

**Reverend John Hale: From Ardent Advocate To Dedicated Critic of the Salem  
Witchcraft Trials of 1692**

by David Estey

The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 were one of the most ruthless and unflinching pursuits of devil worshippers in colonial America. Moving from accusations made by young girls to a frenzied pursuit and persecution of anyone thought to be a witch, these trials spread fear, distrust, and uncertainty throughout Salem and the neighboring towns.

Some New Englanders were close to the leaders at the forefront of the trials, others did not want to attract the accusers' attention, and others still simply wanted to avoid getting involved in the growing frenzy. Whatever their reasons, few openly criticized the trials and those that actively advocated them. The accused often voiced their disapproval and dismay, but they had already been targeted and had little more to lose. Those involved in the trials but were not accused understood the risks of drawing unwanted attention to themselves.

Thus, few levelheaded discussions and critiques emerged as the trials began in June, but some did appear. Increase and Cotton Mather both wrote extensively on the subject soon afterwards, and skeptics like Thomas Brattle shared their own opinions. But one initial ardent defender of the trials' legitimacy, the Reverend John Hale, shifted positions from strong trial advocate to vocal public critic. His circumstances are unique in that he was one of the only people to change his position so completely and so quickly. His turnaround will be explored in depth in this essay.

John Hale was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1636. A member of the Harvard Class of 1657, he was appointed minister of the town of Beverly (two miles away from Salem), in 1664.<sup>1</sup> Hale had been taught the dangers and appropriate responses to witchcraft while at Harvard, and was thus a trusted minister when it came to instances involving witchcraft. Interestingly, his first exposure to witchcraft came long before his years at Harvard. When John Hale was twelve years old, Margaret Jones of Charlestown had been accused and convicted of being a witch, and Hale attended her execution (which took place in 1648). Armed with the divinity training he obtained from Harvard ten years later, Hale became one of the ministers whose testimony and expertise in the divine would be called on during the trials.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Charles Upham, a 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar who has written extensively on the Salem trials, believed that when the Goodwin children claimed to be afflicted by witchcraft in Boston in 1688 (before the Salem trials began), Hale suggested to John Goodwin (their father) that he pursue Goody Glover as the witch responsible for their pain. Upham believed Hale was involved in this case because of a statement John Goodwin made an unknown number of years after his children were afflicted. In this statement, Goodwin explained that it was never Mather who suggested he go to the authorities. Instead, he said “the motion of going to the authority was made to

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<sup>1</sup> John Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts; 1642-1658*. (Cambridge, Mass: C.W. Sever, 1873), 509.

<sup>2</sup> Sibley, *Biographical Sketches*, 509.

him (Goodwin) by a Minister of a neighboring town, now departed."<sup>3</sup> With admittedly little to go on, Upham argued that:

I should be inclined to suggest that it was John Hale, of Beverly, who [...] was deceased at the date of Goodwin's certificate. He was a Charlestown man, originally of the same religious Society with Goodwin, and had kept up acquaintance with his former townsmen. His course at Salem Village, a few years afterwards, shows that he would have been likely to give such advice; and we may impute it to him without any wrong to his character or reputation.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, court records indicate that Hale testified against several of the accused a few years later during the witchcraft trials. He spoke against Sarah Bishop, who was accused of bewitching Goody Trask and having a hand in her death.<sup>5</sup> He also testified against Sarah Wilds, who had reportedly bewitched Goody Reddington of Topsfield; he even went on to say that Wilds' own son claimed she was a witch)<sup>6</sup> Testifiers used statements he had previously made against Dorcas Hoar during her trial in June of 1692,<sup>7</sup> but Hale later petitioned on her behalf, on September 21 of the same year. His testimony usually consisted of stories and gossip that he had heard and then relayed to the courts; his participation in the early stages of the trials suggested that he was an early proponent of aggressive witch persecution.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Upham, "Salem Witchcraft and Cotton Mather: A Reply," Letter to Henry B. Dawson, Proprietor and Editor of *The Historical Review*, 1869. 6 (reproduced on the Project Gutenberg Ebook website <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26978/26978-h/26978-h.htm#III>)

<sup>4</sup> Upham. *A Reply*. 6

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Rosenthal, et al., eds. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 189. (hereafter cited as *RSWH*.)

