

Chosen people, or  
coerced patronage?



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The literature produced during the Puritan era was striking in its ever popular sermon format and its condescending tones. Authors like Jonathan Edwards and Michael Wigglesworth were not reluctant to use fear and intimidation to get their messages across. Wigglesworth's "The Day of Doom," and Edward's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," include vivid imagery and crude descriptions of the mind-numbing path to righteousness. With themes relating to idealism, both political and religious, and the emphasis on practicality and piety, these Puritan writings are filled with elegiac verses and fiery allusions to make fear one of the driving forces to "find God". Most Puritan works of literature were written to inspire the ideals of Puritan living. Puritans were children of a covenant; this gave them the purpose to write these biblical supplements. Just like people of any society or culture, the requirements and duties were a product of their beliefs, and the Puritans belief that they were God's "chosen" people assumed it their duty to bring religion into the lives of those who seemed un-influenced. Jonathan Edwards was one of the many who felt it his duty as a Puritan author to use his abilities and knowledge to influence his readers. He "stressed the emotional side of religion," believing that it was "easier to experience emotional excitement than rational understanding." His writing "made religion trans-colonial; breakdown of distinctions between church and creed, it encouraged the proliferation of sects which led to vagueness in doctrine, laxness in discipline, and faded into general religious indifference. It gave rise to a community organized in pursuit of secular values" (Rueben Chap. 2). Edwards wanted people to feel God since God is not tangible; he thought it highly important to take in the love of God through emotions. The emotions he initiated in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" were abrasive and

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harsh. He preached that “ Hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out” (Perkins 235). Leaving people afraid, yet in awe, was one of the greatest ways for them to become conscious of the powers their God held. Just like Edwards, Wigglesworth’s powers of intimidation were unbeatable. The Puritans were so involved in religion that “ The Day of Doom” was not only an amazing testament of their faith but was memorized and used for reference just as the Bible would have been. “ The overwhelming popularity of the poem suggests that most New England citizens considered themselves to be among the righteous, and the threatening tone only reinforced their faith” (Warren). Wigglesworth’s poem is filled with passages so vividly described one can instantly feel emotions of confusion, desire, and a longing to be holy for fear of the consequences: “ From Judge’s ire, more hot than fire, for whom it may abide? No hiding place can from his face sinners at all conceal. Whose flaming eyes hid things doth ‘ spy, and darkest things reveal” (Perkins 109). With only the devout Christians eligible to rule in this theocracy, striving for overall righteousness was a main goal. Even if one wasn’t an ideal model of Puritan Christianity, Wigglesworth ends this masterpiece with the moral that everyone can be saved. Even while on the path to becoming righteous some Puritans showed signs of decay. Some became overly prideful, especially among those who became newly rich. There were also violations of the Sabbath, sins of sex and alcohol, and questions involving business morality. In these instances menacing words of these Puritan authors would prove to be beneficial, intimidating these sinners back into the life that they had abandoned and serving as a rehab for

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their souls. Whether the citizens of the Puritan era were coerced into being part of this movement by the intensity of the atmosphere, or by choice to better themselves, they were given many great resources including these works to expand their knowledge of religion. The fear these stories instilled was a driving force for the extreme changes many of the Puritans made. “The Day of Doom” and “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” are as frightening as the backdrop against which they were placed.