"Divine Judgments upon us":
Responding to the Throat Distemper in Westborough, Massachusetts

by Ross W. Beales, Jr.[1]

In October 1736, nine-year-old Ebenezer Parkman of Westborough, Massachusetts, became ill, first with vomiting and a fever, followed by a sore throat that his father, the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman, believed were symptoms of the throat distemper, an outbreak of diphtheria that was sweeping through New England. Parkman was well aware of the deaths among children that accompanied the illness. His response to a disease that had no known origin or effective treatment was both typical and appropriate in a culture that saw the hand of God in all things and God's judgments in response to the sins of individuals and an entire people. As he wrote in his diary, "I Desire to Humble my Self under the mighty Hand of God as for the Sins of the Land in General that have brought Divine Judgments upon us So for my own Family's Sins, and my own personal Offences" (Oct. 18, 1736).[2]

My focus in this paper is on Westborough, where scores of children died from diphtheria and other contagious diseases, and on the diary of Ebenezer Parkman, the town's minister from 1724 to 1782. Westborough's deaths from the throat distemper mirrored the wider phenomenon,

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[2]Dates in parentheses throughout the text of this paper refer to Parkman's diary. The extant portions of the diary through 1755 (except 1736 and 1742, which were acquired by the American Antiquarian Society in 1985) appear in Walett, ed., *The Dairy of Ebenezer Parkman, 1703-1782.* Part of the diary for 1737 and Nov. 1778 through 1780 are printed in *The Diary of Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, of Westborough, Mass., for the Months of February, March, April, October and November, 1737, November and December of 1778, and the Years of 1779 and 1780*, ed. Harriette M. Forbes ([Westborough:] Westborough Historical Society, 1899). Unpublished portions of the diary are held by AAS (1736; 1742; 1756 - May 1761; June 1764 - June 1769; Nov. 10-21, 1772; June 1773 - Oct. 1778) and by the MHS (Aug. 1771 - June 1773; 1781-1782). For Clifford K. Shipton's sketch of Parkman, see John Langdon Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts* (18 vols.; Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Boston, 1873-1999), 6:511-27. A transcription of the entire extant diary may be found at The Ebenezer Parkman Project: http://www.ebenezerparkman.org.

with deaths not only in the 1730s but also in the decades down to the Revolution.[3] What sets Westborough apart is the survival of major portions of Parkman's diary. His almost daily entries provide an understanding of his ministry to the people of Westborough; his attempts to explain the throat distemper through his choice of texts for sermons; and some responses of his parishioners to the illness.[4] In addition, he often noted the cause of death and recorded deaths that were not registered with the town clerk.[5]

The throat distemper, at least in its New England phase, began on May 20, 1735, in Kingston, New Hampshire, when John Morgan's son Parker died. About a week later and four miles away, three of Jeremiah Webster's children died within three days. As Ernest Caulfield notes, "there was something unusual about the deaths of these four children, each with the same short illness." The deaths were the beginning of an extraordinary period of childhood mortality in Kingston: by the end of December, there had been 102 deaths in a town that had averaged

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[3]Parkman's son Breck reported two cases of the throat distemper in August 1791, with Phineas Brigham's child dying of the "Throat ail" and Matthew Woods's child of "the throat distemper." Diary of Breck Parkman (Parkman Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society), Aug. 18, 23, 1791.

[4]Beyond the scope of this short paper are questions of (1) the impact, if any, of the throat distemper on church membership, and (2) the demographic impact of multiple deaths of children. With respect to the impact on church membership, Cedric Cowing found none. See "Sex and Preaching in the Great Awakening," *American Quarterly* 20, No. 3 (Aut. 1968), 627-28, n. 8, 11. Cowing examined the records of thirty churches in Massachusetts, eleven churches in Connecticut, three in Rhode Island, and four in New Hampshire, and I have not been able to discern an impact in Westborough.