<sup>6</sup> *RSWH*, 410.

<sup>7</sup> *RSWH*, 557.

His duties and obligations as a trusted minister to seek out and destroy evil notwithstanding, Hale had other reasons to support the legal proceedings and methods set forth by Governor Phips and his advocates. Late 17<sup>th</sup> century Boston had a distinct yet diverse group of men that came together in the interest of properly governing the region. This group was composed mainly of ministers, wealthy merchants, and political appointees. As both a Harvard graduate and a minister in Beverly, Hale would have been an ally of this group and would have acted accordingly. The members of the Bostonian elite were very influential, and it was understood at the time that public disagreements between themselves and their allies should be avoided. Any conflicting issues should be discussed in private. Even if Hale had misgivings about the trials (which is unlikely), he would have understood the risks of voicing them. Hale would have kept silent if he did not approve of the trial proceedings, but that was not an issue because he actually had good reason to support them.

The conflict between the French and the English in Canada had reached a boiling point by the end of the 1600s. Each side had sought alliances with Indian tribes and was avidly pursuing territorial gains. In 1690, William Phips (who would be governor of Massachusetts during the trials) was put in charge of an expedition to head to Quebec and help the English war effort. Phips asked Hale to join the expedition as a chaplain, which Hale agreed to do because, as Sibley later commented, “[...] as a large number were engaged in this enterprize, he was anxious to accompany them that he might watch over their morals”.<sup>8</sup> He served from the

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<sup>8</sup> Sibley, *Biographical Sketches*, 514

June 4 to the November 20 of that year.<sup>9</sup> The Reverend John Wise, another chaplain on the expedition<sup>10</sup>, listed John Hale as a member of the “Council of War”<sup>11</sup>, suggesting that he was involved in military planning and frequently interacted with Phips.

Because Phips would later play a part in the proceedings as colonial governor of Massachusetts, his relationship with Hale likely influenced the Reverend’s initial approval of the trials. Phips supported the magistrates John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin and appointed them to the Court of Oyer and Terminer (the special court that he created in response to the growing number of witchcraft accusations). It is unlikely that Hale would have publicly voiced any disapproval towards them in deference to Phips, but there is no definitive evidence to support such a claim. In any case, after considering his religious motivations, his close ties to Governor Phips and his position as an influential member of the Massachusetts elite, it is clear that John Hale had several reasons for defending the trials.

In late October, 1692, though, Hale’s views shifted dramatically as he began to challenge the validity of evidence used throughout the proceedings. First, he reversed his opinions concerning the Devil’s ability to employ spectral images of the innocent (which he previously thought impossible). He also took a more critical stance on confessions and testimony. He even began to hint at the possibility that some of the accusers were not being totally honest. The most significant change in his attitude came when he began to emphasize that the Devil had more power than

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<sup>9</sup> Sibley, *Biographical Sketches*, 513

<sup>10</sup> Wise, John. *Two Narratives of the Expedition Against Quebec, A.D. 1690, Under Sir William Phips* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1902), 4

<sup>11</sup> Wise. *Two Narratives*, 21

his contemporaries believed. He began to write his book *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* in 1692 to explain his newly formed opinions in more detail, but he did little to explain his motivations behind his sudden October shift.

