situation. Nearly one-fifth of all her biblical quotations and allusions contains an assurance of God's faithfulness or a promise of protection and deliverance.¹⁶

Captivity, in the Old Testament, is viewed as a means of both instruction (or spiritual testing) and correction (or punishment). The Babylonian Captivity came to the Israelites as a penalty for their apostasy, but for the faithful few, such as Daniel and his friends, it served as a witness of their steadfast trust in God. Rowlandson derives from her captivity a similar lesson. She describes how the pursuing English army was unable, or unwilling, to ford a stream that the Indians had crossed "with their squaws and children and all their luggage." Such faint-heartedness was, to one hoping to be rescued, an evidence of spiritual lassitude. Just as she views her personal suffering as divine chastisement, Rowlandson explains the Indian war, through biblical precedent, as a result of the settlers' unfaithfulness to God: "Oh that my people had harkened to me, and Israel had walked in my ways, I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries. Psal. 81. 13, 14" (p. 19).

Rowlandson repeats this verse at the end of the narrative, where she summarizes the lessons to be learned from what she underwent. This reference allows her to extend the implications of her personal experience and view her captivity as a visible sign of the punishment being meted out by God to the Puritan settlements. Her eventual release, then, fulfills the promise of the verse, assuring the Puritan readers of the narrative that their enemies could be overcome if they returned to the way of faith.

Beyond the personal and corporate lessons of her story, Rowlandson adds another dimension; she presents her captivity as an image of the unredeemed soul in the hands of the devil. To her the Indians are not only "merciless heathen" and "barbarous creatures," they are "hell-hounds." She refers to their "hellish manner" of singing and dancing around a captive and describes the first Indian victory celebration she witnesses as a "lively resemblance of hell." Several biblical echoes lend authority to this identification. Like the devil-as-lion in 1 Peter 5:8, the Indians come up behind the settlers "roaring," and seeking "to devour them." Later, when she discovers they have deceived her about the fate of her husband, she echoes John 8:44 to link these liars with the Father of Lies: "So like were these barbarous creatures to him who was a liar from the beginning" (p. 35).

Just as Rowlandson presents her captivity as an image of hell, she describes her release in language appropriate to spiritual regeneration. Describing her sleeplessness just before her liberation, she compares it to the inner turmoil which precedes conversion: "I could not rest, I was so full of fear and troubles, (God many times leaving us most in the dark, when deliverance is nearest)" (p. 62). When actually freed, she quotes Psalms 107:1,2, a passage praising God for both personal and national redemption: "O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good for his mercy endureth for ever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy" (p. 64).

This emphasis upon the spiritual significances of her experience is perhaps the central feature of Rowlandson's narrative. Her account illuminates the character and outlook of the early New England mind by demonstrating the vitality of the Puritan imagination, finding natural events charged with spiritual meanings. The final sentence of the narrative incorporates all the levels of significance—personal, communal, and cosmological—which Rowlandson discovers in her own experience: "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord."

NOTES

¹ *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God; . . . A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Second Addition* [sic] (Cambridge, Mass., 1682). Quotations from this text have been modernized in their spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Page numbers of quoted material are given in parentheses.

² Apart from the references identified in the text, the concluding paragraphs of Rowlandson's account contain these biblical allusions:

Page	Text	Reference
71	. . . a friend unto us near hand, and afar off.	Proverbs 27:10
71	When all are fast about me, and no eye open but his who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past.	Psalm 121:4
	. . .	
71	But now we are fed with the finest of the wheat, and, as I may say, with "honey out of the rock."	Psalm 81:16
72	I have seen the extreme vanity of this world. . .	Ecclesiastes 1:14
72	. . . the dregs of the cup, the wine of astonishment.	Isaiah 51:22
	. . .	Psalm 60:3
73	And I hope I can say in some measure, as David did, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted."	Psalm 119:71
73	. . . Vanity of vanities, and vexation of spirit	Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14

³ See Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Significances of the Captivity Narratives," *American Literature*, 19 (March 1947), 1-20; David Minter, "By Dens of Lions: Notes on Stylization in Early Puritan Captivity Narratives," *American Literature*, 45 (Nov. 1973), 335-47.

⁴ Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn., 1973), p. 101.

