

Examining the accuracy of plymouth plantation religion essay



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Bradford's "Plymouth Plantation," contains records of the Pilgrim's settlement in the New World. This document represents the history of one of the first colonies in New England that founded our country's religion, culture, and history. Some historians wonder if Bradford's documentation of the Plymouth settlement is accurate. Even though Bradford's personal views and bias are evident throughout the passage there is still a lot of factual evidence that would be lost without this manuscript. Bradford has been an inspirational writer to many, such as Cotton Mather, William Hubbard, Thomas Prince, and Thomas Hutchinson.

"Of Plymouth Plantation," is separated into two books dating from 1620 to 1650. Bradford, "apparently wrote the first book in 1630" (Shuffleton), and goes into detail of the Separatist movement. The main points of the book include: the Separatists afraid of religious persecution, fleeing from England to Holland, settling in Leiden, their voyage on the Mayflower, and their experiences in New England. "Bradford orders his material not only chronologically but teleologically, into chapters that are organized topically as well as in terms of sequences of events, and he indicates in numerous ways that his history is plotted and moving toward a particular outcome" (Read). The way in which Bradford wrote this book is why it has been so influential. It is easy to follow and a timeline is evident throughout. He goes into detail on instances that he finds important. For example, in what he called the First Encounter, an Indian attack occurred and he went into meticulous detail of how the Indians looked, sounded, and how they interacted with the pilgrims. "But about midnight they heard hideous and great cry...they concluded it was a company of wolves or such like wild

beasts" (Perkins 56). This text gives insight to how the Indians responded to the Pilgrims invasion. The second book was written between 1646 and 1650, and is a form of annals dating from 1630 to 1650, which tells of the Pilgrim's day to day life. His use of annals proved accurate when compared to colony records that would have been available to him at that time. " Bradford writes most of history out of nostalgia" (Wenska). This means that he has a yearning for the past and uses bible verses to compare to what's happening in the colony. This is seen when Bradford compares the Plymouth settlers to the Israelites of the old testament, " when their time of wandering is over, spiritual principles are settled, and now the Pilgrims must face the spiritual uncertainties of history as they strive to build their own Canaan" (Shuffleton). In the bible, the Israelites were God's chosen people, and God granted them the power to dominate Canaan. Everything was made abundant to them, until they started to sin. Once they started to defy God's word, God took away the inheritance he had given them. Bradford says this in hopes that his Separatists can overcome their sinful nature and remain faithful to God, and in return keep New England, the land God has granted them.

His own personal beliefs and views were definitely evident throughout the text. " He regarded himself as an instrument of God" (Perkins 49). He believed that God helped people overcome obstacles through faith, "...but they cried unto the Lord and he heard their voice and looked on their adversity" (Shuffleton). On the Mayflower there was a young man who thought highly of himself and cursed the sick. " But it pleased God before they came half seas over, to smite this young man with a grievous disease,

of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first that was thrown overboard. Thus his curses light on his own head, and it was an astonishment to all his fellows for they noted it to be the just hand of God upon him" (Perkins 51). This text shows Bradford's belief that God has a hand in everything was shared by the Separatists. In his description of Plymouth, " there were two rather sharply divided groups---the 'saints,' or members of the Separatist church, and the 'strangers,' or Non-separatists... Obviously Bradford held the 'saints' in much higher esteem than he did the 'strangers,' who were often disruptive of the peace of the colony" (Westbrook). His favoritism can also be seen when he omits most of the facts concerning incidents when the Separatists are being disloyal to God. For example when they fight amongst themselves in Amsterdam, or slaughter the Indians at Wessagusset. But, in Plymouth in 1642, when there were outbreaks of " burglary, adultery, and fornication" (Westbrook), he didn't seize to leave out any details of their wickedness. After Bradford discusses the outbreak of flagrant sin he ends his narrative with the headings, " Anno 1647," and " Anno 1648," leaving them blank. Peter Gays says, " Bradford ends his history in silence" (Shuffleton). One can also tell he's partial to the Separatists by his depictions of characters. He differentiates between admiral characters who, " are members of the Separatist congregation and the despicable ones, who are either unchurched or have Anglican sympathies" (Westbrook). When he speaks of William Brewster whom he admires and considers a father figure, he speaks only of his strengths. When speaking of someone he dislikes he explains their weaknesses, and why they are not trustworthy. " His tendency seems to be toward caricature and

ridicule in depicting persons whom he disliked, such as Lyford, Weston, Thomas Morton, and Oldham" (Westbrook).

Many historians have used "Plymouth Plantation" as a resource in writing their books, due to the accuracy and detailed history of the early settlement. "This entire passage has been treated as an early interpretation of the American landscape and an illustration of English preconceptions about that landscape as 'wilderness'" (Read). Nathaniel Morton, Bradford's nephew, had copied large parts from "Plymouth Plantation" and was considered very important when his uncle's original works had been lost. Increase Mather used it as a source for his account of Indian Wars. Increase's son, Cotton, later used it for his own history of the Plymouth Colony. William Hubbard used it in his writing of the "General History of New England from the Discovery to MDCLXXX." Thomas Prince quoted and paraphrased many passages in his "Chronological History of New England in the form Annals" in 1736. It has been influential because of how Bradford handled time relationships, characterized individuals and groups, and focused on events that he thought were important. "Bradford helped to demonstrate the workings of divine providence for the edification of future generations" (Gould). This document has saved past history that would have otherwise been lost. "The years since these early literary historians wrote has neither dulled nor lessened our admiration for Bradford as either historian or man of letters" (Wenska). It will continue to contribute to the American culture for generations to come.

Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" can not be classified as objective

history, because he incorporated too much of his own personal beliefs and <https://assignbuster.com/examining-the-accuracy-of-plymouth-plantation-religion-essay/>

values. Instead it can be used as a history book for the foundation of New England. Early authors saw its importance and incorporated it into their own writings. It has helped shape our differing religions, culture, and literature that can be found in today's era.