

## Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamations

ROSE S. KLEIN

To what extent did the small American Jewish community figure in President George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamations of 1789 and 1795? At least one of Washington's contemporaries, David Tappan, D.D., Hollisian Professor of Divinity in Harvard College, was of the opinion that Jews as well as Deists were taken into consideration by the President when he worded his proclamations, especially the one he issued in 1795.

The earliest known Thanksgiving proclamation by a Town Council in colonial America appeared at Charlestown, Massachusetts, on June 20, 1676. As would be expected of a Puritan community of that period, the proclamation contained a reference to Jesus Christ. A similar reference to Jesus Christ is found in the first national Thanksgiving proclamation published by the United States Congress on November 1, 1777, and setting aside Thursday, the 18th of December, as a National Thanksgiving Day.<sup>1</sup>

President Washington issued his first proclamation of a National Thanksgiving Day in 1789, but that document is notable for its lack of any reference to Jesus or Christianity. Washington contented himself with an acknowledgment of "the providence of Almighty God . . . that great and glorious being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or will be." Indeed, his only concession to Christology was the fact that he dated the proclamation "the 3rd day of October, A.D. 1789."<sup>2</sup> Washington's only other proclamation for a National Thanksgiving Day — he composed it in 1795 — omitted even the conventional use of "A.D." in the date. The omission may have been deliberate, as the 1795 proclamation

---

Mrs. Klein is the wife of Dr. Joseph Klein, Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Worcester, Massachusetts.

<sup>1</sup> Howard S. J. Sickel, *History of Thanksgiving and Proclamations* (Philadelphia, 1940).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



*Sculpture by Moses Ezekiel*

George Washington



was addressed to "all Religious Societies and Denominations, and to all Persons whomsoever within the United States":

When we review the calamities which afflict so many other Nations, the present condition of the United States affords much matter of consolation and satisfaction. Our exemption hitherto from foreign war — an increasing prospect of the continuance of that exemption — the great degree of internal tranquility, by the suppression of an insurrection which so wantonly threatened it — the happy course of our public affairs in general — the unexampled prosperity of all classes of our Citizens, are circumstances which peculiarly mark our situation with indications of the Divine Beneficence towards us. In such a stage of things it is, in an especial manner, our duty as a People, with devout reverence and affectionate gratitude, to acknowledge our many and great obligations to Almighty God, and to implore Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experience.

Deeply penetrated with this sentiment, I, George Washington, President of the United States, do recommend to all Religious Societies and Denominations, and to all Persons whomsoever within the United States, to set apart and observe Thursday the Nineteenth day of February next, as a Day of PUBLIC THANKSGIVING and PRAYER; and on that Day to meet together, and render their sincere and hearty thanks to the Great Ruler of Nations, for the manifold and signal mercies which distinguish our lot as a nation; particularly for the possession of Constitutions of Government, which unite and by their union establish liberty with order — for the preservation of our Peace foreign and domestic — for the seasonable controul which has been given to a spirit of disorder, in the suppression of the late insurrection — and generally, for the prosperous course of our affairs public and private; and at the same time, humbly and fervently to beseech the Kind Author of these blessings, graciously to prolong them to us — to imprint on our hearts a deep and solemn sense of our obligations to Him for them — to teach us rightly to estimate their immense value — to preserve us from the arrogance of prosperity, and from hazarding the advantages we enjoy by delusive pursuits — to dispose us to merit the continuance of His favors, by not abusing them, by our gratitude for them, and by a correspondent conduct as Citizens and as Men — to render this country more and more a safe and propitious Asylum for the unfortunate of other Countries — to extend among us true and useful knowledge — to diffuse and establish habits of sobriety, order, morality and piety; and finally, to impart all the blessings we possess, or ask for ourselves, to the whole Family of Mankind.

In testimony whereof, I have caused the Seal of the United States of America to be affixed to these Presents, and signed the same with my Hand. Done at the city of Philadelphia, the first day of January, one thou-

sand seven hundred and ninety-five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the nineteenth.<sup>3</sup>

Without doubt, the 1795 proclamation found favor among those who believed in the separation of church and state and in complete religious neutrality on the part of the government. But there were some who regarded so nonsectarian a declaration as an affront to Christianity. Such, indeed, was the opinion of the Rev. Ebenezer Bradford, A.M., pastor of the First Church in Rowley, Mass. Preaching in Charlestown on the morning of the day the President had set aside as a National Day of Thanksgiving, Bradford expressed strong displeasure over the proclamation's failure to salute Jesus Christ and Christianity.