H. Louis Stettler, III, examined the impact of the throat distemper on family size and suggests that "the demographic experience of New England families during the diphtheria epidemic of 1734-40 supports the speculation that changes in the death rate stimulate adjustments in the birth rate — that children who died during the epidemic were, in part, replaced." H. Louis Stettler, III, "The New England Throat Distemper and Family Size," in Herbert E. Klarman, ed., *Empirical Studies in Health Economics: Proceedings of the Second Conference on the Economics of Health* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 26. Daniel Scott Smith points out that Stettler's conclusions "may be questioned since he failed to compare the post-epidemic record of families of the same size or women of the same age at the time of the outbreak. His data (Table 2, p. 23) merely confirm the probabilistic point that the chance a family will lose a child increases with the number of children already born." Daniel Scott Smith, "The Demographic History of Colonial New England," *Journal of Economic History* 32, No. 1 (Mar. 1972), 182, n. 21. In fact, there is a more basic point to make: in an era before the practice of family limitation, women would continue to bear children until menopause or death, whichever came first.

[5]For example, in the years 1740-1741, the published vital records list twenty-three deaths, while Parkman noted nine more, bringing the total to thirty-two. Of the total, he attributed twelve to the throat distemper. He recorded one stillbirth; a death attributed to the "Iliack passion"; and the death of a mother and a newborn infant soon after childbirth. The published vital records are *Vital Records of Westborough, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin P. Rice, 1903), hereafter cited as *WVR*.

fewer than ten each year.[6] What happened in Kingston was repeated in communities throughout New England in the following months and years. This was diphtheria, or the "throat distemper," as many contemporaries called it.

Ancient writers described diphtheria,[7] but the disease seems to have become especially lethal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Spain, the year 1613 became known as the "year of strangulations," and in the English colonies, there were "mild attacks,"[8] to use John Duffy's words, before the Kingston outbreak. Cotton Mather reported that in 1659 a "Malady of Bladders in the Windpipe, invaded and removed many Children."[9] And three months before the Kingston outbreak, the area around Elizabethtown, New Jersey, was struck by the throat distemper.[10]

As a minister, Parkman was in a unique position to record information about illnesses and deaths in Westborough and surrounding towns. That said, there is a necessary caution. The language that he and his contemporaries used to describe illnesses was, in many cases, imprecise and overlapping. As John Duffy points out, "Contemporary observers confronted with diphtheria and scarlet fever gave them many names: throat disease; throat distemper; throat ail;

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[6]Ernest Caulfield, *A True History of the Terrible Epidemic Vulgarly Called the Throat Distemper Which Occurred in His Majesty's New England Colonies between the Years 1735 and 1740* (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Beaumont Medical Club by the Yale Journal of Biology & Medicine, 1939, 10, 13.

[7]https://timelines.issarice.com/wiki/Timeline_of_diphtheria (accessed Feb. 7, 2021).

[8]John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971 [1953]), 113.

[9]Ibid., 115.

[10]The Rev. Jonathan Dickinson described the Elizabethtown outbreak in his *Observations on that Terrible Disease Vulgarly Called the Throat-Distemper. With Advices as to the Method of Cure. In a Letter to a Friend* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1740). His *Observations* is reprinted (along with Caulfield, *True History,* William Douglass, *Practical History of a New Epidemical Eruptive Miliary Fever* [1736], and Jabez Fitch, *Account of the Numbers That Have Died* [1736]), in *Disease and Society in Provincial Massachusetts: Collected Accounts, 1736-1939* ("Medicine & Society in America," ed. Charles E. Rosenberg; New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1972). A transcription of Dickinson's *Observations* is at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N03682.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext.

In the following years, outbreaks of diphtheria continued: in 1742; again in 1744-45 in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New York; in Pennsylvania in 1746; in Massachusetts in 1747-48; in South Carolina in 1750-51; in various parts of New England in the first half of the 1750s; again in the 1760s in communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut as well as in Philadelphia. Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America*, 122-28.

canker ail; malignant quinsies; putrid, malignant, or pestilential sore throat; malignant croup; cynanche trachealis; angina suffocativa; and malignant angina. These terms," Duffy notes, "are confusing because many of them were applied to other diseases as well."[11]