Two factors explained why Hale changed his mind. First, four of his own trusted parishioners had been accused<sup>12</sup>, which would give him reason to doubt the accuracy of the proceedings in which he was so actively participating. More importantly, however, his wife Sarah (then seven months pregnant) was accused of being a witch in October, 1692. As Charles Upham put it:

Her genuine and distinguished virtues had won for her a reputation, and secured in the hearts of the people a confidence, which superstition itself could not sully nor shake. Mr. Hale had been active in all the previous proceedings; but he knew the innocence and piety of his wife, and he stood forth between her and the storm he had helped raise.<sup>13</sup>

Convinced of his wife's innocence, Hale claimed that the Devil was more powerful than he had previously thought, and could use "true" (or innocent) Christians whenever he pleased. Hale never claimed that his defense of his wife triggered the end of the trials, but Upham decided that that was exactly what happened. He wrote: "The whole community became convinced that the accusers in crying out upon Mrs. Hale, had perjured themselves, and from that moment their power was destroyed; the awful delusion was dispelled, and a close put to one of the most tremendous tragedies in the history of real life."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sibley, *Biographical Sketches*, 514.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Upham. *Salem Witchcraft. With An Account of Salem Village and A History of Opinions on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects*, (Wiggin and Lunt, 1867), 2:346.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*.

The accusers, therefore, had through their own actions hindered any future efforts to continue with the trials. Hale had a different opinion about what brought forth the end of the trials (which will be explored in further detail later in this essay), but Upham was convinced that the community ultimately made a conscious decision to oppose the accusers after they accused Mrs. Hale, which in turn brought the trials to an end. But Upham did not offer any clear evidence to support his conclusion. In any event, his conclusion was incorrect. As Mary Beth Norton highlighted in her book *In The Devil's Snare*, the Court of Oyer and Terminer had been dissolved a full two weeks before Mary Herrick accused Hale's wife of witchcraft,<sup>15</sup> meaning that Hale's critiques had no impact on the Court.

Hale's wife was not executed (she died in May, 1695 at the age of 41)<sup>16</sup>. In fact she was never officially accused or convicted, so it is hard to determine to what extent Hale was involved in her defense (or if he even had to defend her in the first place). There are no court records to examine, but as a minister it is very likely that Reverend Hale was able to voice his opinions in public (through sermons, public meetings or other social forums) without resorting to written documents. What mattered was that Hale did not cease to voice his opinions once he knew Mistress. Hale was safe. He went on to write his book *A Modest Enquiry*, which was published in 1702, two years after his death.

His work explored several facets of the Salem witchcraft trials, including the different types of physical evidence, the validity of confessions, the credibility of

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In The Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2003), 289

<sup>16</sup> Sibley. *Biographical Sketches*, 518.

later accusers, and biblical evidence of the Devil's capabilities. He focused mainly on evidence from the Scriptures to explore these capabilities. As a prominent Reverend, it comes as no surprise that Hale depended primarily on religious texts. That being said, he also analyzed court records, depending on less theological sources to support his arguments.

Hale explored in great detail the powers and capabilities of the Devil. He argued that the Devil was "chained" by the Lord, and that the scope of his power rested upon how much "leeway" the Lord chose to give him. When the Lord lengthened the chains (for reasons people could only guess at), the Devil was able to accomplish more than usual. Humans were similarly chained, but they were chained through their conscience, knowing full well that any wrongdoing would prevent their ascendance to Heaven. The Devil, free of such moral imperatives, would take advantage of whatever freedom the Lord gave him.<sup>17</sup>

Hale contended that God gave the Devil this freedom to punish humans for their transgressions, and their consequent battle against satanic forces would redeem themselves in the eyes of their Lord. The Devil would then seek to ruin people by ensnaring and tricking them. He sought to tempt them, but not too much, for then they would turn back to God in prayer and repent. His argument explained how and why so many New Englanders thought witches surrounded them; they were misled into believing that the innocent were in fact guilty of witchcraft. By saying that the Devil had tricked them into vehemently pursuing their Puritan

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<sup>17</sup> John Hale. *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft: And, how persons guilty of that crime may be convicted, and the means used for their discovery discussed, both negatively and affirmatively, according to scripture and experience.* (Boston, Mass: B. Green and F. Allen, 1702), 15-16.



brothers and sisters,<sup>18</sup> Hale essentially vindicated all of those responsible for condemning the innocent (including himself) because they had all been hoodwinked by the Devil. Conveniently, those responsible could no longer be held accountable for their mistakes.

After explaining the Devil's capabilities and motivations, Hale addressed Satan's use of specters to trick the Puritans. Hale explained that the Devil was taking on the appearance of humans to hide his identity from those he afflicted. In Hale's eyes, the individual through whom the Devil was acting malevolently was innocent. His argument focused on the fact that the person's image was being used by the Devil by no means proved that that person was guilty of witchcraft. Instead, the Devil was using the image to trick the afflicted into accusing others of witchcraft, but the person whose image he was projecting was not acting in a sinful manner. Not only did the Devil take on human form, but also often resorted to using the form of the innocent to further confuse and mislead man in its quest for justice.

Hale supported his argument by using the Bible as evidence. He pointed to Jesus Christ's forty days spent in the desert being tempted by the Devil, who had appeared as a human. He spoke, pointed, beckoned, and acted in all manners consistent with an apparition.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he observed that the scriptures did not record a single instance in which the Devil used witchcraft to harm man. Thus, Hale argued, "Satan should have been judged for his wickedness, not the man that he

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<sup>18</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 44.

impersonated,"<sup>20</sup> a statement that would have conveniently cleared his wife of suspicions of witchcraft.

The Beverly minister did not rely only on religion to critique the trials. He looked at behavioral patterns among both the afflicted and the accused, commented on the validity of the physical evidence presented throughout the trials, and highlighted several trends that invalidated the claims that Salem was infested with witches. He began by analyzing Tituba's confessions, which he considered at first to be credible. She reported the same facts persuasively in both her first and second confessions. She was very penitent and intent to suffer for her sins. Tituba also benefitted from the matching testimonies of other confessors because they further supported her confession in Hale's eyes.<sup>21</sup>

The credibility of her statements, however, actually hindered the magistrates' efforts to find the truth. Hale declared that Tituba's confession drove them to value confessions too much and to attribute too much importance to those that followed.<sup>22</sup> While their singular focus on confessions led them to pay less attention to other factors of the cases, the magistrates also inadvertently turned confessions into the ultimate tool for the accused to escape conviction. The value the magistrates attached to confessors pushed the accused to confess to whatever they were accused of, meaning that there were too many confessions. Too few of these confessions provided useful information to the magistrates to be as valuable as they were deemed to be. The accused began offering testimony that did little more than

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<sup>20</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*. 28.

correlate to facts already given in prior examinations. Unfortunately, confessors did not stop because their statements were enough to save them from execution.<sup>23</sup>

Confessors also seemed to realize they could gain favor among the magistrates and the accusers by implicating others while being questioned. Hale highlighted this trend: the afflicted first accused people, the accused then implicated new individuals in their confessions, which then led to the newly-involved to also offer confessions to avoid conviction. More and more people were being accused and apprehended for witchcraft, yet the number of accusations did not go down. Instead, it continued to grow. This constant circle of accused-turned-confessor meant that there was always a supply of afflicted, accused, and confessors, which allowed the trials to continue for as long as they did.

Drawing on this cycle to explain how the trials came to end, Hale wrote:

The number of Confessors increasing, did but increase the number of the Accused, and the Executing some, made way for the apprehending of others; for still the Afflicted complained of being tormented by new objects, as the former were removed. So that those that were concerned, grew amazed at the numbers and quality of the persons accused and feared that Satan by his wiles had inwrapped innocent persons under the imputation of that Crime. And at last it was evidently seen that there must be a stop, or the Generation of the Children of God would fall under that condemnation.<sup>24</sup>

His reasoning could stand alone to explain how the trials ultimately ended, but Hale went even further when he stated that participants in the trials had other reasons (besides the growing accused-turned-accuser cycle) to be suspicious of the trials' validity.

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<sup>23</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*. 36.

First, it seemed unlikely that such a large number of people “should so abominably leap into the Devil’s lap at once.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, while Hale did believe in witchcraft, he looked at the number of accused witches and determined that the only way the number could be so high was that the Devil was actively working to create a rift between people by turning them against the innocent. In other words, Hale did not discount the possibility that some of the afflicted had indeed been vexed and tortured by other things, such as unknown physical ailments that went unrecognized<sup>26</sup>. But, seeing such a large number of “tainted” individuals in such a small geographical area, Hale deduced that such a large number of Puritans turning so quickly to Satan was highly unlikely. Some malefic forces that were meant for a darker purpose (to ruin mankind) must have been at play.<sup>27</sup>

Second, Hale pointed out that of the nineteen people convicted, not one admitted to being a witch. Each denied the crimes they were accused of to the death. It was reasonable to believe that a few of those convicted would deny any wrongdoing, but he found that having such a significant number of prisoners all protesting their innocence at once made it more likely that perhaps justice was not being carried out properly. This realization prompted his renewed focus on satanic explanations.<sup>28</sup> He brought up other minor points about the behavior of those directly involved in the trials, but these two arguments were the ones he deemed most significant, based on the amount of evidence he provided for them.

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<sup>25</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 55.

He then moved onto the physical evidence used during the trials, focusing primarily on the touch test and physical manifestations of the Devil on the bodies of the accused. Hale found reason to doubt the validity of the touch test after realizing just how far the Devil's power could reach. Hale explained that the touch test itself was subject to the Devil's will. Satan could choose to bewitch the afflicted as they were touched to mislead trial participants into convicting the innocent. Satan's manipulations of the test's results were meant to further cloud the magistrates' and the spectators' judgments. Hale believed that the Devil's efforts to do so had been largely successful.<sup>29</sup> Because the touch test was so widely used throughout the examinations it makes sense that Hale would focus on its validity in an attempt to redirect potential blame from the magistrates to the Devil instead.

The afflicted who complained of pain or pinching also drew the minister's attention. He claimed that if there were no marks on their bodies, then their reported pain did not constitute enough evidence to condemn the accused. In the cases where marks did exist, he went on to explain that there must be clear evidence that the mark was made by a human. If nobody found clear evidence then no one could be certain that Satan did not cause the mark himself.<sup>30</sup> He also addressed marks on the bodies of the accused. By stating that no one could be sure that the Devil's mark (such as teats) found on their bodies was not there before through natural causes, the marks' presence could also no longer be used as convincing evidence during the examinations.<sup>31</sup> In short, Hale managed to discount some of the

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<sup>29</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Hale. *A Modest Enquiry*, 73.

most reliable and most commonly used types of evidence in his critiques of the trials. His arguments were methodical and rational, but one cannot help but wonder how he could have missed such glaring inconsistencies before his own wife was accused.

*A Modest Enquiry* critiqued several aspects of the trials and successfully invalidated the major factors the trial participants used to condemn the accused. Not only did Hale highlight the problems with the legal proceedings, but he also admitted that several major mistakes were made during the trials. Although his critiques did effectively challenge the evidence used in the trials, it is hard to look past the fact that he only started voicing his disapproval after his wife was accused. Furthermore, he did not hold the magistrates or others managing the trials (or even himself) accountable for what they had done and instead blamed their poor judgment on satanic forces.

That being said, whether his critiques were primarily driven by a desire to shield himself and others from blame or not, the Reverend John Hale was one of the earliest cogent critics of the trials. His abrupt shift from trial advocate to critic was unique. He deserves full recognition for speaking out as he did, regardless of his motivations. His criticisms were based on Biblical scriptures, showing that whether he was for or against the trials, his arguments were always solidly based on religious writings and his divinity training. He was a devoted minister who sought to stay close to God through this period of severe unrest, no matter what side he was on. No other people in the Salem witchcraft trials changed their minds so suddenly and no other people advocated so vehemently against the very institution they

helped build. While Salem history does not (and likely never will) focus on the Reverend John Hale, his one-of-a-kind role in the trials should never be forgotten.

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