‘Promised Land into Real–Life Utopia? Utopian Theory, Numbers 13 and *Of Plymouth Plantation*’

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Promised Land into Real-Life Utopia? Utopian Theory, Numbers 13 and *Of Plymouth Plantation*

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Utopian Theory as key

The Bible can be read as a multifaceted literary utopia. Notions of progress towards a better state of being are prominent themes, so are anti–utopian descriptions of what might happen if the community did not progress towards the 'better' by abiding by divine law. The belief that utopia is achievable, just beyond reach, which is reiterated in the biblical text, has implications for how the Bible is used and understood in its afterlife. The case study presented here investigates the development of a biblical story into a behavioural blueprint used in a real historical situation, which continues to pose considerable societal challenges even today.

First, I am going to discuss the relevance of recognising early utopian templates such as the notion of Paradise or a utopian Promised Land in the Bible. Then I am going to show how the biblical passage Numbers 13 juxtaposes utopian and dystopian images to emphasise the implicit statement that the Promised Land is achievable by obeying divine commands. Finally, I am going to approach William Bradford's treatment of this biblical episode in his text *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Bradford understands the implicit message of Numbers 13. Crucial passages that indicate 'wrong' behaviour of the biblical protagonists are changed by Bradford to convey an image of the Puritan Pilgrims' settlement of New England as part of a divinely favoured progress towards an ideal state. The

challenges of development addressed are found on many levels: historical, ideological and literary. The impossibility of achieving utopia is *challenged* by Bradford who *develops* the Bible into a realistic behavioural manual. His *development* of the biblical literary text has resulted in a new more or less canonical historical text – *Of Plymouth Plantation* – which retains from its biblical template some of the precarious implications regarding the sanctification of conquest and oppression, which continue to pose a real political *challenge* in a post-colonial era. A further topical challenge – even in a secular society – is to recognise and expose such manipulations of biblical templates, which endorse specific ideologies by claiming they are divinely favoured.

The notion of progress to eventually achieve an ideal state of being - in short: the belief in the achievability of utopia - can be regarded as the unifying factor that made the biblical text relevant to the Puritans' endeavour. The challenge, which a belief in the desired development into the ideal society brings with it, is at its base the impossibility of realistically achieving an ideal state. Utopia – especially if enforced violently – brings with it the danger of turning into a dystopia of enslavement or oppression.

The literary roots of manifestations of utopian thinking have rightly been traced back to the Bible. Most, if not all secondary literature that deals with literary configurations of Western utopian thought link utopia to classical Greek works (especially Plato's *Republic*), and the Bible (Manuel 1979/1973; Boer 1997; Levitas 1990; Mohawk 2000). The biblical utopia *par excellence* is the Garden of Eden, a 'prolegomenon and perennial accompaniment to utopia' and the 'deepest archaeological layer of Western Utopia' (Manuel & Manuel 1979, p.33). The image of the primeval Garden of Eden (Paradise) is a thread that runs through the Hebrew Bible. It is

modified, but referred back to constantly within the Bible itself, for instance when it is developed into the image of the Promised Land, which in turn becomes a part of Western political history when the so-called 'New Worlds' are crafted to appear as a new Garden of Eden in the literature that tells of them.

The biblical image of the Garden of Eden was not adopted verbatim by, for example, the Pilgrims, but was transformed and updated to fit a specific context. The transformations the images of the utopian genre undergo are noted by Kumar, who proposes to differentiate between the modern genre of utopia and its literary roots:

> [The modern utopia] inherits classical and Christian forms and themes, but it transforms them into a distinctive novelty, a distinctive literary genre carrying a distinctive social philosophy (Kumar 1987, p.3).

Mohawk (2000) agrees that utopian movements arise in specific contexts, and are subject to change, but he argues against regarding utopian thought and utopian movements as isolated occurrences which are only relevant in a specific context. He sees utopian texts as entering the cultural memory – the 'fabric of culture' (Mohawk 2000, p.3) – even after their peak of popularity is passed. Although utopian visions are most often set in the future, imaginations of a future state draw strongly on past utopian visions:

> In fact, elements of utopian ideology born in one age and context are known to persist and may be pursued by future generations in a completely different context (Mohawk 2000, p.1).