Although Parkman's diary for 1735 is not extant, we can be certain that he knew about the disease through newspaper accounts, correspondence, word-of-mouth news, and visits with family, friends, and colleagues in Boston and Cambridge.[12] In late 1735, Governor Jonathan Belcher of Massachusetts issued a proclamation for "a Day of solemn Prayer and Humiliation with Fasting…on account of the unusual, malignant and mortal Distemper…by which great Numbers, especially of the younger People, have been removed by Death; there being great Danger that the said Sickness will become more epidemical."[13] The fast was to be on January 8, 1736, and for that occasion Parkman preached on 1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." As he noted, fifteen-year-old Stephen Maynard was "very ill, and we fear of that Distemper."[14] He prayed that God would "Sanctifie his sickness to *him*, and to *all our Youth*; that both the Word and Providences of God may be very awakening to them -- nay unto *all*!!" (Jan. 8, 1736). He visited Maynard the next day, and, much to his surprise, "instead of…a Corps," the teenager was "most strangely altered for the better -- his Swelling gone down, his breathing Easy, his Fever low, had Slept well, and

[11]Duffy, *Epidemics*, 114-15.

[12]See *Boston News-Letter*, Aug. 21 and 28, 1735; *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 25, 1735; *New-England Weekly Journal*, Aug. 26, 1735. On Parkman's reading of newspapers, see Ross W. Beales, Jr., "Ebenezer Parkman's World of Print: A Country Parson and the Print Culture of Eighteenth-Century Anglo-America," *Library and Information History* 31:4 (Nov. 2015), 229-57. Parkman regularly visited his parents and his brothers Samuel and William in Boston as well as his in-laws in Cambridge; attended Harvard commencements and the annual convention of ministers; and received verbal reports from Westborough residents who marketed goods in Boston. Parkman used the term "Kingston Distemper" on March 10, 1736, but did not write "throat distemper" until Feb. 13, 1740.

[13]Caulfield, *True History*, 34, quoting the *Boston News-Letter*, Dec. 18-25, 1735.

[14]Sermon 838-839, Parkman Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society), Box 1, Folder 3. Stephen, the son of John and Hephzibah Mainard [Maynard], was b. Aug. 20, 1720; *WVR*, 69.

the Doctor said he began to Mend while we were at Meeting yesterday in the Afternoon. Glory be to the Omnipotent and most Gracious God!" (Jan. 9, 1736).

While Parkman attributed Maynard's recovery to the fast and a gracious God, perhaps Maynard's age worked to his benefit. Parkman, too, was fortunate. Despite his large family,[15] only three of his children were infected with the throat distemper, and they survived. As noted above, in October 1736, his nine-year-old son, Ebenezer, "was taken with vomiting and a Fever followed" (Oct. 17). The next day, he had a "Strong Fever and a Sore Throat," followed by "great Confusion in his understanding and Talk" (Oct. 18). A day later, Dr. Benjamin Gott of Marlborough visited Parkman's son. While not specific about what Gott did, Parkman's diary suggests an examination: "The Canker rose very visibly upon the inside of his Throat but not Swelled a great Deal nor very troublesome to him," and his fever was "not so high" (Oct. 19). Parkman wrote nothing about any treatment, and the next day his son was "composed and Easier, and the Fever much lower" (Oct. 20), and two days later he was well enough for his parents to bring him down to the dining room. Gott made another visit, but Parkman wrote nothing about it (Oct. 22).

A week later, his seven-year-old son Thomas developed a sore throat that "Swelled outwardly on both Sides" (Oct. 29). He was no better the next day but had no fever, "and the swelling," his father wrote, was "most outwardly" (Oct. 30). A day later, Thomas was "in Much the Same State," with "the Swelling on Each side very hard." Thomas survived, as did Parkman's twenty-five-year-old daughter Sarah in a still later outbreak (Feb. 1, 1769).[16]

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[15]Parkman married twice. His first wife, Mary or Molly (Champney), bore five children. In addition to two miscarriages, his second wife, Hannah (Breck), bore eleven children. Of the sixteen children, two died in the first months of life, with the others surviving at least into their twenties.

[16]During another outbreak of the throat distemper in 1754, Parkman's grandson became sick; his parents "fear'd of the Throat Distemper; but tis hop'd otherwise" (Jan. 16, 1754). The grandson, also named Ebenezer, survived the illness.

Parkman's relatives in Boston and Cambridge were also affected, and one of them died. Again, age may have been a factor in the survival of most of them, but his brother Samuel's five-year-old daughter, Dorcas, was "taken with Sore Throat" and died six days later (Apr. 29, 1736).

