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Faith of the Frontier

During the discovery of North America, there were many explorers and colonists that came from Europe to explore the frontier. They discovered that the continent was not uninhabited, but that natives lived and thrived in North America. The natives were upset that the colonists were taking their land, so in response, the natives attacked and enslaved the colonists and explorers. During their slavery, the colonists and explorers turned toward their religion, Christianity, to keep their spirits high and prayed that they weren’t going to die. Two novels, *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition* and *The Captivity and Restoration*, tells the stories of the authors freedom and explorations before and during their captivity by the natives. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, the author of *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition*, and Mary Rowlandson, the author of *The Captivity and Restoration*, reflected on how their faith grew and it helped them survive hard times during their struggles of captivity. Their faith also informed their actions during their time on the American frontier by asking themselves, what would God do or what would God want me to do? Strong belief in religion was very common during this period because many colonists and explorers moved to the New World to escape religious persecution or to convert the natives to the major religion at the time, Christianity. Both authors believed strongly in Christianity but used their religion differently during their time on the frontier.

Cabeza de Vaca’s journey on the American frontier was all but boring. It started out with one storm after another, which made Cabeza de Vaca believe that God was upset with their journey. During their exploration of the land, they encountered many natives and different tribes. They were attacked many times and men were shot but sometimes “God willed it that they did not wound him” (Cabeza de Vaca 14). Cabeza de Vaca was a believer in God and Christianity, but he became an even stronger believer because of miracles he and God performed on the natives. After many Indian raids and losing members of the expedition, there were only four men left from the beginning group. Cabeza de Vaca was one of the four remaining men who was enslaved by the natives. During his time as a slave, the natives were getting sick and expected Cabeza de Vaca and his companions to heal them. They acted as physicians;

The way we treated the sick was by making the sign of the cross over them, and breathing on them, and reciting a Pater Noster and an Ave Maria, and praying as hard as we could to God our Lord that He might give them good health and inspire them to treat us somewhat well. It was by the will of God and His mercy that all those for whom we prayed told the others that they were well and healthy as soon as we made the sign of the cross over them, and that was why they treated us well, and would go without food in order to feed us, and gave us hides and other little things. (Cabeza de Vaca 35)

This showed Cabeza de Vaca that God was with him and his companions. They used their gift from God to heal natives all around the frontier. Cabeza de Vaca saw his ability to heal people as a chance to convert the natives to Christianity and to help those in need. “We gave many thanks to God, for His mercy and favors were increasing daily.” (Cabeza de Vaca 48). When they healed the natives of their sickness, they were rewarded with food and treasures. This motivated them to continue to move around the frontier and heal the natives because they were being given resources to live off. Cabeza de Vaca used his religion to help heal the natives and promote Christianity in the New World.

Rowlandson’s journey on the frontier was more of a slave life and consisted of more personal hardships than Cabeza de Vaca’s journey. During her time on the frontier, Rowlandson faced many hardships, including the death of her child and the constant mystery of the location of her other children. Rowlandson believed in Christianity and prayed a lot during her time as a slave to keep her spirits high and to hopefully see her family again. “but God was with me in a wonderful manner, carrying me along, and bearing up my spirit, that it did not quite fail.” (Rowlandson 11). During the initial raid of her village, Rowlandson was captured by the natives and thought that she was going to die at the hands of them or by starvation. She turns to God to help her survive her journey with the natives, saying, “Oh, I may see the wonderful power of God, that my Spirit did not utterly sink under my affliction: still the Lord upheld me with His gracious and merciful spirit, and we were both alive to see the light of the next morning.” (Rowlandson 11). Rowlandson was given a Bible by a native as a gift for her hard work and she held onto it like her life depended on it. It gave her strength and hope because she knew that God was going to help her.

And here I may take occasion to mention one principal ground of my setting forth these lines: even as the psalmist says, to declare the works of the Lord, and His wonderful power in carrying us along, preserving us in wilderness, while under the enemy’s hand, and returning of us in safety again. And His goodness in bringing to my hand so many comfortable and suitable scriptures in my distress. (Rowlandson 20)

Rowlandson used her faith to determine whether to live or not. She knew that her husband was alive and prayed that she would be bought from the natives that enslaved her and be sold to her husband. All of Rowlandson’s actions were based on what she believed in and what she read in her Bible. She survived because of her belief in God and used her faith to support her through her journey on the frontier.

Cabeza de Vaca and Rowlandson had similar beliefs and ideas on their religion. They both were Christian but were from two different countries. Cabeza de Vaca was from Spain and his journey on the frontier was about 140 years before Rowlandson journeyed to the New World from England. Cabeza de Vaca believed that his journey was for inhabiting the New World and to find gold. During his journey, he realized that God had intended for him to heal the natives of their sickness and introduce Christianity to them.

And we left the whole country like that, <at peace,> and we told them, using signs that they understood, that in Heaven there was a man we called God, who had created Heaven and earth, and that we worshipped Him and considered Him our Lord,, and that we did all He ordered us to do, and that all good things came from His hand, and that if they would do the same, things would go very well for them…And from there on, when the sun rose, with great shouting they would lift their clasped hands to Heaven and then pass them all over their body, and they would do the same at sunset. (Cabeza de Vaca 75)

Rowlandson was a colonist, unlike Cabeza de Vaca, where she believed that she was living in the New World for a new start from England. When Rowlandson was enslaved by the natives, she realized that God wanted her to keep her head high and survive until she was reunited with her family. “I repaired under these thoughts to my Bible (my greatest comfort in that time) and that Scripture came to my hand, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee” (Pslam 55.22)” (Rowlandson 23). Both authors were captured by the natives during their journeys on the frontier, and they both turned toward religion to help them during their difficult times. Rowlandson had her Bible, which connected her to God and Cabeza de Vaca had his connection to the Lord through healing the sick natives. Cabeza de Vaca and Rowlandson both survived with the help of their strong belief in their religion, Christianity. They prayed and struggled through hardships but were successful in the end because they were strong believers in God.

During their time on the frontier, Cabeza de Vaca and Rowlandson reflected a key value of the American frontier life. Through their stories, they showed how their faith informed their actions. Both authors struggled on the frontier but turned toward Christianity to help them stay strong and positive. Even though they were from different time periods and countries, Cabeza de Vaca and Rowlandson both believed in the same religion and relied heavily on it when they were enslaved by the natives of the New World.

Works Cited

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