Since constructed continuities and implicit discontinuities are at the centre of the discussion of a biblical passage and a conquest narrative that makes use of this passage, the following of Mohawk's premises

can help to approach the topic: a crucial tradition in Western culture is the 'pursuit of the (cultural) ideal' (2000, p.1), this tradition runs deep in the 'cultural fabric' and can be consciously adapted to fit a different context.

The challenge – I could go as far as say danger – of utopia, is found in one of its defining features, its literariness, which implies its impossibility. All utopias, whether intended as a realistic proposal or just as a thought-game to criticize society, remain only as literary artefacts (Suvin 1979, p.39). These textual artefacts that remain for us to analyse have imaginations of an improved society as their common theme. What exactly is 'improved' depends on each sample's socio-political context. Since a utopia's main theme is the improvement of a community, textual remnants of utopian movements may reflect a 'shared sense of being a "chosen people" with a special destiny' (Mohawk 2000, p.5), which can be demonstrated in the sample text *Of Plymouth Plantation*. There appears to be no empirically existing perfect society, and the fact that only written proposals or reports about these supposed perfect societies exist from every era, ought to suffice to make it quite obvious that utopia is not realisable. The authoring community may not realise this, which can lead to situations like the one to be discussed, in which utopian hopes are projected onto empirical places, such as America as a Promised Land.

Also relevant to the discussion of Numbers 13 and *Of Plymouth Plantation* is the fact that utopia reflects a specific understanding of history, progress, and religion. Beliefs in utopia have rightly been called religious or items of faith (Mohawk 2000, p.4), especially when a better world is expected to be brought on by divine intervention, like in the biblical stories about the conquest of the

Promised Land, which is portrayed as only achievable with divine help.

A further common theme in utopian proposals, also found in these sample texts, is that utopias are often transformative. The depicted community is a hypothetical vision of how the authoring community may be transformed for the better. As such, the utopian community must remain recognisable as a community of 'we' that would have produced and read the text. In the Bible links are established, for instance by giving long name lists or genealogies to link the past with the 'present'. In Thomas More's work it is said, that the society of Utopia must have developed out of Hellenic society (Bruce 2008, p.86), which stresses the value of studying classics, and offers a reference point that would allow a reader to find a concrete link between one's own society and the fictional society: both have or have had access to Hellenic culture.

It has been discussed whether fundamental societal change or revolution is a factor in utopian literary production. Imagining radically changed 'better' places and circumstances seems to have been a way of thinking that was popular during times of revolutionary changes (Suvin 1979, p.7; Manuel 1979, p.25). Furthermore, there is a consistency in that communities that produced and circulated utopian literature were not the dominant cultural group (Mohawk 2000, p.5-6). However, whether we can access utopian thought depends on the survival of the literary artefacts inspired by utopian thinking. If a community was oppressed to such a degree as to be silenced altogether, or if a community was not literate, a hypothetical literary utopian proposal would never have been made manifest. While the utopia-producing community may not have been culturally dominant, in order for its literary artefacts to be visible at all, it cannot have been completely silenced.

Numbers 13: Utopia meets reality

This summary of the biblical episode upon which Bradford modelled his report of the arrival in New England stresses especially those aspects which Bradford picks up, references, and finally re-interprets to perpetuate the idea that his community is a 'chosen' community on its way to a utopian state. Chapter 13 of the biblical book of Numbers is a threshold episode in which Moses sends out spies to reconnoitre the land of Canaan, the supposed Promised Land. The story of Numbers focuses on the Israelites' wanderings in the desert after their escape from a situation of oppression in Egypt. In Numbers 13, the Israelites are camping in the desert not far from the Promised Land. From each of the 12 Israelite tribes, one representative is sent on a spying mission (Num 13:4-15) to investigate specific aspects of the Promised Land; its fertility, its flora, geography, and the military power of its inhabitants. The spies are also instructed to bring back a sample of the land's produce (Num 13:17-20). The narrative describes the route the spies take and their encounter with resident tribes. The spies cut down a large cluster of grapes and name the place of this find accordingly, *Wadi Eshkol*, 'Grape-Cluster River' (Num 13:23.24). The spies finally report back to the community and show them the fruit of the land (Num 13:25-26). In their report, they confirm that the land 'does indeed flow with milk and honey' – a phrase found frequently in the Pentateuch to describe the Promised Land's agricultural ease and plenty. However, the spies also report that the land is settled by many different peoples: Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Canaanites and the mythological Anakites (Num 13:28-29).

Two of the spies support the idea of a conquest, saying 'Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall

surely overcome it' (Num 13:30). The other spies strongly disagree: 'We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we' (Num 13:31). The spies that disagree:

> [s]pread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, "The country we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; we saw the Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them" (Num 13:32.33, JPS translation).

Following this, the community rebel against their leaders and God. They would rather return to Egypt than to embark on the seemingly impossible conquest. They are punished for their opposition to the idea of divinely led conquest by being condemned to the 40 years long (one generation) desert trek, which none of them will survive to actually settle in the Promised Land. It is, barely, out of reach.

This specific sample of a description of a utopian land exhibits a curious mix of religiosity and this-worldly concerns. The Promised Land is implicitly linked to the Garden of Eden, a transcendental place, e.g. by alluding to guaranteed agricultural provision. Especially by giving so many place names and topographical references it is established, however, that the Promised Land is to be *thought of* as located in empirical reality. This supposed reality is utopian, again, because the authoring community was not wandering in the desert. The proposed dating of the final edit of the Pentateuch, usually meanders around the 5th century BCE, the Persian period. The utopian hope is shifted back into the past of the authoring community possibly to underline claims to the territory by establishing a continuous 'history' of 'ownership', or possibly as a power-fantasy by a non-dominant group. The problematic propagandistic importance of depicting Israelite history as an

unbroken chain, and notions of sacred geography and their impact on current affairs has been described, e.g. in Masalha (2007, p.167).

The community is depicted as having utopian hopes, and they explore the country that was promised to them as being utopian. The utopian grandeur is mixed with anti-utopian imagery of being assimilated ('a land that devours its settlers'), slain, or crushed like insects ('we looked like grasshoppers to them'). Utopia often implicitly defines an in-group. In this passage, a particular attitude towards rival groups is implied, culminating in the 'slander' in verses 32 and 33. Rival tribes inhabit the Promised Land and certain techniques of othering are found, especially in verses 32 and 33, when the Anakites are identified as Nephilim. The Anakites are the only tribe which is fictional in this passage. Identifying them as Nephilim links back to a story found in Genesis 6:1-4, in which divine beings descend from heaven and beget children with human women. The semi-divine offspring are called Nephilim in Genesis and are exterminated by the Great Flood. The re-appearance in Numbers then can be read as an elaborate propagandistic othering strategy that implies that the resident tribes are not actually human and not part of Israel's *Heilsgeschichte*, since they are not mentioned as being among the offspring of those rescued from the Great Flood.

The way utopia and dystopia are mixed and employed as a narrative device, reveals perspectives on obedience to a dominant system of thought. The larger story line presents the idea that utopia may not exist as a sinful act that undermines divine authority. Individuals who express such thoughts of doubt in utopia, we are told, are to be punished and are not favoured by God. The story in its larger framework can be seen as being a call for belief in a utopian ideology. It is a story leading up to the description of an eventually successful conquest of the Promised Land with divine consent, led by

those who believe in the utopia. It establishes an in-group, those who believe in the divinely promised utopia, and deviants, those who remark that utopia is unrealistic; the in-group is rewarded and the deviants are killed. At the same time, the story could serve as an explanation of why utopian circumstances are not part of the authoring (reading, circulating) community's reality: as long as there are realists who keep on pointing out uncomfortable realities, such as the military superiority of rival tribes, and cannot be convinced that reality needs to be overcome by faith in a divine plan, the utopian state cannot arrive.

Thinking of utopia as an empirical geography brings problems with it. In Numbers 13 the 'slandering' spies are ready to abandon hope for utopia, because they see something flawed about the utopian space: It is already settled by others. In a way, the 'slandering' spies, who observe that the land is already inhabited and that a conquest would be a difficult military endeavour to say the least, seem to realise the inherent impossibility of attaining utopia. But this realism is an ideological position that is the subversive one in this particular text. The dominant ideology implied is that if other people(s) are encountered in a geographical space which is propagated as utopian, it is *not* the right reaction to refrain from conquest. It may be possible that this implicit message has served as a template for later utopian enterprises, such as the 'discovery' of America by Columbus, the conquest of Mexico, or the settling of New England.

Of Plymouth Plantation : Tweaking the Justifying Text

I will now demonstrate how specifically Numbers 13 resonates in Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, an account of a Puritan community's journey and settlement in the 'New World', near Cape

Cod in 1620. The report itself includes an account of events leading up to the journey, including immigration to Holland from England hoping to find freedom of religion, some years of dwelling in Holland, and finally the journey to America in 1620. The first few chapters run in more or less continuous prose, for the years 1620 to 1646, the text takes the less prosaic form of annals.

The Bible is a well-known document to Bradford's community and it is a main endeavour in *Of Plymouth Plantation* to outline how the Puritan community is especially favoured by divine providence, a 'chosen' community. Events are either experienced as being divinely sanctioned and uncannily linked to biblical narratives, or purposefully crafted to appear that way in the report:

> [a]fter all, he [Bradford] was telling the story of a new Exodus strikingly similar to the journeys of the Israelites (Bradford 1962, p.21).

It is probably no coincidence that the episode described in chapter 10 of William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* bears remarkable and explicit resemblance to the spy episode of Numbers 13. However, Bradford stresses important discontinuities. Chapter 9 of *Of Plymouth Plantation* closes with the sentence:

> May not & ought not the children of these fathers, rightly say: *Our faithers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness…*(Bradford 1962, p.61).[1]

This links in multiple ways especially but not only to the book of Numbers. Frequently, the Israelites' murmuring against Moses and/or God in the threshold situation of the book of Numbers contains some allusion to not being willing to die in the wilderness for such a vague, dangerous and seemingly hopeless endeavour as

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[1] All citations from Bradford spelled sic.

conquering the Promised Land. God's punishment is, indeed, to kill one generation of Israelites in the desert. This statement not only links the Pilgrims to the wandering Israelites, but also emphasises a certain air of superiority. The Pilgrims will gladly die in the wilderness. They are not about to murmur against their Promised Land, against their God or their leaders. They will not be known to later generations as the generation who rebelled against the gift of a Promised Land. The utopian ideological message of e.g. Numbers 13 implies that if utopia cannot be achieved, it is because of subversive realists who point out that it is an impossible goal. This Puritan account of settling the Promised Land will not be caught committing such a mistake on their supposedly divinely sanctioned progress towards Paradise.

After Bradford sets the scene like this, Chapter 10 speaks of a group of Pilgrims who leave the ship (on which they dwell near Cape Cod, still waiting to find a proper place to settle) to explore the land. 16 armed emissaries encounter '5. or 6. persons with a dogg coming towards them, who were salvages (…)' (Bradford 1962, p.62). The locals flee into the woods and the 16 spies take up pursuit in order to find their settlement, to find out whether they could communicate with them, as the text states. Then, though, we also find statements like this:

> It is recorded in scripture as a mercie to the apostle & his shipwraked company, that the barbarians shewed them no smale kindness in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians, when they mette with them (as after will appeare) were readier to fill their sids full of arrows then otherwise (Bradford 1962, p.60).

The text has also mentioned the Pilgrims being well armed. Such statements set up a scenario that would indicate that in reality, the

Pilgrims are not setting out on a peaceful diplomatic mission, but are prepared for armed combat.

Eventually, the spies lose the Native group's trail. When they find water, Bradford renders the experience in the following way:

> But at length they found water & refreshed them selves, being the first New-England water they drunke of, and was now in thir great thirste as pleasante unto them as wine or bear had been in for-times (Bradford 1962, p.63).

The exaggerated quality of the water found in the unknown place could be linked with the episode of the exaggeratedly large cluster of grapes found in the land 'flowing with milk and honey'. Obviously, the large grape cluster can be read in a number of ways. It could be a literary symbol similar to the New England water that is almost as good as wine or beer. Both are Cockaygne/*Schlaraffenland* tropes and could be explained – or at least made universally understandable – by an experience of arriving in a strange place and therefore expecting strange and wonderful things, and/or experiencing a feeling of relief after a situation in which subsistence was not guaranteed. However, we are of course working with the premise that the biblical story about the spies is a story written and distributed in a specific (different) historic situation, not an account of a literal event. If the large grape cluster is a metaphor for a feeling of awe and wonder upon arrival in a strange land, and/or relief after a period of deprivation, it would mean that it is not an immediate metaphor but one that is so crucial and basic that it has survived in tellings and re-tellings until the episode was eventually written down.

In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the episode even more closely associated with the giant grape episode follows after the discovery of the water that tastes like wine. The 16 Pilgrim spies find an

abandoned village, including graves, a cooking site and a recently harvested corn field. They find:

> heaps of sand […], which they, digging up, found in
> them diverce faire Indean baskets filled with corne, and
> some in eares, faire and good, of diverce colours, which
> seemed to them a very goodly sight (having never seen
> any shuch before) (Bradford 1962, p.63).

The appearance of the corn, which they had never seen before, may have been as marvellous as an unexpectedly large cluster of grapes. An important discontinuity between this text and the biblical parallel episode about finding food in the Promised Land is that this is a site of carefully cultivated produce, not a wild growing cluster picked off a branch. While the spies in Numbers were foraging, the Puritan spies are committing theft. Somewhat later in the text, when Bradford describes finding more corn and beans on another exploration, it is mentioned that:

> the corne and beans they brought away, purposing to
> give them full satisfaction when they should meete with
> any of them (as about some 6. months afterward they
> did, to their good contente) (Bradford 1962, p.64).

This interjection attempts to portray the stealing as buying or borrowing, but there is neither agreement nor contract; the 'vendor' does not know he is 'selling' his corn to the Pilgrims. In fact, the 'vendor' has been chased away into the forest by the well-armed Puritan spies. Being reimbursed (in foreign currency?) some six months later in the middle of the summer does not help to meet immediate needs in the winter. The passage about being glad to finally be able to meet and reimburse the Natives for the food the Pilgrims stole, is a cover-up for theft of food and a grave mistake in planning: leaving to settle in an unknown place at the beginning of winter and not taking enough food supplies. Divine favour is

emphasised when it is said that without having found the corn stash on the first explorative journey and the corn and beans on the second journey, they would not have had any seeds to grow the following year and no food to satisfy immediate demands in the winter.

The spies, taking the corn, return to their base camp. Now Bradford explicitly references Numbers 13:

> […] they returned to the ship, least they should be in fear of their saftie; and tooke with them parte of the corne, and buried up the rest, and so like the men from Eshcoll carried with them of the fruits of the land, & showed their brethren; of which, & their returne, they were marvelusly glad, and their harts incouraged (Bradford 1962, p.63-64).

The biblical large grape episode should not be read as an account of an actual event, but Bradford most certainly references the story to justify an actual event. We might go as far as assuming that he would have understood the biblical story to refer to an actual event. The biblical spies were more or less divinely commanded to harvest local fruit. The excitement of finding this continuity between the Bible and his own experience probably overshadowed the apparent inconsistency that the Bible does not mention the Israelites spies raiding the Amalekites' cultivated produce. Finding (and stealing) the Native tribe's corn is crafted into a miraculous episode: the Pilgrims start their exploration on November 15th. Finding food in November in New England is almost as miraculous as a huge grape.

Bradford does more than just pointing out the parallel of 'chosen' emissaries finding food in a Promised Land and return to their community to show it off. He disregards discontinuities, and implicitly claims the divine sanction of the settling of the land and likens the Pilgrims to the Israelites, a 'chosen' people. But, just like

the citation from the end of Chapter 9 implied a certain moral superiority to the Israelites, the fact that the community to which the Pilgrim spies return is 'marvelusly glad, and their harts incouraged' signals that the Pilgrims see themselves as consciously appreciative of divine favour. The community of Israelites in Numbers 13 is not at all glad. The Israelites are ready to reject the gift of the Promised Land and rebel against God. The Puritans adhere to the biblical ideology of progress to the Promised Land, be it a geographical space or heaven, the ultimate Puritan utopia. Just as the Bible employs the resident tribes as a device to establish its ideology of right and wrong when it comes to achieving divinely promised utopia, the Pilgrims do not see the Native tribes of Cape Cod as more than a divinely sent food cultivator to aid them in their progress towards utopia. Those outside of the 'chosen' group do not come into view as anything but either an inconvenient challenge to achieving utopia or a convenient helper on the 'chosen' community's progress towards it.

Conclusion

We have looked at two snippets from two huge ideologies, without a doubt connected. Bradford manipulates a specific passage from the Bible to emphasise the idea that his community is especially favoured and progressing towards utopia. All non-members of his community are perceived as marginal helpers. There are two 'challenges' here, one manifest historical, one implied, with contemporary relevance. The first one is a challenge posed to the Bible by Bradford. He sees the text as challengeable and changeable. *Of Plymouth Plantation* shows that the Bible is seen as an instruction manual on how to achieve the utopias of Paradise or the Promised Land. The Bible often demonstrates mistakes committed by its protagonists, which

Bradford claims his community did not repeat. The second challenge is dealing with the aftermath of past powerful utopian fervours, which should lead to the realisation that ideas of 'chosen-ness' and utopia are prone to bring about marginalisation of the 'not-chosen' and dystopia.

The Puritans' encounters were interpreted by them in biblical utopian terms. Just like the biblical Promised Land is literarily constructed to seem real (i.e. by giving place names), the Puritans must have thought of their utopian journey as leading to an empirical reality, which is one of the utopian fallacies. Biblical legacy, though, not only includes stories about fantastic clusters of grape. The encounter with another tribe already residing in the Promised Land should signal that this utopia is not an empty land. Numbers 13 establishes that those who see the resident tribes as a reason to refrain from conquest are condemned to death for heresy. Bradford, then, references biblical themes of rebellion and disbelief, but stresses how in these particular 'parallel' situations his own community reacted faithfully. He is proud to report that his group would gladly die in the wilderness, as opposed to the biblical Israelites, who would rebel against such a fate. Furthermore, Bradford's community is glad and encouraged upon finding 'miraculous' food supplies; not so the Israelites. The biblical story of Numbers 13 is explicitly referenced to underline divine sanction of the Puritans' behaviour in their Promised Land. These small instances would support the assumption that Bradford was consciously promoting his own community as just that little bit more 'chosen' than the Israelites.

Just as the Bible is used as a referent to stress the faithfulness of the Puritans, biblical stories are used to justify and interpret real-life actions which show a strong disregard for the Native tribes in favour

of the community thought of as 'chosen'. The Bible does not give a template for diplomacy or respect for other tribes when it comes to promoting the Promised Land as an empirical reality to be conquered by the 'chosen' people. Just as the Canaanite tribes mentioned in the Bible do not play a bigger role in this passage than providing a hook to drive home a point about obedience to dominant ideology, Bradford paves the way to encountering the Promised Land's resident tribes with the same haughty air of 'chosen-ness'; here, the Native tribes serve as a mere cameo in the *Heilsgeschichte* of the Puritans by unknowingly helping them survive on stolen food.

Utopia is made real in a way one might not expect: it is not a realised better society, but a real way to structure and present information about what is seen as a particularly favoured 'us'. This is often done by implicitly or explicitly referring back to the Bible as a document of tremendous cultural importance to the conquerors. The Bible contains a propensity to be developed into a justifier. This essay was concerned with showing how the text was manipulated by Bradford. By extension, it proposes to expose and challenge every manipulative reading of the Bible – historical or contemporary - that seeks to draw from it a convenient justification of a particular ideology.

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