

Murray State University

One God and Three Persons

Caralyn DiMatties

English 311

Dr. Gina Claywell

December 5, 2019

## Abstract

This paper will discuss the backgrounds of Jonathan Edwards, Anne Bradstreet, and Mary Rowlandson. Their Christian upbringings will be compared and proved to be similar. Puritanism and its relation to the authors will be explained. A specific work from each author will be analyzed – Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Bradstreet’s “To My Dear Children,” and Rowlandson’s *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. The focus of this paper will be on the portrayal of God in all three works. Edwards subscribes to the God of the Old Testament, a God of wrath and destruction. However, Bradstreet and Rowlandson rely on the gentle God of the New Testament. Overall, this paper will consider the three authors’ differing depictions of the same God.

## One God and Three Persons

In his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards repeatedly represents God as an unyielding “Mediator” who will not withhold His wrath or judgement. Edwards continually stresses that anyone who has not secured his or her spot in glory is awaiting eternal damnation. Unlike other early American writers, Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson, Edwards evokes fear from his audience by portraying God as an almost merciless Creator with little compassion for His creation. Edwards primarily subscribes to the God of the Old Testament – a God of wrath and destruction. Conversely, Bradstreet and Rowlandson seem to rely on the gentle God of the New Testament. Edwards, Bradstreet, and Rowlandson all shared a Puritanical upbringing, so one could assume they might be similar in their portrayals. However, Edwards’ views of God are drastically different from those of Bradstreet and Rowlandson’s, and an analysis of their writings forms a probable reason for this contrast.

Puritanism is a religious movement that took place “in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries” (“Puritanism”). Englishmen were dissatisfied with the Church of England and wanted to reconstruct its theology. The Puritan teachings that resulted from this reconstruction were influenced by Calvinist theology. Calvinism is centered around the idea that salvation is dependent upon a relationship with Christ, but not all people will be redeemed. The sanctified are considered “the elect.” While the elect are referenced in Edwards and Bradstreet’s work, they are not a central component for Bradstreet or Rowlandson. Rather, the mention of reformation only shows agreeance with Puritanical thought. Knowledge about Puritanism is essential for a better understanding of Edwards, Bradstreet, and Rowlandson, though. The movement and the resulting ideology influenced them and, as a result, their writing.

Jonathan Edwards began writing (at least) by the age of twelve but struggled spiritually after his conversion because he felt it was unlike others' regarding the sequence of events (Kimble). Edwards was also initially unaccepting of "the doctrine of predestination" (Schafer). It was his salvation that spurred a change in thinking and led to a revolutionized understanding of God. Edwards also maintained a unique reasoning regarding reality. Essentially, he thought God permits converted individuals to see "reality." This reality, though, is nothing more than "ideas in perceiving minds" (Schafer). He pastored a church in Northampton, Massachusetts from 1729-1750 but was eventually relieved from his ministerial position. Matters concerning the Lord's Supper seemed to be of the utmost importance in this decision, but his request for a raise and his responses to young people also contributed to his removal (Kimble). Edwards "became pastor of the frontier church at Stockbridge," and it was there that he spent time evaluating the will of men (Schafer). He upheld the notion that people are born as sinful beings and are not inherently "good." At the end of his life, Edwards was president of the College of New Jersey. He died in 1758 and "his final words were written to his daughter, Lucy" (Kimble). Edwards' memory may not be pleasant due to his damning sermon, but his undeniable contribution to the First Great Awakening should not be dismissed.

Jonathan Edwards begins his renowned sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," by referencing Deuteronomy 32, with an emphasis specifically on verse 35. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses is addressing the Israelites and their forthcoming punishment from God. Edwards calls them "wicked" and equates his present-day audience to God's chosen people. However, Edwards erred in his choice of passage. It is not an applicable one when attempting to spur conversions due to its context. Moses was speaking to a select group – the Israelites. Edwards, therefore,

should not have attempted to transfer this message to his audience. It was not intended for them. However, he is convincing when evaluating God's response to the human condition.

“There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.” By the mere pleasure of God, I mean his sovereign pleasure, His arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty, any more than if nothing else but God's mere will had in the least degree, or in any respect whatsoever, any hand in the preservation of wicked men one moment. (Edwards 327)

It is partly “the mere pleasure of God” to withhold his wrath, but grace and love should be accounted when discussing His mercy as well. However, the phrase “arbitrary will” is perplexing. “Arbitrary” is not an appropriate descriptor when referring to God's plan. It arouses a sense of randomness and carelessness – two attributes that are not Biblically of God. Overall, Edwards' observation is not completely without merit. There is truth in it, but it warrants revisions and additions.