Parkman's references to his children's illnesses underline two important points about the medical response to the throat distemper. First, with one possible exception, Parkman mentioned no treatment for the patients. He himself did nothing, and if the doctors who visited his children tried any remedies, Parkman did not record them. The exception is a reminder of a second point: the problem of the language that Parkman and others used to describe illnesses. In 1746, when Parkman's twenty-year-old daughter Molly became ill, Dr. Gott gave her a "physick." This was apparently a purgative, as Parkman noted the next day that she "took another part of her purge" (Sept. 1). Did she have the throat distemper?

A closer examination of the deaths in late 1745 and 1746 provides detail and a tentative answer. Between late November 1745 and May 1746, several families in Westborough and surrounding towns were affected by what Parkman called the throat distemper, with his last use of the term on May 27.[17] Two months later, the town was devastated by illness and death. Between August 23 and October 15, Parkman attended twenty-five funerals.[18] The first death was that of three-year-old Lydia Cook who succumbed to "the Fever and Flux." As Parkman noted, "This Distemper begins to Spread among us" (Aug. 24). Another child, one of Richard and Elizabeth Barns's twins, died on the same day, with the other twin succumbing the next day; they were buried in the same coffin (Aug. 25). When Molly Parkman became "ill and full of

[17]For specific uses of the term "throat distemper," see Nov. 22, Dec. 4, 1745; Jan. 28, May 27, 1746.

[18]"This is the 25th since August 23" (Oct. 15, 1746). There were at least thirty-two deaths in Westborough in 1746, but only eighteen were reported to the town clerk, with Parkman's diary providing information about the other fourteen. Adults accounted for only five deaths; there was one stillbirth; and one neonatal death. The other twenty-five deaths were children, twenty of whose ages can be determined. The oldest was 9 years; the youngest, eleven months. Fifteen of the children were under the age of five.

pain," she seemed "to have the Same Distemper" as Parkman's neighbors (Aug. 30). In response to this "gloomy Time," the church agreed to a "Day of Fasting and Prayer" (Aug. 31), and when the day came, Parkman attributed the fast to "the great Mortality among us" (Sept. 4), without specifying the throat distemper.[19] It could have been the throat distemper, but the word "flux" suggests that Lydia Cook may have had dysentery. In late September, Parkman visited thirty-three-year-old Persis Rice who was "ill of the Same Distemper (Fever and Flux) which is so Common among Children" (Sept. 27); she died two weeks later (Oct. 9). In mid-October, two of Parkman's children, five-year-old Billy and one-year-old Suse, were "somewhat indispos'd with Flux, but (through Divine Goodness) run about yet" (Oct. 13).[20] A few days later, Parkman visited twelve-year-old Abigail Whipple who was "very ill of the Common Distemper" (Oct. 22),[21] and still later he reported that Abner Newton's family was "Sick of the Bloody Flux" (Oct. 27). All of this suggests that the extreme mortality in Westborough in the eight weeks between August 23, and October 15, 1746, was due to dysentery, not the throat distemper. As John Duffy notes, after the 1730s, dysentery "climbed to first position among epidemic diseases afflicting New England. Year after year outbreaks occurred and rarely did a five-year period elapse without at least one major epidemic."[22]

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[19]Rev. Nathan Stone of Southborough preached the morning sermon on Heb. 3:7-8, "Wherefore as the Holy Ghost saith, To-day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness." Rev. Samuel Barrett of Hopkinton preached the afternoon sermon on Ps. 37:2, "For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb."

[20]Parkman later noted that "Billy has a Bloody Flux, but helps about House" (Oct. 18). After visiting Abigail Whipple, who was "very ill of the Common Distemper," Parkman noted that "Billy is ill of the Same, yet runs about" (Oct. 22).

[21]Abigail, dau. of Francis and Abigail Whipple, b. July 6, 1734; *WVR*, 105.

[22]Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America*, 219. Quoting Parkman's diary, Duffy notes that "many children [were] taken away" in Shrewsbury in 1745 (ibid., 220), but he somehow missed the outbreak in Westborough. After visiting Bezaleel Eager's family, Parkman noted that "Their sickness is Fever and Flux which greatly prevails in Shrewsbury and many children are taken away" (Sept. 6, 1745).

