

Ezra Stiles – A Confluence of Congregationalism and Judaism

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Almost two-hundred years after Ezra Stiles was ordained as a minister at Yale University, Edmund Morgan, a student at Yale locates a pile of Stiles writings in a dusty corner of the library. Within the pile of papers, he finds a series of letters between Stiles and Benjamin Franklin ardently arguing against the Stamp Act (Stiles, 1765). Even with his opposition to taxation, Stiles thought it best that the colonies remain under the control of the King of England. Stiles once said, "We have a better chance with aristocracy, whether hereditary or elective, than with monarchy" (Morgan, 1961). Morgan finds this to be an odd political position and digs in deeper into Stiles writings. Thus begins the ten-year development of his book, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles*, a detailed account and interpretation of Stiles life, writings, and theology.

Ezra Stiles (1727-1795) was born the son of the Congregationalist, the Rev. Isaac Stiles in North Haven Connecticut. Ezra was a fourth generation Congregationalist, his great grandfather, John Stiles, Jr., was originally from England and was one of the first Puritans to settle in Connecticut. Stiles' family was in many respects the first citizens of the new world. He had the first-hand view of the challenges the country and Puritans would experience. First were their attempts at reforming the church and then seeking autonomy from England. With this incredible family history and the prominence in the new land that the Stiles' achieved it was sure to have been a catalyst to Ezra's education and future.

This time was the period of the Great Awakening, and even though Ezra was, only a boy of twelve, he kept detailed diaries documenting all the great people he had come in contact. One influential preacher was Jonathan Edwards, an old acquaintance of his father. Edwards explained to the young Ezra (who was expected to become a preacher) that, "The object of his preaching has been to make sinners aware of their total dependence on Christ." Edwards further said that his, "object was to produce a conviction of such utter humiliation and helplessness, that the sinner would have no place left to put his hope except in Christ" (Morgan, P. 24). These methods of preaching were in stark contrast to the preaching methods of his father, Isaac Stiles. The methods Ezra was familiar with were warm and inviting and did not impose terror in the congregant's hearts. Conversion was the task. Preachers, like Isaac Stiles, who took a gentler approach, became the victims of other preacher's pressures to conform to more violent methods of preaching. Young Ezra witnessed this abuse of his father by many of the the most zealous preachers of the time. It was here that he formed opinions that would help shape the ministry and works he was to do in the future.

Morgan found Stiles to be an intellectual whose curiosity was omnivorous. It was because Stiles was more receptive to new ideas than he was creative, a discussion of Stiles is as much a study of the times as it is of the man (Morgan, 1962, P vii). When Stiles graduated from Yale in 1749, he delivered the valedictory oration. Rather than speak of individual accomplishments, he spoke of

the topics of religious liberty, and the benefits found in the pursuit of knowledge. These were not words expected from a Congregationalist whose university education was Calvinist based. They came from somewhere much deeper and of a greater more understanding of the future.

During his time at Yale, he struggled with the Calvinist doctrines. Stiles applied Newton's methods of scientific analysis to religion, "He had learned that Newton's method was to discard the authority of great Names and ingenious Hypothesis in philosophy" (Morgan, P. 66). By applying this notion to traditional religious beliefs, he decides that the Christian doctrine drawn up by the ministers in England a hundred years earlier was "no authoritative Standard of Truth" (Morgan, P. 67). It is here where Stiles rejects the powerful authorities and bible. Though not ready to doubt the existence of G-d, he requires more proof than the scriptures written by men whom he believes are already suspect in motive.

Stiles digs deeply into the origins of Christianity by comparing the Scriptures with other historical sources. He believes they contain accurate accounts of historical events, but questions the authenticity of the New Testament. Morgan relates from Stiles writings,

"the apostles could not have conspired in so uniform a Testimony of the Fact, in opposition to Jew and Idolaters, at different Times and Countries, when separate and together, in all circumstances, without betraying

contradictions of Facts, and absurd Representations of their Master's Doctrine" (Morgan, P. 68)

It is here where Stiles reaches back to the Old Testament and the prophesy of the diaspora of the Jews, and finds evidence that the Bible (Torah) is divinely inspired. When the Puritans first came to America it was the understanding that this land was to be the New Israel, yet while many of the Puritans were fascinated with the Jewish religion, few maintained any level of association with the few Jews that existed in the area at the time (Hoberman, 2011). Still seeking to believe in G-d, he continues to struggle with Christianity and leans towards the teachings of Moses as it is without the idea of original sin. While some of his statements and thoughts were not fully developed at the time, history reveals that these beliefs remained with him his entire life.

Even with these radical thoughts, the university offered him a teaching position, which he remained at until 1755 taking full advantage of every opportunity to learn about different cultures and religions. During that time, he preached in New Haven for a while but then left the ministry briefly to practice law. However, G-d kept calling him, and he left law to take the position of pastor for the Second Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island

Newport, R.I. in the mid 1700s was the fourth wealthiest city in America. this was due to the trading and shipping activities with Europe and the Caribbean. One unique benefit that aided commerce was Rhode Island's liberal self-

government that appointed its own customs agents (Butler, 2008). Some considered the practices to border on piracy at times while others found it to be a way of business without taxation from the King. In addition to the colony with liberal trade, Rhode Island had large religious tolerance making it a comfortable place for people of different faiths to visit and settle (Hoberman, 2011).

The financial life of a pastor is rarely flush, to that end Stiles takes on the position as Librarian at the Redwood Library and Athenaeum. Redwood, founded in 1747, is one of the oldest community libraries in the United States. The library served as an information center for those seeking cultural, international, and legal information. As such, Stiles is in the most precious location to meet distinguished sea captains, merchants, and travelers. As a child Stiles kept copious notes about the people, he continued this practice here, and compiled a formidable collection of people with whom he also developed direct relationships.

One relationship Stiles develops is with Aaron Lopez, a Portuguese Jewish merchant and philanthropist. Lopez is also the primary patron of the Redwood Library, and leading donor to the establishment of the Touro Synagogue. At the age of forty, Lopez amasses such wealth that he is the wealthiest person in Newport, Rhode Island and the entire British America. However, Lopez is not just trading spices; he had sent more than 347 slave ships to Africa, making him the most powerful slaver in the colonies. While today we find the history and methods of colonial slavers repugnant, it is important to look at men like Lopez

within the context of the times. Slavery was an industry, and despite what was a moral atrocity it was a legal form of business. One day Lopez presented Stiles with a 10-year old Negro slave as a present. Stiles named the boy "Newport."

Newport is the center of commerce and the most tolerant of religions in British America. It was in 1773 that that Rabbi Raphael Haim Isaac Carregal, came to Newport. He is the first known Rabbi to visit the Colonies. Carregal had been traveling for the previous twenty years though Palestine, Constantinople, Curacao, London, Jamaica, Philadelphia, and New York. While his time in Newport was similar in nature to his other locations, he develops a deep and meaningful friendship with Ezra Stiles. So impressed with each other Stiles studied with Carregal weekly for six months learning about the Holy Land and the Kabbalah. Fluent in Hebrew from his time at Yale, Stiles had translated much of the Old Testament to English. He believed that it was important for Christian scholars to understand the Old Testament without denominational influence (Morgan, 1962). Carregal's stay in Newport was short, though his friendship and correspondence with Stiles continues until his death in 1777.

Stiles, helps establish the College in The English Colony of Rhode Island (now Brown University) on a plantation donated by Aaron Lopez. However with the impending war and the arrival of British troops in Newport Stiles moves up the coast to Portsmouth, New Hampshire where he becomes pastor of the Congregational Church in 1777. However, Stiles needed to do more than preach

to a small congregation. He received an appointment as President of Yale University in 1778, where he remained until his death.

Stiles understood the effects the Revolutionary War had on religion and the Church. While he had an affinity for principles of Judaism, he was a Congregationalist by birth. This confluence of religion was a conflict he seemed to have struggled with his entire life. In a famous 1783 sermon "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor" Stiles says; "This will be a great, a very great nation... when the Lord shall have made his American Israel high above all nations..." Stiles says these words fully understanding the challenges the nation was to face regarding free religion. He goes on to say:

Religion may here receive its last, most liberal, and impartial examination... Here Deism will have its full chance; nor need libertines more to complain of being overcome by any weapons but the ...argument and truth. Revelation will be found to stand the test to the ten thousandth examination (Stiles, 1783).

Had Stiles been a Deist this entire time? Alternatively, had he finally reached the station in life when he was able to say what he truly felt about religion? Had he found sufficient evidence to prove an existence of a creator? It appears when examining Ezra Stiles' life that he knew the answer to these questions early in life when Jonathan Edwards made him think in an alternative manner about a relationship with G-d. He just spent a lifetime proving it.

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