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William John Lyons

## Realizing Calvin's Radical Potential

Interpreting Jeremiah 48:10 during the English Revolution

In his *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin* (2009), Roland Boer asks “what if we let loose the revolutionary strain of Calvin’s theology and politics?” This article examines the impact of Calvin’s ideas on the English Revolution (1642–51), as exemplified in a sermon by Stephen Marshall on Judg 5:23. His much-repeated *Meroz Cursed* was first delivered to Parliament in 1641 and called for the execution of the King’s councillor, the Earl of Strafford. Picking up on Calvin’s written comments on Jer 48:10, the article examines Marshall’s use of that text to argue that Parliament’s choice was between taking divinely approved *action* or being judged for their *inaction*, echoing Calvin’s usage. Calvin’s “revolutionary strain” was thus loosed to tumultuous effect in seventeenth-century England, culminating in the execution of Charles I.

**I**N THE DEDICATION to the French king, Francis I, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first published in 1536 when he was aged twenty-seven,

William John Lyons is Reader in Religion and History at the University of Bristol.

John Calvin offered—and rejected—this description of revolutionary activity:<sup>1</sup>

*Ne quis hæc, iniuria, nos queri existimet: ipse nobis testis esse potes, Rex nobilissime, quam mendacibus calumniis quotidie apud te traducatur, quod non aliorum spectet, nisi ut regna omnia et politiae subvertantur, pax perturbetur, leges omnes abrogentur, dominia et possessiones dissipentur, omnia denique sursum deorsum volvuntur.*

So that no one may think we are wrongly complaining of these things, you can be our witness, most noble king, with how many lying slanders [this doctrine] is daily traduced in your presence. It is as if [it] looked to no other end than to subvert all orders and civil governments, to disrupt the peace, to abolish all laws, to scatter all lordships and possessions—in short, to turn everything upside down!<sup>2</sup>

Calvin protested his innocence, but could not conceal the kernel of truth that such accusations contained. As if unable to stop himself, he continued with a potentially less welcome comment:

*Siquidem et verum regem hæc cogitatio facit, agnoscere se in regni administratione Dei ministrum. Nec iam regnum ille, sed latrocinium exercet, qui non in hoc regnat, ut Dei gloriæ serviat.*

<sup>1</sup> Under the influence of Marxist historians, the use of the term “revolution” was common until the early 1970s, e.g., Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Idea during the English Revolution* (London: Viking, 1972). It has been questioned more recently, however, on the basis of whether a significant change in society was entailed by the specific events of 1640–52, one that was not presaged by earlier social and cultural developments in the early seventeenth century and before (cf. e.g., the critical reflections of Glenn Burgess on this trend in his “On Revisionism: An Analysis of Early Stuart Historiography in the 1970s and 1980s,” *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 3 (1990): 609–27). Later responses have left both of these viewpoints intact to some degree, a fact neatly made by the title of Keith Lindley’s *The English Civil War and Revolution: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1998). While the point that comparatively little was changed for the long term is well-taken, the removal (and execution) of the king, even for a short while, seems to me to be an act of some significance and so the term revolution is retained here.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Boer, *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 1–2; *Joannis Calvini opera selecta*, ed. Petrus Barth and Guilelmus Niesel, vol. I (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1926), 22 [henceforth, OS]; John Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion . . . be read by all persons zealous for piety, and recently published*, trans. Ford L. Battles (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1969), 2 [henceforth, *Inst.*].

Indeed, this consideration makes a true king: to recognize himself a minister of God in governing his kingdom. Now, that king who in ruling over his realm does not serve God's glory exercises not kingly rule but brigandage.<sup>3</sup>

Roland Boer summarises his 2009 book *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin* with a single sentence appearing on the opening page: "John Calvin let the radical *political* cat out of the *theological* bag only to try his hardest to push it back in and tie the bag up again."<sup>4</sup> This, for Boer, is an example of the "revolutionary paradox"; the "tendency for radical impulses to fall back all too easily on reaction and repression."<sup>5</sup> In *Political Grace*, Boer raises, but does not investigate further, an intriguing question: "What if we let loose the revolutionary strain of Calvin's theology and politics?"<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, this omission is unfortunate. Such an investigation would have led Boer directly to the cases of seventeenth-century Holland and Scotland, each of which accepted a doctrine of rebellion based upon Calvin's ideas,<sup>7</sup> and indeed to cases in many other periods and regions since; Boer's views on any of these would have been a valuable contribution to discussion about Calvin's revolutionary influence. On the other hand, the question Boer poses also provides an open-ended invitation for others to explore the intricacies of Calvin's impact on later radicals.

In this article, a specific example where Boer's "what if" might be said to have become a historical reality will be investigated—a sermon on Judg 5:23 that was delivered on February 23, 1641, to the House of Commons in London by Stephen Marshall (1594–1655).<sup>8</sup> We begin by introducing Marshall

<sup>3</sup> Boer, *Political Grace*, 90; *OS* 1:23; *Inst.* 3.