⁵ Note, for example, these allusions to biblical passages concerning judgment:

Page	Text	Reference
4	Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he has made in the earth.	Psalms 46:8
9	. . . it was easy for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off the thread of my life, and cast me out of his presence forever. . . .	Psalms 51:11

⁶ Richard Slotkin has suggested (*Regeneration*, p. 110) that Rowlandson's expressions of guilt are due in part to an incident that occurred during her eighteenth remove, when she took from a captive white child a piece of meat too tough for him to chew. However, Rowlandson herself does not relate the incident with shame or remorse, since she apparently considered the food to be inedible for the child. She comments that "the Lord made that pleasant and refreshing which another time would have been an abomination" (p. 46), which indicates that she hardly considered her taking the meat as an act of theft. Slotkin's interpretation of the incident also does not take into account the structure of the narrative. Rowlandson's admissions of wrongdoing come early in her account; they become progressively less frequent and less explicit as the narrative continues. The meat-eating episode does not illustrate what Slotkin calls her "beastlike condition"; rather it is intended as another example of God's providential care to those who obey him.

⁷ Charles T. Burke, *Puritans at Bay: The War Against King Philip and the Squaw Sachems* (New York, 1967), pp. 193-96.

⁸ Minter, p. 343.

⁹ Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), p. 17.

¹⁰ Aside from references identified in the text, Rowlandson's only echoes of the New Testament are these:

Page	Text	Reference
4	I hope she is reaping the fruit of her good labors.	John 4:36
12	. . .	
12	. . . him who is above all. . . .	John 3:31
30-31	But the thoughts of my going homeward . . . made my burden seem light.	Matthew 11:30
35	So like were these barbarous creatures to him who was a liar from the beginning.	John 8:44
40	. . . and might I say with the poor publican, "God be merciful unto me a sinner."	Luke 18:13
63	Help, Lord, or we perish	Matthew 25:8
66	But the Lord knows them all by name.	John 10:3
68	. . . their labor of love.	1 Thessalonians 1:3
71	Instead of the husk, we have the fatted calf.	Luke 15:11-24
72	Affliction I wanted, and affliction I had, full measure (I thought). . . .	Luke 6:30

¹¹ Brumm, *Puritan Typology and Religious Symbolism* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970), p. 33.

¹² Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, 1975), p. 27.

¹³ See, for example, the reference to Job 1:15 (p. 4), to Job 1:21 (p. 23), or to Job 19:21 (pp. 33, 34).

¹⁴ Some of Rowlandson's more familiar references from the Psalms are Ps. 46:8 (p. 4), Ps. 84:11 (p. 9), and Ps. 119:75 (p. 30).

¹⁵ The references to Hebrew captives are these:

<i>Page</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Reference</i>
12	"Me (as he said) have ye bereaved of my children; all these things are against me."	Genesis 42:36
34	. . . which made me think of that spoken concerning Samson, who said, "I will go out . . . [not knowing] the Lord was departed from him."	Judges 16:20
56	God showed his power over the heathen in this, as he did over the hungry lions when Daniel was cast into the den.	Daniel 6:16-22
64	God's power is as great now, and as sufficient to save, as when he preserved Daniel in the lion's den, or the three children in the fiery furnace.	Daniel 3:8-30

¹⁶ Note, for example, these allusions to biblical assurances of God's help:

<i>Page</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Reference</i>
3	The Lord hereby make us the more to acknowledge his hand, and to see that our help is always in Him.	Psalms 121:2 Proverbs 3:6
8	But the Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of this power.	Isaiah 40:31 Isaiah 46:4
8	Still the Lord upheld me with his gracious and merciful spirit. . . .	Nehemiah 9:31 Psalm 51:12
9	Yet the Lord still showed mercy to me, and upheld me; and as he wounded me with one hand, so he healed me with the other.	Deuteronomy 32:39
40	"For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee."	Isaiah 54:7
63	. . . and though they had made a pit . . . yet the Lord hurled themselves into it.	Proverbs 28:10
68	Thus saith the Lord, "Refrain thy voice from weeping; . . . they shall come again from the land of the enemy."	Jeremiah 31:16
70	Thus hath the Lord brought me and mine out of that horrible pit. . . .	Psalms 40:2