We ought to be thankful for the glorious Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. How this came to be neglected in the Proclamation is a circumstance not only wonderful but truly mortifying to the friends of Christianity: For it is, without exception, the greatest favour ever bestowed on the children of men; and therefore, on occasions like the present, should not be passed over in silence.

To leave Christ, therefore, out of the account, in so important a matter as a National Thanksgiving, must be an unpardonable neglect; for he is our creator, preserver, benefactor and redeemer, and therefore we are bound to do all in his name.

Bradford concluded his sermon with a passionate outburst of religious fervor:

Forget not to cry for a world that lies in sin and wickedness; — Oh! plead with the great Disposer of all events, that all Civil and Ecclesiastical Tyranny may be destroyed from the earth — that Satan's kingdom may be ruined, and Christ's kingdom built up on its ruins — that God's ancient people, the Jews, might be brought to the knowledge of God — that the heathen might be given to his Son, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession — that every heart might glow with love, and every tongue speak forth the praise of the Most High, from the rising to the setting Sun; — Which may God grant, for his dear Son's sake. Amen<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Ebenezer Bradford, *Mr. Bradford's Thanksgiving Sermon. The Nature and Manner of Giving Thanks To God* (Boston, 1795).

Dr. Tappan, of Harvard College, heard Bradford's sermon and decided to enter the controversy. Delivering a sermon to the same congregation on the afternoon of the same day, Dr. Tappan defended the proclamation and took issue with Bradford's criticism of the President:

Mr. B. sever[e]ly censures the omission of the Christian religion and the name of Christ in the appointment of a National Thanksgiving. The attachment of our beloved President to the Christian religion has long been fully evinced by his steady profession of it and attendance on its sacred institutions; by his earnest recommendation of its principles to his fellow-citizens in his circular letter at the close of the late war; by the bright exemplification of its virtues in his public and private life, especially that conspicuous Christian humility and piety, which have distinguished even his political addresses. The omission in question may, therefore, be accounted for, and perhaps fully justified by the following causes: — by the special occasion of the Proclamation, which appears to have been our recent confirmed exemption from foreign and domestic war, joined with our superior national prosperity; — by a modest wish in our Chief Magistrate to appear merely as the political Head of the Union, and not in any sense the Dictator of its religious opinions and worship, and thus to keep at the greatest distance from that spiritual domination, which the monarchs of Christian, as well as other nations have exercised; and finally, by a desire to unite in one general thanksgiving all the inhabitants of our favored land, whether Christians, Jews, or Deists; that those who were joint partakers of the national prosperity might all conspire in celebrating its glorious Author.<sup>5</sup>

Bradford did not let Tappan's defense of the President pass without comment:

The Doctor's next and last argument is the President's "desire to unite in one general Thanksgiving all the inhabitants of our favoured land, whether Christians, Jews, or Deists."

If the Thanksgiving be considered as a political festival only, just to testify to one another and to the world our joy for our prosperous circumstances — then bonfires, sky-rockets and illuminations, with eating, drinking, singing and dancing (which is the most common mode of the world, showing their joy at their prosperity) might answer the purpose. But if the Thanksgiving be considered as a religious festival, the right celebration of which implies such views, exercises and actions as the Doctor urged on his

<sup>5</sup> David Tappan, *Christian Thankfulness* (Boston, 1795).

audience in his Thanksgiving Sermon, I can see no propriety in the omission of the Gospel and the Name of Christ in its appointment.

It is my opinion, as well as the opinion of Dr. [Joseph] Priestly, a gentleman well acquainted with the state of religion in France, that infidelity and atheism is decreasing in that nation; but we have incontestible evidence that both do rapidly increase in America. Therefore, I must take my turn in expressing my surprise that Dr. *Tappan* should speak of Jews, Deists, and Infidels celebrating a Thanksgiving with such raptures, without dropping a single word of his disapprobation of their pernicious and damnable sentiments, as he does in p. 36.<sup>6</sup>

Bradford's intolerance doubtless reflects the view of a goodly percentage of the Christian fundamentalists of his time, but it was the liberal attitude of George Washington as expressed in his Thanksgiving proclamations and the championing of that attitude by men like David Tappan that would become normative in the Republic.

<sup>6</sup> Ebenezer Bradford, *The Nature of Humiliation* (Boston, 1795).

#### NEW LOAN EXHIBITS

The American Jewish Archives is pleased to announce the availability of sixty-one new loan exhibit items. The material will be sent free of charge for a two week period to any institution in the United States and Canada. The only expense involved is the cost of return expressage. The items deal, for the most part, with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Twenty to thirty of them make an adequate exhibit.

Inquiries should be addressed to the Director of the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.