<sup>4</sup> Boer, *Political Grace*, xv (his emphasis). Boer here builds on earlier discussions of Calvin as a radical figure; e.g., W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and his Socio-Economic Impact* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1971); William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Boer, *Political Grace*, 113. Boer ends by expressing his appreciation for a Calvin who, at his radical best, consistently opposed the tyranny and oppression of rulers: "let the Princes hear and be afraid" (*Audiant principes et terreantur*; *Institutes* 4.20.31; *OS* 1:279; *Inst.* 310).

<sup>6</sup> Boer, *Political Grace*, 111.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., Emidio Campi, "Calvin, the Swiss Reformed Churches, and the European Reformation," in *Calvin and His Influence, 1509–2009*, eds. Irena Backus and Philip Benedict (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 130.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Marshall, "Meroz Cursed," in *In God's Name: Examples of preaching in England from the Act of Supremacy to the Act of Uniformity, 1534–1662*, ed. John Chandos (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 368–70.

and setting his sermon within the context of a series of seventeenth-century sermons against the inhabitants of the biblical city of Meroz. Although it is easy to connect Marshall's argument weakly to Calvin by way of a shared general commonality of ideas and themes, a much stronger connection can be made on the basis of their shared usage of one biblical text, Jer 48:10. In order to firmly establish that connection, we need to consider Calvin's use of the text in three of his writings: his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, from the 1536 edition onwards; his *Commentary on the Psalms* from 1557; and his *Commentary on Jeremiah*, from 1563. A potential counter-argument from Julie Woods based on the Psalms commentary will be also be examined. The entry of Calvin's works into England and into the orbit of Marshall will then be considered, before turning to the events surrounding the trial and execution of Thomas Wentworth, the Earl of Strafford. The final section notes the use of Jer 48:10 throughout the English Revolution and concludes that Marshall's use of Calvin in his Meroz sermon clearly demonstrates the impact of the latter's revolutionary thinking upon his later readers.

## Stephen Marshall and the Meroz Preachers

Arriving in 1615 at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, a college that had been founded by Sir Walter Mildmay in 1584 specifically to educate Calvinist preachers,<sup>9</sup> Stephen Marshall proved a keen student, graduating in 1618 with a BA, adding an MA in 1622, and a BD in 1629. Between 1629 and 1651, he was a vicar in Finchingfield, Essex, and soon became Parliament's most popular preacher, his nick-name of the "Geneva Bull" clearly demonstrating that his rhetorical power was fully deployed in recognisable service to a Calvinistic ideology.<sup>10</sup> Marshall's was not a lone Calvinist Emmanuel voice in Parliament; alongside him were fellow graduates such as William Bradshaw, John

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sargent Bush Jr and Carl J. Rasmussen, eds., *The Library of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, 1584–1637* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2–4. Mildmay was a former Chancellor of the Exchequer of Queen Elizabeth I and a staunch supporter of Calvinistic Puritanism.

<sup>10</sup> E. Vaughan, *Stephen Marshall: A Forgotten Essex Puritan* (London: A. Fairbanks, 1907), 48; cf. the early mention of the nick-name by Richard Newcourt (d. 1716) in his *Repertorium ecclesiasticum parochiale Londinense* (London: Benj. Motte, 1708–10), 265. In the nineteenth century, J. B. Marsden described his preaching thus: "In the pulpit he triumphed. By general consent he was the greatest preacher of his time. His manners, like his mind, were ardent, and when he began to speak along by a fervid eloquence that seemed to spurn control" (*The History of the Later Puritans* (1852); in Vaughan, *Stephen Marshall*, 49).

Yates, Jeremiah Burrows, and Sidrach Simpson, each becoming members of Parliament's Westminster Assembly of Divines (formed in 1643).<sup>11</sup>

Marshall's sermon on Judg 5:23 was the first of the monthly "fast sermons" preached to the House of Commons in what would become the Long Parliament of November 1640–February 1660, called into being after the collapse of the three-week "Short Parliament" of April–May 1640, following its abject failure to carry out the financial wishes of Charles I. "Curse ye Meroz (said the angel of the LORD), curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty," reads Marshall's text in the KJV of 1611.<sup>12</sup> Part of the song of Deborah and Barak, this verse records the failure of the people of Meroz to help the Israelites against the army of the Canaanite General Sisera during their conquest of the land, and it is followed by a paean of praise to Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who did not hesitate to kill the defeated commander with a tent peg, hammered through his temple (Judg 5:24–27). Marshall's choice of this text on this auspicious occasion was no accident, following on as it did from a number of fiery sermons on the curse against Meroz in the early seventeenth century (e.g., Thomas Jackson, Thomas Gataker, and Edward Gee)<sup>13</sup> and going on to act as a precursor to the many more Meroz sermons delivered during the English Revolution.<sup>14</sup>

Oxford University orator Robert South (1634–1716), preaching to the restored court of King Charles II on January 30, 1661, on the king-less age described in Judg 21—when "every man did what was right in his own eyes"—offered a royalist interpretation of the Meroz preachers that should, initially at least, gladden Boer's revolutionary heart:

<sup>11</sup> Bush and Rasmussen, *Library of Emmanuel College*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> The 1599 printing of the Geneva Bible reads: "Curse ye Meroz: (said the Angel of the Lord) curse the inhabitants thereof, because they came not to help the Lord, to help the Lorde against the mighty."

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Adlington, "John Donne, Confessional Identity, and the *Civitas Dei* in Early Seventeenth-Century Europe," in *Mighty Europe 1400–1700: Writing an Early Modern Continent*, ed. Andrew Hiscock (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of his *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), John Milton would ironically turn the Meroz curse against those "divines" who had preached it so fiercely when they adopted a position opposing the prosecution of the king. It was their failure to act as the execution drew near that meant they were themselves now coming under the curse of Meroz: John Milton, "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates," in John Milton, *Prose: Major Writings on Liberty, Politics, Religion, and Education*, ed. David Loewenstein (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 273–74.

I speak not of the contempts and rebukes lying upon the preachers of those days; for they brought their miseries upon themselves, and had a great deal more cause to curse their own seditious sermons, than to curse Meroz. They sounded the first trumpet to rebellion, and like the saints, had grace to persevere in what they first began; courting a usurper, and calling themselves his loyal and obedient subjects, never endeavouring [enduring] so much as to think of their lawful sovereign.<sup>15</sup>

On this, the twelfth anniversary of the execution of Charles I, South was not minded to name or attack Marshall personally; interred in Westminster Abbey six years earlier, Marshall's remains were among those that were being exhumed and dumped in a nearby pit as South was delivering his sermon.<sup>16</sup> South was far more concerned with the "lasting slur on the Protestant Religion" that was the "great destructive consequence" of the Meroz preachers' rebelliousness, a trait traceable, he said, to the "seditious writings" of, among numerous others, a Calvin "warranting the three estates to oppose their prince, 4 Instit. ch. 20. sect. 31." The principles espoused by Calvin and these others had "like sleeping lions, lay still a great while, and never were completely awaked, nor appeared in the field, till the French holy league, and the English rebellion." South thus exhorted his audience to "[t]ell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines triumph," lest the papacy laugh us to scorn.<sup>17</sup> For South, Calvin's *Institutes*, Marshall's Meroz sermon, and the copies it had spawned had undoubtedly contributed to the execution of Charles I and to the replacement of the divine right of kings with an alternative form of English government for a decade.

## Connecting John Calvin and Stephen Marshall

South's linking of the Meroz preachers with Calvin involved the citation of a part of one of the latter's texts, Book 4, Chapter 20, Section 31 of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This raises two problems for anyone investigating the direct influence that Calvin's revolutionary potential had upon Marshall's seditious activities, however. First, only the still-living Meroz preachers are

<sup>15</sup> Robert South, "On the Martyrdom of King Charles I: A Sermon preached at Court on January 30th," in *Sermons Preached upon Several Occasions*. Seven Volumes (Vol. 7; Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1823), 487.

<sup>16</sup> Vaughan, *Stephen Marshall*, 131.

<sup>17</sup> South, "On the Martyrdom of King Charles I," 487–88.



explicitly mentioned and then only as a group, though there is probably little doubt that Marshall would have been included had he still been alive; as we shall see, his Meroz sermon was offered to Parliament in service of a “seditious” attempt to remove the king’s favourite councillor, the Earl of Strafford, in 1641.<sup>18</sup> Second, South listed Calvin as only one of five possible sources of seditious “Meroz” thinking, albeit placed at the top of the list.

With the relatively weak link between Calvin and Marshall implied by these two points in mind, it is time to turn towards the more substantial connection between the two demonstrated by their shared use of Jer 48:10: “Cursed be he that doeth the work of the LORD deceitfully,<sup>19</sup> and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood” (KJV, 1611). This couplet was not simply a biblical text that Calvin himself had “discovered” and that Marshall had then “copied,” however. Julie Woods points out that in the eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII had used it metaphorically on numerous occasions, encouraging his supporters to “attack” his opponents from the pulpit with the “sword of the word”; she also notes that his extensive military activities tended to leaven the metaphor with liberal amounts of literal blood.<sup>20</sup> Calvin himself knew of contemporaries who had also employed the text. The Zurich Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), for example, had not hesitated to apply the first half of the verse to the practice of almsgiving in his *Commentarius de vera et falsa religion*; those who give grudgingly damage their gift, for “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9), those who give short measure, do not act rightly (Matt 7); nor do those who do so *contemptim* (“contemptuously”) or *neglectim* (“negligently”), for *Maledictus enim qui facit opus domini negliger*; *Hier 48* (“cursed be he who does the work of the Lord negligently”; Jer 48).<sup>21</sup> Despite such possible alternative sources for Marshall, however, it will

<sup>18</sup> Vaughan, *Stephen Marshall*, 99–102.

<sup>19</sup> The 1599 Geneva Bible has “negligently” here, with “deceitfully” included as a side-note.

<sup>20</sup> Julie Woods, *Jeremiah 48 as Christian Scripture* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 213. Taking her lead from Ephraim Emerton’s selection of Gregory VII’s letters, Woods writes that Jer 48:10 appears in at least eight of his letters, six of which include explicit commentary which makes apparent the metaphorical nature of the imagery (ibid; cf. Gregory VII, *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII: Selected Letters from the Registrum*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 8, 11, 15, 40, 82, 101, 104, 155). Woods also offers us as a much earlier example of an interpreter with a metaphorical approach to this text in Sulpitius Severus, whom she dates to between ca. 360 and ca. 420/25 (Woods, *Jeremiah 48*, 212–13).

<sup>21</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentarius de vera et falsa religion* (Tiguri, 1525), 67. That Calvin had read this text is asserted by Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 185n9; and Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2005), 171.

be argued below that the way that Calvin treats this text—combining it with certain others and drawing out its political implications—is sufficiently distinctive as to allow us to convincingly demonstrate the connection between the latter’s revolutionary potential and the former’s seditious activity.

## Calvin on Jeremiah 48:10

### The 1536 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Calvin’s first extant use of Jer 48:10 is in the last chapter of the 1536 *Institutes*. It was reproduced, with minor linguistic changes, in every subsequent edition. Under the topic of *politicae administrationis* (“civil government”),<sup>22</sup> Calvin described two separate but compatible forms of government, the civil and the spiritual. In his discussion of the *Magistratus* (the “Magistrate”), *qui praes et legum ac custos* (“who is protector and guardian of the laws”), he invoked Jer 48:10. Believers owed obedience to the magistrates, Calvin argued, because God had entrusted them with power. But this sacred calling should also be in the minds of magistrates themselves:

*[S]i se Dei vicarios esse meminerint, omni cura, sedulitate, industria invigilent oportet, qui hominibus quandam divinae providentiae, custodiae, bonitatis, benevolentiae, iustitiae, imaginem in se representent. Ac perpetuo illud sibi subiiciant maledici omnes, qui opus Dei faciunt in dolo.*

[I]f they remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, benevolence and justice. And they should perpetually set before themselves the thought that “all are cursed who do in deceit the work of God.”<sup>23</sup>

The twenty-seven-year-old Calvin was content to apply Jer 48:10 to the legal authorities of his day, and it appears from its retention in later editions of the *Institutes* that he did not change his mind about the legitimacy of such an application.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Christianae Religionis Institutio*, 474. Or, as Boer might prefer it, “civil disorder” (*Political Grace*, 114)!

<sup>23</sup> OS 1:262; *Inst.*, 288–89. Calvin, *Christianae Religionis Institutio*, 477.

## The 1557 Commentary on the Psalms

Our text next appeared in Calvin's 1557 "commentary"—like almost all of such works actually a literary record of his lectures on the biblical books—on the Psalms.<sup>24</sup> There it was linked with four other texts: Ps 137:9; Heb 1:11; Isa 13:16; and Matt 7:2. The psalmist did not wish the dashing of the babies against the rocks through personal feeling, Calvin asserted; rather he discerned the unseen but coming judgement of God on Babylon with the *fidei oculis* (the "eyes of faith"; cf. Heb 1:11). The psalmist had, he wrote, Isaiah's *speciale vaticinium* ("special prediction") in reference to Babylon in mind (13:16): *Ecce Deus acuit ferrum, et intendit arcus, Medos et Persas emittit, qui non expetent argentum et aurum, tantum sitiunt sanguinem, etc.* ("Behold God has sharpened the iron, and bent the bows; he sends forth the Medes and Persians, which shall not regard silver and gold; they shall thirst for blood only). The Babylonians were receiving a just judgement, *sicuti quum pronuntiat Dominus, qua quisque mensura usus fuerit erga alios, vicissim ei remensum iri* ("as when our Lord says, 'with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again'"; Matt 7:2).<sup>25</sup> Success in battle would not mean that the deity approved of the Medes and Persians, however. Rather:

*Quia enim statuerat Deus poenam sumere de Babylone, benedixit Cyro et Dario: sicuti rursus Jer. 48, 10 simili ratione maledictos pronuntiat qui facient opus Dei negligenter: hoc est, qui non strenue operam Deo suam, vastando et perdendo, impendent, ubi conducti erunt ab eo carnifices.*

As God had determined to punish Babylon, he pronounced a blessing upon Cyrus and Darius, while on the other hand, Jer. 48.10 declares those cursed who should do the work of the Lord negligently, that is, fail in strenuously carrying out the work of desolation and destruction, to which God had called them as his hired executioners.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Grateful thanks are offered to Jon Balsarak for reminding me that "commentary" is not always the best descriptor for Calvin's works on the biblical texts (cf. e.g., Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 51–59).

<sup>25</sup> *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 32:372 [henceforth, *CO*]; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (1557; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–49), 5: 197.

<sup>26</sup> *CO* 32:371; Calvin, *Book of Psalms*, 5: 197.

Success was guaranteed to these foreign kings unless they faltered in slaughter!

### The 1563 Commentary on Jeremiah

Calvin's 1563 commentary on Jeremiah began with a summary of the prophet's teaching:

*Actum esse de regno et sacerdotio, quoniam Iudiaei toties ei tam diversis modis, et tam longo tempore provocaverant iram Dei, et respuerant sanctas admonitiones servorum eius.*

It is all over with the kingdom and the priesthood; for the Jews have so often and in such various ways, and for so long a time, provoked God's wrath and rejected the pious warnings of his servants.<sup>27</sup>

While *tyrannidem regis Manasse* ("the tyranny of King Manasse") provided Jeremiah with an exemplar of humanity's *hominum incuria et seguities in studio pietatis* ("carelessness and sloth in the great concerns of religion"), Jer 48:10 was neither about Israel nor humankind in general; it was about the Chaldeans' assault on Moab. Calvin emphasised that fact precisely because others had not done so:

*Locus hic perperam fuit expositus, et citatur vulgo quasi propheta diceret strenue dandam esse operam, ne quid omittamus ex Dei mandatis.*

This passage has been very absurdly explained, and it is commonly quoted as though the Prophet had said, that special care ought to be taken by us, not to omit anything of what God commands.<sup>28</sup>

Remember Zwingli's application of the text to alms-giving.

Calvin continues:

*Sed ita corrumpunt genuinum sensum. Tenendum igitur est quod iam dixi, nempe sermonem hunc dirigi ad Chaldaeos: quasi diceret,*

<sup>27</sup> CO 37:471; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (1563; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850–55), 1: 30.

<sup>28</sup> CO 39:320; Calvin, *Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 5: 14–15.

*Ne parcatis, sed fundite sanguinem, et ne vos tangat ulla humanitas. Est enim opus Dei, hoc est, Deus vos armavit, ut strenue iudicium eius exsequamini, neque sanguini parcatis. Eritis ergo maledicti, nisi exsequamini vindictam eius.*

But they thus misrepresent the meaning. We ought therefore to bear in mind what I have already said, that these words are addressed to the Chaldeans, as though he had said, “Spare not, but shed blood, and let no humanity move you, for it is the work of God; God has armed you, that you might fully execute his judgment and spare no blood: you shall then be accursed, except you execute his vengeance.”<sup>29</sup>

If we were looking at Calvin’s view of this text on the basis of this work alone, we would have to agree with David L. Puckett’s conclusion that: “[a]ccording to Calvin, if the reader considers history, [Jer 48:10] is perfectly clear. It is a warning addressed to the wicked Chaldeans. It should not be applied to God’s people.”<sup>30</sup>

### Calvin’s Commentary on Psalm 149:6b–7 and its Significance

Julie Woods has argued that Calvin’s 1557 commentary on Ps 149 is also relevant to understanding his use of Jer 48:10, despite its failure to mention the Jeremiah text explicitly. She concludes her discussion of Calvin’s Jeremiah commentary by acknowledging that he was expressly locating the text in its historical context in opposition to the absurd metaphorical readings of the text offered by unnamed others. Problematically, in Woods’s view, Calvin had as a result failed to explain what a good Christian reading of Jer 48:10 would be. Into this gap, she introduces his discussion of Ps 149:6b–7: *gladii ancipites in manibus eorum ad faciendam vindictam in nationibus* (“a two edged sword in their hands, To execute vengeance upon the heathen, *and* corrections among the people”; Geneva Bible, 1599). Woods notes that, for Calvin, the “use of the sword was a task peculiar to the rulers and magistrates,” but she argues that in his comments on Ps 149 he also acknowledges that there existed a sword of another kind—a metaphorical kind—that had been placed into the hands of the Church; it should use this

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. CO 39:320; Calvin, *Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 5: 15.

<sup>30</sup> David L. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 70.

*gladium* (“sword” of “word and spirit”) to *quo mactemus Deo in sacrificium qui prius fuerint hostes: vel etiam quo eos tradamus in aeternum exitium nisi resipiscant*. (“slay for a sacrifice to God all those who formerly were enemies, or again deliver them over to everlasting destruction unless they repent”).<sup>31</sup> This approach Woods describes as a “figural reading,” neither metaphorical nor literal; the “plain sense of the context of vengeance” is maintained, but without “taking the text literalistically”; though she does not say so, this is presumably to be considered an echo of the usage of Gregory VII, but without the tendency to slide into literal bloodshed. Calvin then largely drops from Woods’s discussion of Jer 48:10.<sup>32</sup>

There is a problem with Woods’s discussion, however; she fails to mention Calvin’s use of Jer 48:10 in the 1536 (and subsequent editions of the) *Institutes*, and in the 1557 Commentary’s section on Ps 137. Given that her discussion relies on Calvin offering only two interpretations—a literal historical “Chaldean” one unhelpful to Christians and her proposed figural “Church” one based upon his view of Ps 149:6b–7—the existence of two further and *appreciably different* applications poses a significant difficulty for her argument. We can agree with Woods that Calvin had effectively ruled out the metaphorical applications that we saw with Zwingli earlier, but it is not the case that the text was then either sealed into the historical setting of the pre-exilic Chaldeans or released into the figural church reading that his response to Ps 149 suggests to her. Through his application of Jer 48:10 to the post-exilic Medes and Persians in his commentary on Ps 137:9, and his application of it to the godly magistrates of his own day in the various editions of his *Institutes*, Calvin had in fact already offered both his contemporaries and any later audiences a positive understanding of the text that went some way beyond either of these two possibilities. He had countenanced the use of Jer 48:10 in two alternative political settings outside the Church and potentially opened the door to its positive application to countless others.

Despite the historically limited nature of Jer 48:10 implied by the 1557 Jeremiah commentary, Calvin’s various hermeneutical manoeuvres severely undermined such a understanding. When later readers/hearers examined his use of that text, they were far more likely to find it available to them for radical political purposes than not, and it is that situation to which we now turn, to the England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and to Marshall.

<sup>31</sup> CO 32:439; Calvin, *Book of Psalms*, 5: 316.; Woods, *Jeremiah 48*, 214.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

## Calvin and Seventeenth-Century England

During Edward VII's reign (1547–53), continental reformers had fled or been exiled to England, bringing Protestant ideas with them. With the accession of “Bloody Mary” in 1553, eight hundred English Protestants fled to the continent, settling in areas dominated by reformed churches.<sup>33</sup> Following her death in 1558, they returned to an England now containing three significant religious groupings: adherents to the Roman church; adherents to Protestantism; and adherents to an “English” church, which would be both catholic and reformed. With the twin Acts of Supremacy and of Uniformity that made up the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, Elizabeth I became the head of an episcopal Church of England. The papal bull excommunicating the Queen in 1570 led to the suppression of those desirous of remaining within the Roman church. Those of the Protestant persuasion, however, were largely content to “endure” Elizabeth's Church of England, seeking what they saw as a more biblical form of church order for the country through an undermining of its episcopal structures from within. Only a few chose to become formal separatists, an act that cost some of them their lives.<sup>34</sup>

With the Protestants so embedded, Calvin's publications flooded into England. Ninety-six editions of his works *in English* had been published in the British Isles by 1640. According to Charles D. Cremeans, the Genevan Reformer was the most-published author in England until he was overtaken by William Perkins and Henry Smith, both seventeenth-century Calvinists; Archbishop Matthew Parker, the most published “official” in the Anglican Church, had only ten publications.<sup>35</sup> The Geneva Bible had also been pub-

<sup>33</sup> Charles Davis Cremeans, *The Reception of Calvinistic Thought in England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 35. Some adopted views that were, or could easily be seen as, anti-Monarchist. In Strasburg, the Anglican churchman John Ponet (1516–56) published his *A Short Treatise on Political Power, and of the True Obedience which Subjects owe to Kings and other Civil Governors* (1556), ch.6 of which was entitled: “Whether It Be Lawful To Depose An Evil Governor, And Kill A Tyrant”; cf. the discussion of David W. Hall, *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (Lanham: Lexington, 2003), 181–85.

<sup>34</sup> John R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (London: A&C Black, 1963), 199–211.

<sup>35</sup> Cremeans, *Calvinist Thought*, 65; also the essays of Francis Higman, “Calvin's Works in Translation,” in *Calvinism in Europe 1540–1620* ed. Andrew Pettegree, Alastair Duke, and Gillian Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 82–99; Andrew Pettegree, “The Reception of Calvinism in Britain,” in *Calvinus sincerioris religionis vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, eds. William H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 267–89.

lished in 1560 by English exiles and soon became commonplace in England. Its margin notes, deeply marked by the translators' Calvinism, were a factor in the commissioning of the KJV of 1611; King James I described them as "very partial, untrue, seditious and savouring too much of dangerous and traitorous conceits."<sup>36</sup> In Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the library's single copy of the *Institutes* was joined in 1598 by twelve volumes of Calvin's works, including his commentaries upon the Psalms and upon Jeremiah;<sup>37</sup> all were ready and waiting for Marshall's arrival there in 1615.<sup>38</sup>

### Parliament versus the Earl of Strafford

In 1640, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford and the Lord Deputy of Ireland, was Charles I's most trusted advisor.<sup>39</sup> War with a Calvinistic Presbyterian Scotland deeply hostile to the bishops imposed on it by James VI/I had left his son desperate for funds with which to bring the Scots to heel; the three-week "Short Parliament" of April–May, 1640, called together for the first time in a dozen years, had been swiftly disbanded after it refused to authorise said funds. At a meeting of the Privy Council on May 5, 1640, a furious Strafford stated that an "Irish army could be used to subdue this land"; he meant Scotland, not England, but it was a fatal mis-step.<sup>40</sup> Emboldened by the Scots' success at curbing the king's powers—Charles I, like his father, was an outspoken advocate of the divine right of kings—the Long Parliament assembled in November, 1640, and began its struggle to purge the king's councillors; Strafford, increasingly the symbol of absolute monar-

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Henry Wansbrough, "History and Impact of English Bible Translations," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008), 550. I have updated the English for this article.

<sup>37</sup> Bush and Rasmussen, *Library of Emmanuel College*, 19, 82.

<sup>38</sup> We should be clear that a book's presence or absence does not necessarily mean that it was either read or not read. The College no doubt expected those studying to have their own copies of some books, and the mere presence of other books in the library does not allow us to claim definitively that a specific person read them. Mere availability will have to suffice for our argument.

<sup>39</sup> Ian Gentles, *The English Revolution and the Wars in the Three Kingdoms 1638–1652* (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), 38–48; Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637–1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 274–302.

<sup>40</sup> Gentles, *English Revolution*, 44.



chy, was charged with treason and accusations were laid before Parliament on January 31, 1641.<sup>41</sup>

Marshall's sermon, *Meroz Cursed*, was delivered to Parliament on February 23, as Strafford awaited trial for treason. The Parliamentarians were by no means disinterested in the trial's outcome. Strafford was a fierce opponent, and they could scarcely afford to free him. Marshall's task was to help produce the necessary conditions in which the MPs would find Strafford guilty. He began with the people of Meroz, cursed by the Angel of the Lord in Judg 5:23 because they did nothing to help God's cause. Certain Israelite tribes in that chapter were blessed for their activities; Jael was blessed for her putting her hand to the hammer and nail! But God's "displeasure, indignation, wrath and curse" was on any who did nothing! Though this point, Marshall thundered, was "plain in many other Scriptures. I shall cull out but you among three hundred, Jer. 48:10."<sup>42</sup> Though a man might protest against an order to kill women and children, or try to act fraudulently as Saul had done with the Amalekites, there was no alternative; he must do it! In doing so, Marshall argued, that man would be blessed just like those who had destroyed Babylon's infants in Ps 137:8–9. Lamentations showed how badly Babylon had behaved towards Israel. Marshall concluded: "Now says the Spirit of God, Blessed is the man that thus rewards Babylon, yea blessed is the man that takes their little ones and dashes them against the stones."<sup>43</sup> Marshall's message to Parliament that day was clear; execute Strafford or be cursed for inactivity.

This combination of Ps 137:9 and Jer 48:10 is, of course, exactly what we saw in Calvin's Psalms commentary. Marshall's use of the Jeremiah text could have come from elsewhere—a copy of Zwingli's *Commentarius de vera et falsa religione* had appeared in Emmanuel's library before 1597 and was still listed in its 1637 catalogue<sup>44</sup>—but since Calvin had severely criticised metaphorical interpretations in his Jeremiah commentary, such interpreters are unlikely sources for Marshall's politically-aligned exegesis. It also seems improbable that Marshall thought of it independently. He was heavily influenced by Calvin's imprint at Emmanuel College and had access to the

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 46–47. Russell discusses the twenty-eight disparate articles of the charge in some detail (*British Monarchies*, 281–84).

<sup>42</sup> Marshall, "Meroz Cursed," 369.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 370.

<sup>44</sup> Bush and Rasmussen, *Library of Emmanuel College*, 86.

Psalms commentary there. Direct reliance cannot be proved definitively, of course, but even without it, it is not too hard to accept that Calvin's attitude to Jer 48:10 was being reprised by a hardened follower for a different time and place. The text that he had applied to the godly magistrates could just as easily and rightfully be applied by Marshall to the godly Parliamentarians challenging the unjust ruler, in this case, through their prosecution of his closest councillor, Strafford. The logic of Calvin's exegetical position made the text easily available for Marshall's "seditious" usage. If it did not achieve the desired effect alone, texts like Judg 5:23 provided additional material to use against the ungodly ruler. Printed and much-copied, Marshall's Meroz sermon was very popular; he himself delivered it over sixty times. Later, captured "roundhead" soldiers would quote it in order to explain why they were fighting against the king.<sup>45</sup>

Marshall's call for action was further emphasised on April 4, 1640, during Samuel Fairclough's fast sermon, "A Call for Blood: The Troublers Troubled, or Achan Condemned and Executed," on the story of Achan in Josh 7. The Meroz story was again mentioned, with Parliament's procrastination in the case of Strafford being attacked through the transparent medium of the biblical texts. Swift execution of the "Achans" whose continued presence was afflicting England and thus preventing the "Jubilee of the Church" was demanded; "as long as the sonnes of Belial live, the Kingdomes peace and comfort cannot be established."<sup>46</sup> Though Strafford skilfully defeated the treason charge on April 10, Marshall and Fairclough's biblical rhetoric of action eventually helped to encourage an increasingly desperate House of Commons to prevail. Parliament passed a Bill of Attainder—a legislative procedure that simply defined Strafford's actions as treason without the need for a judicial process<sup>47</sup>—resulting in a finding of his guilt and his condemnation to death, subject to the king's agreement. Charles I was reluctant, but he was pressed on all sides, with even the accused man petitioning him to sign the bill. Strafford was executed on May 12.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Glen Burgess, "Was the English Civil War a War of Religion? The Evidence of Political Propaganda," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 61 (1998): 173–74.

<sup>46</sup> Samuel Fairclough, "A Call for Blood: The Troublers Troubled, or Achan Condemned and Executed," in *In God's Name: Examples of Preaching in England from the Act of Supremacy to the Act of Uniformity, 1534–1662*, ed. John Chandos (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 373.

<sup>47</sup> Russell, *British Monarchies*, 287–88.

<sup>48</sup> Gentles, *English Revolution*, 81–82; Russell, *British Monarchies*, 300.

## Conclusion

The impact of Parliament's triumph over Strafford upon Charles I and upon England was later described by Robert South in a fulsome piece of sermonic hagiography that sought to sanctify the martyred king and his executed minister. In so doing, South made the revolutionary importance of the event abundantly clear:

It is known, I say, what a struggle his pious and truly tender conscience had with itself, when he was urged to sign the death of a faithful and great minister, and how far his heart was from going along with his hand in signing that fatal act. Nevertheless thus pressed (as he was on all sides) he was prevailed upon at last to throw an innocent life overboard, to secure the whole government from that terrible national storm, which seemed at that time to threaten all. But what was the issue and result of this woeful expedient? (which yet none more deeply regretted and repented of than that blessed prince himself.) Why, the result and natural effect of it was, that the flame (intended thereby to be stifled and extinguished) broke out and raged thereupon ten times more violently, and the Devil and his faction took their advantage, and carried all before them, more and more audaciously; never ceasing, till they had brought his royal head to the block, overturned both church and state, and laid our laws and liberties, with everything that was great, honourable, or sacred throughout the whole kingdom, in the dust.<sup>49</sup>

The king's cause was deeply wounded, with the regretful monarch later telling the Duke of Hamilton that he viewed the Civil War as divine punishment for abandoning his councillor.<sup>50</sup> The consequences for England and its society would be enormous, if arguably short-lived.

Jeremiah 48:10 continued to play a role in the saga of King Charles I. Writing in response to a book-length defence published under the king's name, *Eikōn basilikē* [*The Royal Image*]: *The Portraiture of His Sacred Majesty in his Solitudes and Sufferings*, which appeared in 1648 as the execution date approached, John Milton attacked some of those who were criticising the

<sup>49</sup> "A discourse concerning temptation," in Robert South, *Sermons Preached upon Several Occasions*. Seven Volumes (vol. 4; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1823), 442–43.

<sup>50</sup> Gentles, *English Revolution*, 81–82.

turn of events in his work, *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649). These people had once worked towards this very end, he wrote. Now they were hesitating and turning to attack those men who “for the deliverance of their Country [were removing], not only the calamities and thralldoms of a People, but the roots and causes whence they spring,” that is, they were seeking the king’s execution! In a brief aside about those under attack, Milton described them as heroically pursuing their course, fearing nothing “but the curse written against those that do the work of the Lord negligently” (Jer 48:10). Executing the king would bring blessing, would—in Fairclough’s words—release the “Jubilee of the Church” upon the land, whereas hesitation would bring only curse.<sup>51</sup>

Calvin’s interpretation of Jer 48:10 as found in his *Institutes* and in the Psalms commentary had—whether through direct access to these books or not—found a faithful echo in the argument put forward by Marshall in his Meroz sermon and the impact of that echo was then felt, as its repeated delivery and Milton’s usage shows, throughout the remaining years of the English Revolution. Directed by the “Geneva Bull” at those in the House of Commons in the English Parliament who were failing to persist in the prosecuting of Strafford, the closest councillor to an increasingly ungodly king in Charles I, the invocation of a Calvinistic Jer 48:10 had made a very significant contribution towards turning England upside down. In this case at the very least, Boer’s wish for a seditious and radical appropriation of Calvin’s revolutionary ideology can be rightly considered as having been fulfilled.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Milton, “Kings and Magistrates,” 246; see footnote 14 for the ironic contrast between Milton’s positive use of Jer 48:10 and his negative use of Judg 5:23 in this work.

<sup>52</sup> Thanks are offered to those who have heard, read, and responded to drafts of this article, firstly to those who attended the Use, Influence, and Impact of the Bible seminar’s first session on revolution at the SBL Annual meeting in San Francisco in 2011, and secondly to those who read and commented on the final draft in February, 2015: Jon Balsarak, Brennan Breed, and Jon Morgan. The usual caveat about the foibles that remain most definitely apply for this piece.