Parkman was not among the preacher-physicians whose ministries and ministrations have been celebrated in colonial New England.[23] While he kept a booklet of receipts for various illnesses, he never mentioned using them either for members of his family or for residents of Westborough. He had three specific receipts to treat the throat distemper, but, as far as the diary informs us, those receipts remained on paper.[24]

While not a physician, he was a minister who visited the sick and dying, attended funerals, consoled the grieving, and preached in the midst of and in anticipation of death. For the most part, he only recorded the fact of a visit, not what he did or how a family responded either to illness and death or to their minister's visit. Twelve-year-old John Newton is one exception. When Parkman attended the burial of John's fifteen-year-old brother Peter, he noted that John was "very ill" (July 30, 1751). When he returned to the Newton home two days later, John was "dangerously ill" (Aug. 1). The next day, "being near his End," John sent for Parkman and asked the minister to repeat, as Parkman wrote, "the Discourse I had with him yesterday." Parkman, who also prayed with him, did not describe the "Discourse" (Aug. 2), but it is reasonable to assume that he wanted John to be prepared for death. John died that night.

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[23]See Patricia A. Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physician of Colonial New England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). On the relationship between the work of Dr. William Douglass and the Rev. Jonathan Dickinson, see Bryan F. Le Beau, "The 'Angelical Connection' Revisited: Another Look at the Preacher-Physician in Colonial America and the Throat Distemper Epidemic of 1735-1740," *Journal of American Culture* 18, No. 3 (Fall 1995), 1-12.

[24]Timothy Bryant of Middleborough wrote a six-page "Receipt to Cure the Throat Distemper," dated Jan. 3, 1754; Parkman Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society), Box 2, Folder 5. See: http://nehh-viewer.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/#/content/ParkmanEbenezer/viewer/Personal20papers2C20171217722C20undated/95.

Parkman made extracts from a "Method of Cure" for the throat distemper that Jacob Ogden of Jamaica, Long Island, published in New York and Boston newspapers in 1769. See: http://nehh-viewer.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/#/content/ParkmanEbenezer/viewer/Personal20papers2C20171217722C20undated/147. Ogden's letter of Oct. 28, 1769, and a later letter, Sept. 14, 1774, were reprinted in the *Medical Repository* 5 (New York, 1802), 97-103. See: https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Medical_Repository_And_Review_Of_Ame/dphbAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Medical+Repository+Jacob+Ogden+1802&pg=PA97&printsec=frontcover.

He also compiled an alphabetical list of diseases and their treatment, including the "Terrible & Mortal Throat Disease." See: http://nehh-viewer.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/#/content/ParkmanEbenezer/viewer/Personal20papers2C20171217722C20undated/140.

On another occasion, Phinehas Gleason came to Parkman with word of "the very low State" of his thirteen-year-old daughter, Katharine, who, Parkman noted, "would be glad to See me." Parkman found her "very bad; her Throat much Swelled – her speech greatly altered." She was, Parkman found, "very humble, penitent, and earnest." He talked and prayed with her (Aug. 4, 1770). Five days later, she died. These cases were exceptional because of John Newton's and Katharine Gleason's ages. Younger children, who were more likely to die during the epidemic, were much less likely to hear a "Discourse" or to be "very humble, penitent, and earnest."[25]

The grief of parents whose children were ill and had died is reflected in some entries in Parkman's diary. When his niece Dorcas died, he received "a Mournfull Letter" from his brother Samuel (Apr. 29, 1736). After the burial of Isaac Amsden's only son, Parkman returned to Amsden's home "to afford him…consolation…under his melancholy circumstances" (Apr. 1, 1737). At the funeral of two of the children of Joseph Tainter, Parkman "pray'd upon this sorrowful Occasion" (Feb. 13, 1740). The death of the Rev. Aaron Smith's four-year-old daughter Mary was, in Parkman's words, "a very grievous Loss to the poor bereav'd Parents" (Sept. 3, 1745). When seven-year-old Sarah Baker was so ill that she could "hardly fetch a Breath," Parkman visited the family and "prayed with them in their Distresses" (Dec. 6, 1767).

