

THE BIBLE AND THE FOUNDERS, PART 3—WASHINGTON’S THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATION

Thanksgiving is among the most American of American holidays. While it was not celebrated as an annual national holiday until 1863, the origins of the holiday are found in a proclamation by George Washington in the first year of his presidency. The proclamation is full of biblical language and religious overtones, imploring the new nation to offer thanks to God for His providential guidance of their affairs, as well as for His mercy for their sins.

Among the directly biblical phrases Washington used was “manifold mercies.” The phrase comes from the ninth chapter of Nehemiah, where the rebuilders of Jerusalem’s walls after the long exile of the Jewish people offers a prayer of confession and thanksgiving to God for His provision for the Jewish people in the past, present, and future. Specifically, the phrase appears in verses 19 and 27.¹ Verse 19 reads as follows (from the King James Version, which was by far the most popular translation in early America, and the one Washington would have been the most familiar with):

Yet thou in thy *manifold mercies* forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go.

Verse 27, again from the King James Version, reads as follows:

Therefore thou deliveredst them into the hand of their enemies, who vexed them: and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto thee, thou heardest them from heaven; and according to thy *manifold mercies* thou gavest them saviours, who saved them out of the hand of their enemies.

From the context of the Revolutionary War, as well as the language of the proclamation itself, Washington was clearly drawing parallels between the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (and exile in Babylon) and the freedom and independence of the United States from Great Britain, a common motif throughout early American rhetoric and thought. Many at the time believed that God had intervened throughout the Revolutionary War on behalf of the Americans, a belief reflected in the words of James Madison in *Federalist No. 37*, during the debate on whether to ratify the new Constitution:

It is impossible for any man of candor to reflect on this circumstance [the ability of the constitutional Convention to produce a Constitution] without partaking of the astonishment. It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.²

¹[Nehemiah 9:19, 27 \(KJV\).](#)

²[James Madison, *Federalist No. 37* \(January 11, 1788\).](#)

The proclamation used several other biblically ubiquitous terms that further contributed to the religious solemnity of the occasion. For example, Washington refers to “Almighty God,” “Lord,” the “Ruler of Nations,” and prays that “true religion and virtue” may reign in America.

But the proclamation was not Washington’s idea alone. In fact, the idea came from Congress, after the introduction of a resolution by Elias Boudinot which read:

That a joint committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States, to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a Constitution of government for their safety and happiness.³

Boudinot had previously served as the President of Congress toward the end of the Revolutionary War, represented New Jersey in the House of Representatives, and would go on to be one of the Founders and Presidents of the American Bible Society. In response to his motion, Roger Sherman, who was famous for being the only man to sign *all* of America’s great founding documents (the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution), responded favorably to the resolution:

Mr. Sherman justified the practice of thanksgiving, on any signal event, not only as a laudable one in itself but as warranted by a number of precedents in Holy Writ; for instance, the solemn thanksgivings and rejoicings which took place in the time of Solomon after the building of the temple was a case in point [1 Kings 8; 2 Chronicles 5-7]. This example he thought worthy of Christian imitation on the present occasion; and he would agree with the gentleman [Elias Boudinot] who moved the resolution.⁴

Ironically, the resolution was approved by Congress on the very same day it approved the final wording of the First Amendment.⁵

The proclamation, which, like all future Thanksgivings, called for the national holiday to take place on the last Thursday of November, reads as follows:

³[George Washington Papers, University of Virginia, “Thanksgiving Proclamation” \(accessed February 10, 2017\).](#)

⁴Joseph Gales, ed., *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, Volume 1; With an Appendix, Containing Important State Papers and Public Documents, and All the Laws of a Public Nature, With a Copious Index* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834-1856), 950.

⁵Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 86.

By the President of the United States of America
A Proclamation⁶

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and

Whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me “to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness”:

Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies [Nehemiah 9:19, 27] and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations [numerous biblical references], and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

Given under my hand, at the city of New York, the 3rd day of October, A.D. [*anno Domini*, meaning “In the Year of Our Lord”] 1789.

George Washington

⁶[George Washington, Proclamation—Day of National Thanksgiving \(October 3, 1789\).](#)