In his second “consideration” regarding his aforementioned observation, Edwards states that “[wicked men]” deserve to be cast into hell. While the word “wicked” may be a stronger adjective than most would use when describing sinfulness, it is not an unfair or inaccurate representation of the unconverted. Edwards continues by saying “justice calls aloud for infinite punishment of their sins” (327). However, he altogether masks the hope offered in the New Testament with a multitude of reminders depicting the ensuing damnation for those who “continue to reject Christ” (330). Edwards presents redemption but shrouds it in the form of condemnation:

Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls, all you that were never born again, and made new

creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. (Edwards 332)

In this instance, Edwards fails in presenting the gospel. He should have shared that a change of heart in response to the supernatural movement of the Holy Spirit causes one to be born again. It results in being made new creatures that are no longer in sin and, therefore, in “a state of new.” Light and life are then experienced, and one is no longer “in the hands of an angry God.” However, Edwards misses this opportunity. Rather than offering the changing effects of grace, his sermon is composed of fear tactics. He nearly veils “Him who has loved [sinners]” and, instead, gives precedence to the God who “abhors you” (337 and 333). One of his closing scriptural references comes from Romans 9:22, again illustrating the mighty wrath of Jehovah. However, Edwards’ sermon could have benefited from quoting the three chapters prior to that verse. For example, Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (New International Version). This presents God as the literal giver of life, not as the archer with “the arrow made ready on the string” (332) to pierce an unrepentant heart.

Because Anne Bradstreet was the daughter of the highly esteemed Thomas Dudley and Dorothy Yorke and her father was “steward to the Earl of Lincoln at Sempringham,” Bradstreet had “educational opportunities unusual for women of her time” (Bradstreet 236). Furthermore, “her family was part of a nonconformist group of Puritans actively planning for the settlement of Massachusetts Bay Colony” (236). Around the age of sixteen, she married Simon Bradstreet who was also a nonconformist. The family settled in Massachusetts in 1630. Bradstreet had eight children. Her love for them is revealed through her longing that they know God. Bradstreet believes if her children trust in Him, they will find true satisfaction.

Bradstreet, in “To My Dear Children,” fondly recalls her life in relation to the Lord. She writes not to promote herself, “but the glory of God” (243). After her purpose for writing is established, Bradstreet describes her early years of life and notes she “found much comfort in reading the Scriptures” (244). It is evident that Bradstreet believes God bestowed hardships upon her in order to promote spiritual growth: “The Lord laid His hand sore upon me and smote me with the smallpox” (244). Her choice to use “smote” could imply a negative feeling toward God. This is not her intent, though. The belief that God causes calamity and misfortune stems from her Puritan upbringing. She is not negatively presenting God. Bradstreet, rather, is thankful for the physical struggles she endured because of their positive results: “After some time I fell into a lingering sickness like a consumption together with a lameness, which correction I saw the Lord sent to humble and try me and do me good, and it was not altogether ineffectual” (244). Again, her tone does not translate as pitiful. There is a sincerity in her response to God and an appreciation for the effects of His intercession. She attests “that He hath never suffered me long to sit loose from Him...” (244). This is reminiscent of 1 Peter 5:10: “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (New International Version). Bradstreet concludes it was the trials bestowed upon her by the Lord, “through His great mercy,” that caused “correction” (244). However, after recounting her many physical ailments, Bradstreet makes a profound statement regarding eternity. It is perhaps the most compelling line in her letter. Bradstreet transitions to share the spiritual concerns that plagued her. She says, “... for in truth it is the absence and presence of God that makes heaven or hell” (245). Bradstreet does not use any imagery to describe either place because her purpose is not to push recipients to repentance. Instead, she is merely relaying her adoration for God while affirming that His

company, or lack thereof, is the difference between everlasting peace or eternal misery.

Bradstreet continues the address to her children by sharing spiritual concerns that plagued her.

She rationally confronts the doubts she had and poses her evidence in the form of questions.

Referencing the Bible, Bradstreet asks, “Is there any story but that which shows the beginnings of times, and how the world came to be as we see? Do we not know the prophecies in it fulfilled

which could not have been so long foretold by any but God Himself?” (245). She included these queries for her own reassurance and to offer potential reassurance for her children. In closing,

Bradstreet reiterates that her faith in the Lord prevailed through her uncertainties and again acknowledges the letter’s intent – an exaltation of God.

Mary Rowlandson was born in Somerset, England and died in Wethersfield, Connecticut. She and her parents migrated to America when she was a child, and they settled in Salem in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (present-day Massachusetts). Mary Rowlandson married Joseph Rowlandson *before* “he was ordained a Puritan minister (“Mary Rowlandson”). Interestingly, the twenty years following her union are not well known. It was during King Philip’s War that Rowlandson and her three children were taken captive by Indians. However, she had a strong Puritan upbringing, as evidenced in her captivity narrative, and her faith in the Lord upheld her through trying circumstances.

Mary Rowlandson portrays a merciful God in *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. On February 10, 1675, Indians invaded Lancaster, Massachusetts. Rowlandson and her three children – Joseph, Mary, and Sarah – survived the attack, but were taken captive by “the worst of the heathen” (Rowlandson 250-251). She and her two eldest were separated; however, her youngest, Sarah, remained with her. Rowlandson recounts in vivid detail the daily trials they encountered. When departing from home, she

expresses grief but finds comfort in knowing that “God was with [her], in a wonderful manner, carrying [her] along, and bearing up [her] spirit, that it did not quite fail” (254). Rowlandson, from the start of the narrative, shares the strength she finds in the Lord. When Sarah passes away due to the wounding she received during the raid, Rowlandson credits God for sustainment: “I have thought since of the wonderful goodness of God to me, in preserving me in the use of my reason and senses, in that distressed time, that I did not use wicked and violent means to end my own miserable life” (255). Soon after her daughter’s death, she receives a Bible from an Indian and takes solace in reading Scripture. When Rowlandson is forced to pass through a frigid river, she references Isaiah 43:2. She later quotes Job and notes the similar misfortunes she and the titular character share. Rowlandson also relies heavily on the book of Psalms during her captivity. Once ransomed, she still reflects on God’s goodness. Rowlandson thinks of “his wonderfull power and might” and believes He “suffer[s] none to hurt us” (269). This denotes the idea of sanctification through trial. Regardless of beliefs surrounding the purposes for hardships, though, it is clear Rowlandson’s confidence was in the faithfulness of Christ.

Jonathan Edwards, Anne Bradstreet, and Mary Rowlandson are undeniably connected through their religious beliefs. They share a Puritanical background and, as a result, a Calvinist doctrine. However, they still differ in their depictions of God. Edwards nearly villainizes God and underrepresents the love He has for humanity. Bradstreet and Rowlandson, however, describe God in gentler ways and are grateful for His intercessions. The variation in representation could be due to the purpose for their writing. Edwards wrote with hope of provoking spiritual conversions. Bradstreet penned her letter to her children to illuminate God’s magnificence, while Rowlandson narrated her captive tale “for the edification of her children and friends” (248). Despite the reasoning behind their prose, though, all three authors do hold one

major similarity: They are personally testifying God of the Bible's existence and His evidence in their lives.

## Works Cited

- Bradstreet, Anne. Foreword. *Anne Bradstreet*, by Pattie Cowell, Colorado State University, pp. 236-237.
- “To My Dear Children.” *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Second Edition Volume 1, *Beginnings to 1865*, edited by Paul Lauter et al., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014, pp. 243-246.
- Edwards, Jonathan. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Second Edition Volume 1, *Beginnings to 1865*, edited by Paul Lauter et al., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014, pp. 326-338.
- Kimble, Jeremy M., “10 Things You Should Know about Jonathan Edwards.” *Crossway*, 01 Dec. 2017, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-jonathan-edwards/>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2019.
- Rowlandson, Mary. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. *The Concise Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Second Edition Volume 1, *Beginnings to 1865*, edited by Paul Lauter et al., Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014, pp. 249-269.
- Rowlandson, Mary. Foreword. *Mary White Rowlandson [Talcott]*, by Sharon M. Harris, University of Connecticut, pp. 247-249.
- Schafer, Thomas A. “Jonathan Edwards.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 01 Oct. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Edwards>. Accessed 23 Oct. 2019.
- The Bible*. New International Version, Zondervan, 2011.

“Mary Rowlandson.” The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 21 June 2019,

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Rowlandson>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2019.

“Puritanism.” The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 21 Sept. 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Puritanism>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2019.