Parents whose children were ill not only prayed in private but also asked for public prayers. Requests for public prayers in time of illness and loss, as well as expressions of thanksgiving for recovery, were a universal part of services in the New England churches.[26] It is not surprising that parishioners in Westborough requested prayers in the face of the ravages of

[25]On another occasion, Parkman visited Ebenezer Forbush's daughters, nineteen-year-old Betty and thirteen-year-old Patty, and "Instructed, and prayed with them" (July 17, 1776). Elizabeth, dau. Ebenezer and Lucy Forbush, b. Jan. 29, 1757; Martha, dau. Ebenezer and Lucy Forbush, b. Sept. 23, 1762. *WVR*, 48, 49. Both Betty and Patty survived.

[26]Ross W. Beales, Jr., "Public Prayers and Public Thanks in Eighteenth-Century Westborough, Massachusetts," New England Historical Association, Fall Conference, October 17, 2020 (virtual).

the throat distemper. On a Sunday in 1736, Parkman noted that Samuel Allen was "Sick of the Distemper, and he was prayed for" (July 18). On another Sunday, he noted the names of those for whom prayers were requested "being Sick of the Throat Distemper" (Aug. 31, 1740). On a later occasion, prayers were offered "for no less than Six Children," three of whom had "a malignant Fever," while the others had "the Canker or Throat Distemper" (Nov. 12, 1749). As he wrote on a Saturday in October, 1756, "This has been a very remarkable Week for mortality among us," with either a death or a funeral on each day since the last Sabbath (Oct. 9). Not surprisingly, at the next day's service, there were "18 Notes and Requests for Prayers" (Oct. 10). Five weeks later, when much of the mortality seemed to have passed, a number of persons gave "Thanks for recovery" (Nov. 21, 1756). Requests for public prayers had both individual and communal function, with the individual seeking God's mercy and at the same time requesting support from the community.

While prayers, whether private or public, were woven into the fabric of religious life, Sarah Billings' response to her children's deaths was decidedly unusual and outside the scope of expected responses. After the death of her daughter Jane, the third of her children to die within a week, "a Story had got about of a Dream." Billings confirmed to Parkman that, in her dream, "She Saw a man bring the Coffin of her youngest Child into the House, upon which She took on; but presently there came in another Man with a large Coffin, and said to her that She had not need to take on for her Child for here was a Coffin for herself also, for she Should die next." Even more unusual, a Mr. Hale, who lived near the burying ground, was said to have seen "a large Coffin (as well as a small one) in the air just over the Burying place" after the burial of two of the Billings children. Parkman's response was to cite 2 Peter 1:19, "We have also a more sure

word of prophecy"[27] (Sept. 16, 1745). In other words, look to Scripture, not to dreams or visions.[28]

And it was to scripture that Parkman and his colleagues turned when they preached in response to illnesses such as the throat distemper. The texts reminded parishioners of God's wrath, their sinful and backsliding natures, their deserved punishments, and the need to repent and reform. The texts that the ministers chose may seem gloomy to the modern mind, but that suggests how far removed we are from a world view in which God's judgments were deserved and the people's sinful natures evident in their daily lives and shortcomings. The calamities of nature (for example, drought, earthquakes, and epidemic disease) were evidence of God's judgments upon a sinful people and a call for individual and collective reformation.

Some texts were especially appropriate in response to the throat distemper – for example, Micah 6:9, "The Lord's voice crieth unto the city, and the man of wisdom shall see thy name: hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it."[29] Parkman used that text for sermons at fasts in Shrewsbury (Sept. 11, 1740) and Upton (Dec. 14, 1758) and also from the Westborough pulpit on three occasions relating to the throat distemper (Aug. 31, Sept. 14, 1740; Nov. 24, 1745).[30]

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[27]2 Peter 1:19, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts."

[28]Parkman had a different concern the next year when two of Cornelius Cook's children died. His "little Sarah" died on August 26, 1746, and when Parkman went to the funeral the next day, he learned that Cook's son Solomon had died that morning. Deacon Josiah Newton and "some others" wanted to have both children buried that day, something that Parkman was not willing to countenance. The burial of both children, he wrote, "might soon have caus'd evil Report of Mr. Cook that he Should so soon hurry his Children into the Grave, as if having many of them and being an odd man he was afraid they should come to life again" (Aug. 27, 1746). A double burial was not unusual, but Cook was, at least in Parkman's perception. We might hypothesize a tenuous link between Cook and Mrs. Billings. Cook, whom Parkman described as "an odd man," was a blacksmith, and so, too, was Sarah Billings's husband, Thomas. Did blacksmiths have a reputation, deserved or not, for unusual behavior? When Lucy Keyes was lost on Mt. Wachusett, Thomas Smith, rather than joining the search parties, "went to a Wise-Man (Mr. Williams Wood a blacksmith in Scituate nigh Providence) to know where Mr. Keys's lost Child might be found" (Apr. 23, 1755). Parkman responded by preaching "against the foolish and wicked practice of going to Cunning Men to enquire for lost Things" (Apr. 27, 1755).

[29]Parkman's sermon on Micah 6:9 is reminiscent of the jeremiads that Perry Miller analyzes in "Declension in a Bible Commonwealth," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 51, No. 1 (Apr. 1941), 14-49.

[30]Parkman returned several times to 1 Peter 5:6, the text that he had used for the fast in early 1736. He preached on that text in at a fast in Marlborough "on account of the Sickness in that Town" (Mar. 12, 1740); again in

In the sermons,[31] he reminded his audience that "the Glorious God is the Superintendent and Sovereign Ruler of Heaven and Earth, That not So much as any Smallest Accident falls out without His overruling Hand." Indeed, "when God almighty sees meet to inflict such a Judgment as this of the wasting Sickness, He has Something Special in View." Was not his voice as "loud and terrible as Thunder declaring to us that He has a Controversie with us; that He Contends, and pleads, and Commands?" Clearly, the people at every level had "forsaken" God's law: "If we Should look up above us to our Rulers, or round about us to our Equals, if we look without, or examine ourselves within, we are, of all Orders and ages full of Iniquitys and Abominations of almost every kind." He listed the range of the people's sins: "Atheism and Infidelity," "Pride, vain Confidence and Security," "Envys and Discontent," "Grudgings of Heart, burnings, Strifes and Feuds, Hypocrisy and lifeless Formality, Unfaithfulness, Lying and horrible Profaneness, Sabbath breaking and a Spirit of Disobedience and Resistance, worldliness and Sensuality, Luxury and Intemperance, Lewdness and uncleanness, Dishonesty, unrighteousness and grievous Oppressions" to which he added "incorrigibleness and Insensibility."

What was a sinful people to do? Remember, he urged, "how gracious God has been to us and to our Fathers in this Land." God had treated them with "So much tender Mercy and

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Hopkinton "on account of the Throat Distemper" (Oct. 2, 1740); and in Shrewsbury "on occasion of the mortal Sickness among them (the Fever and Flux)" (Oct. 10, 1745). He used that text for a fast called "on the Account of the Small pox and other Malignant Distempers at Boston and divers other Towns." In his afternoon sermon that day, he preached on 1 Kings 8:37-38, "If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be;" 1 Kings 8:38, "What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands towards this house." At a fast in Grafton, his text, Hosea 14:1, reminded his audience, "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." Other texts used in response to the throat distemper were Matthew 24:44, "Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh"; and Luke 12:40, "Be ye ready therefore also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not."

[31]Sermons LXXIV-LXXV, Parkman Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society), Box 1, Folder 4.

faithfulness," but in recent years, God had been "forced to Shew His fierce anger against our Sins in Sorer Judgments." The judgment that was now upon the people was the throat distemper, and, as Parkman urged, "we are to Sett ourselves to repenting and reforming." Repentance had to be immediate, unfeigned, and thorough. There were to be no "hypocritical appearances of Repentance." There was "no further room for dallying and lingering, nor for trifling with either God or our own souls." The alternative was bleak: "Otherwise He Swears in His Wrath[32] and we are Swept away as a Flood."

There is no evidence of individual or collective reformation, although that does not mean that Parkman's words failed to strike to the hearts of some of those who heard him. And, of course, there is no evidence that the throat distemper was affected by anything that was said from the pulpit. But Parkman's sermons did provide a context in which a lethal disease could be understood — not, of course, from a medical perspective but rather in the context of a religious world view.

[32]Heb. 3:11, "So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest."