Thomas Hooker and His May 1638 Sermon

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ABSTRACT  In May 1638 the Puritan pastor Thomas Hooker preached a sermon that has been accounted as among the most important in colonial New England. According to existing interpretations, Hooker advocated popular sovereignty and popular control of civil government. Furthermore, in line with this interpretation, most scholars have accorded Hooker an important, if not also central, role in Connecticut’s adoption in 1639 of the Fundamental Orders—the colony’s articulation of its design for self-government. Contrary to the accepted interpretation, this essay demonstrates that Hooker’s sermon, based on Deuteronomy 1:13, was actually instruction to his congregation and audience about their religious duties as persons living under a government that God had ordained for them. This essay concludes that this change in perspective about the sermon’s meaning—from “political” to “religious”—has important implications for existing stories of New England political history.

On May 31, 1638, in the settlement of Hartford along the Connecticut River, Thomas Hooker preached what has been accounted as among the most important sermons in colonial New England. The only record of it that we have today exists in the form of an auditor’s shorthand outline.1

This essay reflects my ongoing research into the historical development of political institutions. With this in mind, I owe thanks to many who have assisted me over the years, both teachers and colleagues. In particular, Christopher Collier has, over the past decade, generously provided ongoing guidance and encouragement, and I thank him. The reviewers for Early American Studies provided helpful comments and suggestions, particularly regarding the development of the “Implications” portion of this essay. Inquiries regarding this essay can be directed to michael.besso@gmail.com.


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Three features of this sermon have contributed to the attention given it by historians. First, its source: Hooker, a prominent Puritan pastor in both old and New England, was undoubtedly Connecticut’s leading public figure in the first decade of the colony’s existence. Second, its subject: the sermon referred to matters regarding civil government; more specifically, it apparently advocated popular sovereignty and popular control of government. Third, its timing: within the year—reportedly in January 1639—Connecticut would adopt the Fundamental Orders, the colony’s articulation of its design for self-government. The relationship among Hooker, Connecticut’s nascent government, and the Fundamental Orders has long been a matter of study and commentary, attracting the attention of such prominent historians as Charles Andrews, Perry Miller, and Clinton Rossiter. Interpretations of the sermon have ranged from those that rank Hooker as among the earliest of modern democratic thinkers to others that insist that Hooker, although embracing a popular component of civil rule, was simply endorsing practices that had been developing since 1636, the beginning of government among the Connecticut settlements of Hartford, Wethersfield, and Windsor. The various interpretations have had important implications for understanding the colony’s early history and, more broadly, for understanding the political history of New England.

It is necessary to reconsider the entire debate about the meaning and significance of the sermon. Reconsideration must follow from a change in the perspective that, until now, has been accepted by all who have studied it. Although Hooker preached a religious sermon, it has been interpreted as if he had intended a secular discourse on the nature of political society. The extant commentary takes as a premise that Hooker directed his sermon to the issue of governmental design and operation, in anticipation of the drafting of the Fundamental Orders. Even those scholars who held that Hooker had not announced a new form of popular-based polity nevertheless accepted that he had explicitly addressed political matters as a means to


ensure incorporation of the colony’s local practices into the Fundamental Orders. Regardless of the particular interpretation, they agree that the sermon presented an important, new political development in Connecticut and New England.

This assumption is remarkable, however, in light of what has been long known about Hooker. He led an exemplary life as a highly regarded preacher, first in his homeland of England, then during his emigration to Holland, and finally in the last phase of his life after settlement in New England.4 In 1633 he joined the Puritan Great Migration to the Massachusetts Bay colony. Hooker spent three years in the Bay colony before departing, with most members of his congregation, for what would become the Connecticut settlement of Hartford. He presided over the church there from 1636 until his death in 1647. Throughout these phases of his life, Hooker maintained a zealous concern with the saving of souls. In his time and after, he was recognized as perhaps the greatest of the seventeenth-century American preachers—the Puritan stalwart Cotton Mather declared that Hooker had been “the ‘Light of the Western Churches.’”5

Hooker’s calling did not preclude concern about broader public matters. As a leading preacher, he gained prominence in his communities, and records of his sermons establish that he addressed matters of public concern. When he did, however, he did so in the context of Puritan religious commitments.6 Most prominently, for example, in his 1631 sermon “The Danger of Desertion,” Hooker urged those in England to reform the land along Puritan lines rather than to “desert” God.7 In New England Hooker was both knowledgeable about and engaged with civil affairs, including those of government.8 But the matters of this public world were understood and


subject to consideration from a foundational Puritan perspective. Hooker’s
driving concern and most active efforts always centered on his religious
obligations and duties.9

The fundamentally religious commitment of Hooker’s life work suggests
that his 1638 sermon be appreciated foremost for its religious message.
With this in mind, we find that the record of the sermon provides ample
evidence to support interpretation for its religious content. Hooker’s subject
dealt with biblical text: principally, the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 1,
verse 13. And his delivery followed a standard Puritan structure for ser-
mons, which culminated in the important uses to which the congregation
should put the sermon’s message. These “uses” did not exhort the adoption
of a democratic form of civil government. Rather, they served as Hooker’s
instruction to his audience about their religious duties as persons living
under a government that God had ordained for them.

The difference between the “political” and “religious” understandings of
the sermon has several significant implications. It requires a reconsideration
of the origins of government in Connecticut. It reshapes claims about the
causes for the expansion of the New England migration from Massachusetts
Bay into Connecticut. And the change in perspective also contributes to a
reassessment of conclusions about political order in early New England. For
instance, existing studies have maintained that Hooker’s sermon repre-
dented a new development in colonial political society. That is, they have
asserted that the democratic features Connecticut enshrined in the Funda-
mental Orders followed as a result of Hooker’s urging. In the new interpre-
tation proposed here, Hooker’s sermon is no longer at the center of the
story of Connecticut’s political development. We can then more readily
connect the colony’s political development with findings regarding political
experiences across New England and in the trans-Atlantic world.10

In support of these conclusions, this essay begins by examining the record
of the sermon and the subsequent commentary. These reviews show that
commentaries to date have effectively cast the sermon as a political tract
while they have ignored its religious origin and message. The essay then


10. See, for example, David D. Hall, A Reforming People: Puritanism and the
Transformation of Public Life in New England (New York: Knopf, 2011); Francis J.
Bremer, “The County of Massachusetts: The Governance of John Winthrop’s Suf-
folk and the Shaping of the Massachusetts Bay Colony,” in Francis J. Bremer and
Lynn A. Botelho, eds., The World of John Winthrop: Essays on England and New
argues for the religious understanding on the basis of evidence such as Hooker’s selection of Deuteronomy 1:13 for the biblical text, the meaning given that text by the leading Reformed Protestant figure of the era—John Calvin—as well as the sermon’s content and structure. In-depth review of each of the sermon’s structural components—its “doctrines,” its “reasons,” and its “uses”—undermines the existing political interpretations and permits us to recover the sermon’s religious meaning. The change in perspective regarding our approach to the sermon—from political to religious—does nothing to diminish its importance for providing insight into early New England. Rather, this new view better informs our understanding of important developments in colonial history.

THE SERMON

It was Thomas Hooker’s preaching of sermons that brought him renown among Puritans. Hooker himself defined the centrality of this practice in his classic statement of Congregational Church doctrine and organization: *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline.* Through “exhortation”—essentially, the preached sermon—the pastor would strive to bring his parishioners closer to God. “The scope of [the pastor’s] Office,” according to Hooker, “is to work upon the will and the affections, and savoury, powerful, and affectionate application of the truth delivered. . . . the Pastor must endeavour by heat of exhortation to quicken, strengthen and encourage the soul in every holy word and work.”

Preaching God’s message was not merely central to Hooker’s approach to his duties. It was at the core of Puritan practice generally. And this commitment was well established in Reformed Protestantism—a tradition to which Puritans, including Hooker, belonged. Sermons were not occasions for discoursing on matters separate from the Bible or beyond what was necessary to explicate biblical text. John Calvin explained the sermon’s singular focus on the Bible: “Therefore when we go up into the pulpit, it is

not to utter our owne dreames and dotages. Why so? For God reserveth the mastership and chief superioritie still to himselfe, so as hee will have me to receive his word, to rest wholly therupon without any swarving at all from it. Seeing that God hath once set it downe so: it behoveth us to rest upon it.”

Calvin continued, “Had this bin well observed in the world, there should not be so great troubles & variances at this day as there are.” In other words, it was when persons used the pulpit to “utter” their “owne dreames,” rather than to “rest wholly” on the Bible “without any swarving at all,” that there arose “troubles & variances.” As noted in the case of Hooker, Puritan preachers did from time to time address their sermons to public matters. Addressing public matters from within the context of a Puritan religious commitment is different, however, from adopting the sermon form simply to offer social or political policy not otherwise founded on biblical authority. The sermon was the means to preach the scriptural word of God. It was to do nothing else.

Regarding Hooker’s May 31, 1638, sermon, the available record exists in the form of auditor notes made by Henry Wolcott Jr. of Windsor. Virtually the entire catalog of Hooker’s sermons comes to us not from the author but from notes of listeners. Although there exist fuller published representations of his sermons, Wolcott’s records of the May 31 sermon and others


were no more than outlines made using a form of shorthand. They also remained undiscovered by historians for over two centuries.

Two transcriptions of the sermon are now available. The first, from 1860, appeared in the Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, courtesy of the efforts of James Hammond Trumbull. The second was not produced until nearly a century later, as a result of doctoral research by Douglas Shepard. Though Trumbull and Shepard each strove to render Wolcott’s shorthand into text, Shepard more explicitly attempted as near a literal transcription as possible. Following Wolcott’s original form, the sermon was recorded in thirteen brief paragraphs, spanning a total of twenty-six lines in the notebook. Here is Shepard’s transcription:

2 book 4 sermon by Mr Hooker at Hartford May 31 1638

text Deuteronomy 1 13 choose you wise men and understanding and known among your tribes and I will make them heads over you captains over thousands captains over hundreds 50 10
doctrine that the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people by Gods own allowance
2 doctrine the privilege of election which belongs to the people it must not be exercised according to their humors but according to the blessed will and law of God
3 doctrine they who have power to appoint officers and magistrates it is in their power also to set the bounds and limits of the power and places unto which they call them
1st 1 1 reason because the foundation of authority is laid 1stly in the free consent of people

19. Wolcott appears to have used the shorthand form articulated in John Willis’s 1602 The Art of Stenographic. Shepard, “Wolcott Shorthand Notebook,” 3–6. There is evidence that Wolcott’s outlines of Hooker’s sermons were essentially accurate. In at least one instance Wolcott recorded a Hooker sermon for which a more complete version was later published. Wolcott’s outline matches the more complete version, albeit without the same detail. Herget, “The Hooker Corpus,” 255–58.

20. Trumbull, “Two Sermons by Thomas Hooker.”
22. Shepard introduced his effort with a discussion of his method of transcription; he emphasized his intent to present as literal a transcription as possible. This included, for example, keeping Wolcott’s arrangement of lines and the refusal to add punctuation. Ibid., 11–17.
2 reason because by a free choice the hearts of the people will be more inclined to the love of the persons and more ready to yield obedience

3 reason because of that duty and engagement of the people

use 3 fold 1 here is matter of thankful acknowledgement in the apprehension of God's faithfulness towards us and the promotion of those mercies that God doth command and vouchsafe

2 use of reproof to dash the conceits of all those that shall oppose it

3 use of exhortation to persuade us as God hath given us liberty to take it

doctrine that the wants of all creatures in general and of man in particular are great and numberless

last use what course we should take we should take [sic] to supply our great wants.23

The phrases that have attracted later scholarly attention come from the third, the fifth, and the sixth paragraphs. In these three passages Hooker commented on matters of civil politics and, apparently, advocated popular authority for and popular control of government: that “the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people,” that “they who have power to appoint officers and magistrates it is in their power also to set the bounds and limits of the power,” and that “the foundation of authority is laid 1stly in the free consent of the people.”

Trumbull's earlier transcription appeared in more readable form, with slight editing for grammar and style. Trumbull added capitalization and punctuation; he also noticeably demarcated and highlighted the paragraph headings for “text,” “doctrine,” “reasons,” and “uses.” The particular transcription variations are incidental, however, to the more significant similar aspects that each recorded. Both agree that the Wolcott shorthand established the text of the sermon as Deuteronomy 1:13 and that the delivery of the sermon followed the structure of “text,” “doctrine,” “reasons,” and “uses.” They also agree on the substantive content that the shorthand recorded. Before considering what these elements reveal about the sermon’s religious message, this essay reviews the interpretations given the sermon by previous studies.

23. Ibid., 57–58.
EXISTING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SERMON

Interpretations of Hooker’s sermon have been central to debates about the political foundation and functioning of early Connecticut and New England, especially about the advent and development of democratic practices. The interpretations have been shaped, however, more by assumptions about the sermon than by its content, properly assessed.

Trumbull’s transcription of the sermon, published in 1860, is the version that has shaped subsequent commentary. This is unfortunate because of the interpretive context within which Trumbull set the transcription. His introductory remarks, which appeared along with the transcription in Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, suggest only a secular, civil purpose for the sermon. From 1636 through 1638 the Connecticut colony had been governed pursuant to a “commission” first drawn up in Massachusetts Bay. In January 1639, however, the colony adopted a new compact of government for the Connecticut settlements—the Fundamental Orders. Acknowledging the fact that there had been, in April 1638, an election of Connecticut’s General Court, Trumbull opined that “To [the General Court], undoubtedly, though the records are silent on this point, was intrusted the formation of the first constitution, which was formally adopted in January, 1639. Mr. Hooker’s sermon, or rather lecture, was delivered on Thursday, May 31st, 1638, at an adjourned session, probably, of the April Court; and was apparently designed to lead the way to the general recognition of the great truths which were soon to be successfully incorporated in the Fundamental Laws.” According to Trumbull, in other words, Hooker pointedly addressed members of the colony’s political leadership as a means to direct their deliberation regarding the forthcoming Fundamental Orders.

Trumbull did concede important qualifications: that, at least for the time of Hooker’s sermon, there exist no records that the General Court was focused on the task of forming the Fundamental Orders or that Hooker was even addressing the General Court with this in mind. Nevertheless,

25. Andrews, Colonial Period, 78. The form of government under the commission underwent local modification in 1637, but the authority for government, to the extent there was any, still rested on the commission. Ibid., 91–95.
the lacuna did not prevent Trumbull from reading into the sermon subsequent developments in political thought, including modern views about political authority: that the sermon “was apparently designed to lead the way to the general recognition of the great truths” of civil government. Nowhere in his prefatory remarks, however, did Trumbull indicate that the sermon had any religious significance. For instance, he provided no comment on Hooker’s choice of biblical text for the sermon or on the religious import of the organizational structure of “doctrine,” “reasons,” and “uses.” Trumbull simply assumed that Hooker had as a purpose the shaping of the civil, political direction of the colony.

Equally unfortunate is that Trumbull’s transcription ignores the context of the earlier period’s sermonizing practices. He did acknowledge, in his introductory comments, that Wolcott’s notebook contains the record of numerous sermons, not only by Hooker but by other preachers and teachers—those by Hooker total thirty-nine.29 In 1860, however, he published only two of the sermons. Trumbull did not indicate the number, dates, or nature of any of the other sermons beyond these two. The Shepard transcription of the full notebook, however, reveals that Hooker regularly engaged in midweek sermons for the attending public—of which the May 31, 1638, sermon, falling on a Thursday, was one.30 In other words, the May 31 sermon was one of many in the regular course of Hooker’s preaching to his congregation and others in attendance. There is no evidence that it was, as Trumbull asserted, a special presentation to “an adjourned session” of the recently elected “April Court.”

Finally, because Trumbull presented the May 31 sermon out of its proper context, his comment that Hooker delivered a “lecture” rather than a “sermon” generates further misunderstanding. Trumbull employed the following phrase: “Mr. Hooker’s sermon, or rather lecture.”31 This use of lecture, in conjunction with his assertion that Hooker intended “to lead the way to the general recognition of the great truths,”32 reinforces his civil (“lecture”) rather than religious (“sermon”) characterization. Puritan practice did provide for the public delivery of lectures, but these were still religious undertakings, albeit usually delivered midweek.33 As a contemporary of Hooker

29. Trumbull, “Two Sermons by Thomas Hooker.” For the thirty-nine sermons in total, see Shepard, “Wolcott Shorthand Notebook.”
32. Ibid., 20.
33. Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “Lecture” (entry 4.b.): “Applied to discourses of the nature of sermons, either less formal in style than the ordinary
described practices among the New England congregations, “Upon the week dayes, there are Lectures in divers townes.” 34 Although it appears accurate, therefore, to refer to Hooker’s midweek sermonizing as a lecture, Trumbull used the term in contrast to sermon—Hooker, according to Trumbull, delivered a lecture “rather” than a sermon. 35 Later commentators did recognize that Hooker might indeed have been engaged in the preaching of a sermon. 36 But, following Trumbull’s lead, they undertook no analysis of the sermon as a religious exercise or for its religious message.

Trumbull, through his interpretation, effectively removed God and religion from Hooker’s Puritan preaching and, in their place, put politics. Later commentators heralded Trumbull’s transcription and further imbued the sermon with political significance. Initially, nineteenth-century historians cited the sermon as evidence that Hooker was nothing less than a modern-day democrat. Most prominently, in 1891 George Walker authored Thomas Hooker: Preacher, Founder, Democrat. In that work Walker summarized a consensus that, through the sermon, Hooker articulated “the source, the limitations, and the warrant of all authority in human government.” In so doing, Hooker set forth a “a new principle in political science.” 37 In time, commentators tempered the view of Hooker as a democratic theorist. That is, subsequent assessments appreciated that Hooker had matured firmly within the Puritan mold; and that, accordingly, it would be anachronistic to impart to his sermon our modern understandings of democratic government. Despite noting these caveats, commentators nevertheless continued to interpret the sermon as evidence that Hooker had intended to announce, or at least to advocate, principles of civil government.

One line of interpretation continued to argue that Hooker advanced the features that would manifest in the Fundamental Orders. For instance, the former Connecticut state historian Albert Van Dusen stated: “Apparently the need for a genuine system of government greatly concerned Hooker, for he delivered an important sermon on May 31, 1638, in which he outlined sermon, or delivered on occasions other than those of the regular order of church services.” The Oxford English Dictionary notes this use for “lecture” as early as 1556.

36. Some commentators have also referred to the sermon as an “election sermon”; e.g., Miller, “Hooker and the Democracy of Early Connecticut,” 695; although there is no evidence that Hooker delivered the sermon at the colony’s 1638 election.
37. Walker, Thomas Hooker, 126.
Figure 1. Frances Wadsworth, *Thomas Hooker*, 1950. The inscription reads, “Thomas Hooker/1586–1647/Founder of Hartford/Pastor—Statesman.” The statue, located outside the Old State House, in Hartford, is one of several public depictions of Hooker that highlight the commonly accepted “political” perception of his role in colonial history. Courtesy of the Society of the Descendants of the Founders of Hartford.
certain basic principles: . . . Hooker believed that successful government required ‘the free consent of the people.’” \(^{38}\) “It seems almost certain,” Van Dusen continued, “that Hooker’s sermon deeply influenced those who later in 1638 devised the new governmental document.” \(^{39}\) Accordingly, Hooker was indeed a “shaper of the Fundamental Orders.” \(^{40}\)

A related line of interpretation argued that Hooker’s thoughts on civil government were not original but were nevertheless advocacy in favor of existing local practices. This approach rested on the fact that, before the dates of Hooker’s sermon and the adoption of the Fundamental Orders, Connecticut had been incorporating popular components into its civil government. \(^{41}\) Charles Andrews and Perry Miller were the most prominent historians who advanced this interpretation. According to Andrews, “The probabilities are that [Hooker] was simply putting into an expository form certain principles already agreed on, according to which a civil government should be erected. There was nothing specially new about these principles, for they had been in process of test in Connecticut for the preceding two years.” \(^{42}\) For his part, Miller similarly concluded that the sermon did not advocate anything new for the colony: “The Orders merely codified what already existed. When Hooker delivered his Election Sermon, the people of Connecticut had already held one election on the assumption that the choice of public magistrates belongs to the people, and by that time his first ‘doctrine’ at least was not new to them.” \(^{43}\)

Even these relatively conservative interpretations emphasized a political intent. Andrews concluded that “under the stimulus of Hooker’s powerful words the general court set about its business of framing a government.” \(^{44}\) Miller agreed that the “doctrine” passages in the sermon “obviously support

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39. Van Dusen, *Puritans against the Wilderness*, 35
40. Ibid., 47.
41. The “popular components” apparently began in 1637, with local town elections for representatives who would then select and join with the magistrates in the colony’s government. Andrews, *Colonial Period*, 91–92.
42. Ibid., 101.
43. Miller, “Hooker and the Democracy of Early Connecticut,” 698. The first “doctrine” to which Miller referred had been transcribed by Trumbull as follows: “That the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people, by God’s own allowance.” Trumbull, “Two Sermons by Thomas Hooker,” 20.
the case for Hooker's political democracy.”45 Similarly, Clinton Rossiter later reinforced this view by arguing that, regarding the origin of the Fundamental Orders, it was “Hooker himself, who with his sermons and wise counsel pointed out the path for the others to travel.”46 Rossiter concluded that “it was this election sermon, surely one of the most influential ever preached in New England, that set the stage for the adoption of the Fundamental Orders.”47

Differences among the many interpretations do exist. They are all similar, however, in falling within a tradition, which has lasted over a century, that has placed Hooker and his 1638 sermon at the center of Connecticut’s early political development. This tradition is based, fundamentally, on speculation regarding the sermon’s provenance. There is no record, as Trumbull himself acknowledged, that Hooker had intended his 1638 sermon as a form of advocacy regarding civil polity. Yet Trumbull’s assumption that Hooker “designed” the sermon “to lead the way to the general recognition of the great truths which were soon to be successfully incorporated in the Fundamental Laws” has become the presumption that all subsequent analyses accepted.48 It is necessary to set aside Trumbull’s assessment. It is necessary to study the sermon anew.

A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE SERMON

An analysis of the sermon that illuminates both its textual starting point and its structural elaboration reveals Hooker’s religious message. The new interpretation offered here depends generally on the significance of Deuteronomy 1:13; it depends equally on the understanding of the sermon’s components—the “doctrines,” “reasons,” and “uses”—and the coherence of the general message from the Deuteronomy passages with Hooker’s elaboration of these components.

On Deuteronomy

Hooker selected as the text on which to preach passages from the Old Testament book Deuteronomy. According to Wolcott’s notes, Hooker explicitly invoked Deuteronomy 1:13. Here is the verse: “Take you wise men,

46. Rossiter, “Thomas Hooker,” 469, 475 (Hooker “inspired” the Fundamental Orders).
47. Ibid., 478.
and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you." Hooker did not limit his sermon to that text alone, however. Wolcott’s notes reveal that Hooker actually preached on multiple verses, including the fifteenth.49 These biblical verses do not, in themselves, end the inquiry into the sermon’s meaning. The task becomes one of developing evidence for what these verses most probably meant among Puritans. Although there is no other direct record of their interpretation by Hooker, there is significant evidence from within the Reformed Protestant tradition that satisfies the inquiry.

John Calvin has provided us with the most compelling record for a relevant interpretation of these verses from Deuteronomy. Through his preaching—Sermons on Deuteronomie—and as his theological work—Institutes of the Christian Religion—reinforces, Calvin indicated that the biblical message from Deuteronomy 1:13 and attendant verses was that God, by his command, determines the nature of government that will prevail over a people. Given that God has directed the form of government, it then becomes the duty of the people to accept that command and to obey God by acting accordingly.50

Before proceeding to look more closely at Calvin’s works, it is worth considering the extent to which he is an appropriate source for understanding Puritanism generally and Hooker specifically. Calvin’s work was first produced on the European Continent, in Latin and French, nearly a century before the Great Migration.51 Later scholars of New England Puritanism, most notably Perry Miller, discounted the extent of the effect of Calvin on the Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut clergy.52 More recent studies, however, have demonstrated three things. First, Calvin’s works were dominant among those in circulation throughout England during the period when those who would later come to New England were training and beginning their ministries.53 Second, regarding theological views, scholars now

50. Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomie, 12–17; Calvin, Institutes, 640–41.
51. Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomie, which collected sermons delivered in Geneva during the 1550s, first appeared in French. His Institutes of the Christian Religion appeared in multiple versions during the mid-sixteenth century, each originally in Latin.
53. Calvin’s Sermons on Deuteronomie appears to have been first translated and published in England in 1583. Furthermore, the Institutes of the Christian Religion was translated into English by at least 1561. John Calvin, The Institution of Christian Religion (London: Reinolde Wolfe & Richarde Harison, 1561). See also Andrew
accept that Puritanism did adhere closely to major precepts advocated by other Reformed Protestants, especially Calvin.54

As for the third point, there existed strong lines of personal connection and descent that operated to transmit the Calvinist perspective to the New England clergy. In England, for instance, “English Puritans of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries elaborated Calvin’s outlines,” which included the work of “the great English codifiers and simplifiers of Calvin’s theology, William Perkins and William Ames.”55 Perkins, a “thorough Calvinist,” and his pupil Ames, who “saw himself [as] orthodox Calvinist,” were leading Puritan preachers of the era.56 These men had strong influences on those who would go to New England, especially through Ames during times when important Puritan clergy, including Hooker, were in exile along with him in Holland.57

Hooker adhered to the Calvinist articulation of Reformed Protestantism. No less a figure than Ames, in a testament to his assessment of Hooker’s doctrinal commitment, asked Hooker while they were both in Holland to prepare a preface to one of Ames’s important works.58 Not surprisingly, then, it was said that Ames believed that “though he [Ames] had been acquainted with many scholars of divers nations, yet he never met with

Pettegree, “The Spread of Calvin’s Thought,” in Donald K. McKim, ed., The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 210 (“By far the largest market for Calvin’s writings in the later part of the sixteenth century was . . . England”; “Calvin clearly outstripped all other authors, English or continental, in English book collections”).


55. Bush, Writings of Thomas Hooker, 146.


57. Ibid., 201 (“A clear line extends from the Congregationalism preached and practiced in the Netherlands to New England Congregationalism by means of Peter, Hooker, Davenport, the writings of Ames and Parker. . . . To the Congregationalists of New England the writings of Ames and his fellows were the words of a prophet”). See also Francis J. Bremer, Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community, 1610–1692 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994).

58. Hooker wrote the preface to Ames’s “To a Fresh Suit against Human Ceremonies in God’s Worship.” Williams, Thomas Hooker: Writings in England and Holland, 299–319; Sprunger, The Learned Doctor William Ames, 244.
Mr. Hooker’s equal, either for preaching or disputation.” And the most complete modern study of Hooker’s known works—The Writings of Thomas Hooker: Spiritual Adventure in Two Worlds—reveals important aspects of Hooker’s “orthodoxy on the main points of Calvin’s theology.”

As one well-versed in the Puritan line of scholarship, Hooker would have appreciated the significance of Calvin’s existing commentary on Deuteronomy for the development of his own sermon. Calvin’s particular sermon covered verses 9 through 15 of the first book; he also explicitly returned to these passages in a later sermon. Regarding the civil, political order, Calvin was clear on two points. First, the form of government over a people is determined by God and the people must appreciate God’s choice of government for them. Because of the fallen nature of man, “it was needful that God should take order for the governing of them.” Calvin regularly referred to God’s imposition of government as a “benefit.” That a people are permitted to select their rulers—as Calvin phrased it, “the people should choose”—is because “God gave that priviledge . . . and that he meant to have them to bee in better and more excellent state, than any of their neighbors, who had kings and Princes.” History, according to Calvin, showed that “Where Princes have sovereigntie, they appoint Judges at their owne pleasure and liking, and ambition beares all the sway there.” Accordingly, when God ordained a government that permitted the people to choose their leaders, “Surely such freedome was a singular gift; & we see it is not granted to al men.”

Democracy, in some form, might very well be a gift that God granted to a few but not all peoples. Calvin explicitly rejected, however, any right of a people to revolt and adopt a new form of government. As he articulated in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, “if those, to whom the will of God has assigned another form of government, transfer this to themselves so as to be tempted to desire a revolution, the thought will be not only foolish and useless, but altogether criminal.” “Divine Providence” determines which countries are to be governed by the “different forms of civil polity”—monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy. It is necessary, therefore, that people


60. Bush, Writings of Thomas Hooker, 154.

accept the government set over them: “For if it be his pleasure to appoint kings over kingdoms, and senators or other magistrates over free cities, it is our duty to be obedient.”

Calvin delivered *Sermons on Deuteronomie* in a Geneva that had at base a democratic form of civil government. Selection of civil leaders depended, in one form or another, on relatively popular participation. Calvin invoked Deuteronomy to remind the Genevans of their God-given good fortune, that their form of civil government rested on God’s “grace” and “privilege.” He encouraged an attitude of thankfulness that Genevans should hold: “Seeing then that we behold such examples [as the principates in other territories], we must needs think it an inestimable gift, when God graunteth a people or Nation libertie to choose their owne Judges and Magistrates.” This example of the Genevan democracy would probably not have escaped Hooker’s notice, as he preached on Deuteronomy to his Connecticut congregation.

Given that it is God who commands the form of civil government, a second point from Calvin’s sermon is that a people with the privilege of civil election must not “abuse” God’s gift. “Now then, let us be well advized, & forasmuch as God graunteth us the grace or rather priviledge of choosing officers to governe us, which is not common to all people: in any wise let us not abuse that gift of God, or els we shal be amazed to see our selves bereft thereof.” He alluded to historical examples to emphasize his point: “when people had the election in their hands, they abused it, & so were worthy that God should bereave them of the honor that he had done them.” He actually added a warning for his Genevan audience, which had some reputation for conducting political activities in “Taverns or Alehowses”: they had better be more thoughtful of their religious obligation, “For is it not as good as a wilful provoking of Gods wrath, and spyting of him, when folke having free elections, whereas they should choose men to serve god and to be as his officers, doe in stead thereof keepe rowtings in Taverns or Alehowses, and even as it were in skorne & mockerie of God, choose such as are most unthriftes & furthest out of order?” Only dutiful consideration of their

64. Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, 16.
65. Ibid., 621.
66. Ibid., 16. On the reality of political activities in Calvin’s Geneva, Harro Höpfl noted that “popular activism, or at any rate assembly–politics, . . . centered as
choices for civil leaders would satisfy the obligation that God had imposed on a people as a consequence of the privilege of election.

In his sermon Calvin reviewed the biblical authority for the qualifications that leaders must possess, including—foremost—godliness. Additional characteristics included “good zeale, courage, and noblemindednesse.” Finally, Calvin emphasized that only tested and trusted persons should be chosen by people to take office. None should be selected merely upon “hope, without good knowledge and experience of him.” People were selecting not merely civil leaders to preside over them, but representatives to occupy offices that God had ordained.67

Deuteronomy 1:13 and attendant verses concern God’s commands to persons over whom God has set a government. What these verses do not concern are arguments to establish the merits of a democratic form of government or advocacy for a particular government. Calvin did speak favorably about the “inestimable gift” of civil elections—being a gift, such a system is preferable to monarchy—but more fundamentally biblical authority establishes that it is God who provides this privilege of choosing leaders. Accordingly, given elections, God’s injunctions require that a people fulfill a religious duty regarding the selection of proper persons for civil leadership.

On Structure

The structure of a Puritan sermon—its component parts and organization—reinforces and adds to our appreciation of the sermon’s religious content. Once the preacher announced the text, he developed “doctrines” that followed from that text as well as “reasons” that in turn supported the doctrines. He then concluded with the “uses.” This structure was important because it built the sermon toward a culmination in the uses, which were directives to people that encouraged their religious well-being. The doctrines and reasons were significant components, but for the Puritan minister preaching to a congregation the import of the sermon lay not so much in these as it did in the final uses for the audience. The structure of Hooker’s preaching followed this established pattern.68 It is difficult to emphasize this too much, because the political interpretations of Hooker’s sermon have taken statements of doctrine and reasons and treated them not only as secular commentary but as the sermon’s principal points.

often as not on the taverns, and drunken and noisy demonstrations in the streets were by no means unknown.” Höpfl, Christian Polity of Calvin, 133.


68. Bush, Writings of Thomas Hooker, 20–21; Shuffelton, Thomas Hooker, 103–5.
Regarding the doctrine: within this structure it was a religious doctrine. According to Ames, “Doctrine is a Theologicall Axiom, either consisting in the expresse word of Scripture, or flowing from them by immediate consequence.” Just as the sermon as a whole was based on scripture alone, so too were specific doctrines. Perkins warned why: the “collection” of doctrine “ought to be right and sound, that is to say, derived from the genuine and proper meaning of the Scripture. If otherwise, wee shall draw any doctrine from any place.” He was echoing Calvin's point that “when any doctrine is to be followed, let us on our side looke that we be sure that it proceedeth from God, & that our faith be grounded on him alone, so as we hang not upon mortal men, nor upon any creature.”

Hooker, in his May 1638 sermon, listed three doctrines that followed from the biblical passages: “that the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people by Gods own allowance”; that “the privilege of election which belongs to the people it must not be exercised according to their humors but according to the blessed will and law of God”; and that “they who have power to appoint officers and magistrates it is in their power also to set the bounds and limits of the power and places unto which they may call them.”

Regarding the first two doctrines—about the election of public magistrates—Calvin had already illustrated how Deuteronomy 1:13 provided their bases. First, it was God who ultimately had ordained government for a people—there, the Israelites during the time of Moses. Although God permitted them to select their leaders—“Take you wise men”—it would be God who sanctioned the leaders’ authority—“make them rulers over you.” Accordingly, the Bible provided the basis for Hooker to preach “that the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people by Gods own allowance.” Second, the Bible also provided the content for Hooker’s injunction that elections were to proceed “according to the blessed will and law of God.” As it is set forth in Deuteronomy, the Israelites were commanded to choose “wise” and “known” men. And as Calvin interpreted this, these would be men of godly character, of “good zeale, courage, and noblemindnesse,” and already well established and trusted.

70. Perkins, Arte of Prophecying, 96 (emphasis added).
71. Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomie, 118. See also Perkins, Arte of Prophecying, 98 (“human testimonies whether of the Philosophers or of the Fathers are not to be alleged”).
72. Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomie, 15–16.
Nothing in Calvin’s sermon on Deuteronomy 1:13 accounts directly for Hooker’s third doctrine—that the people held power to set the “bounds and limits” of magisterial authority. Indirect support does appear in this sermon, though, and more direct evidence exists elsewhere in his *Sermons on Deuteronomie*. The sermon in which Calvin explicates verse 1:13 contains his interpretation of Moses’ role in the setting of elective government among the Israelites. According to Calvin, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, was a “common man,” a “poore heathen man.” Nonetheless, Jethro provided to Moses God’s message for the proper ordering of the Israelites’ political society. What was important for Calvin was that Moses—“chosen of god to govern his Church, and to be the chiefe of it”—could have rejected Jethro: “should a common man now presume to teach me?” Yet Moses “submitted himself” to that “common man.”

Even a church leader—even Moses—in Calvin’s view must accept that the “common man” can provide guidance and wisdom and represent a command from God. Hooker’s view was essentially identical. The story of Moses and Jethro, which Calvin incorporated into his sermon covering Deuteronomy 1:13, appears in the Bible beginning at Exodus 18:17. Hooker actually preached a sermon on Exodus 18:17–18, in April 1639. In that sermon Hooker announced as one of the doctrines that the “weaker man in some affairs and at some times may suggest seasonable advice to one that is far wiser.”

In this same vein, several times in *Sermons on Deuteronomie* Calvin reminded his Genevan audience about perils associated with their selection of those who held themselves out for political leadership. Such persons should seek office to advance not their own glory, but God’s glory. And once in office, their fallen nature should put them on guard to avoid temptations that would undermine just application of the laws. The laws, which Calvin noted in his *Institutes* guide how a magistrate ought to govern, also constrain the magistrates. Returning to the *Sermons on Deuteronomie*, Calvin emphasized this constraint: “If there be a thing which is good, and yet there is no law for it: and I being of power and authority would constrain a man to do what I think good; were there any reason in it? For the law con-

73. Ibid., 13, 15.
75. Ibid., 135.
77. Ibid., 620–26.
straineth him not to do it, and I ought not to pass those bounds. Let us therefore note well, that such as are armed with the sword, must constrain themselves within their bounds: and not challenge to themselves any Lawless liberty to say: What? I commandeth nothing but that which is good, and therefore you must do it. No: for there is no constraining, where there is no law.”79 Although it was God’s command as to the form of government over a people, in a democracy the people as a whole had the duty, through not only elections and laws but lawful constraints on their elected leaders, to instill godliness in the political order.

As statements of religious doctrine, Hooker’s three initial points served as the biblical bases on which to begin the sermon’s development—or again to invoke Ames’s term, as biblical “axioms.” In the light of Calvin’s exegesis, biblical text provided the foundation for Hooker’s statements about elections as the means to choose public magistrates as well as about the “bounds and limits” of magisterial power. These doctrines can be considered as advocacy for a political theory only by stripping them of the context within which Hooker had embedded them. To do this, the existing assessments treated these doctrines as ends in themselves: for instance, that Hooker “exhort[ed] the freemen ‘to set the bounds and limitations’” on magistrates.80 Generally, they emphasized “the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people” while they ignored “by Gods own allowance.” And they overlooked the linkage of “the privilege of election which belongs to the people” with “exercised according . . . to the blessed will and law of God.” In sum, they failed to consider existing biblical authority for these doctrines and instead treated them as expressions of newly developing political theory.

Following the revelation of doctrine, the Puritan preacher would often provide “reasons” in support of the doctrine. The reason served as an elaboration of the doctrine and therefore related directly to the doctrine. A reason was not an introduction of a new concept, but could clarify a doctrine through additional explanation. According to Ames, though a doctrine “ought to be taken out of the more cleere testimonies of Scriptures,” a preacher might be warranted in adding “reasons . . . where the nature of the thing will suffer.”81 Hooker regularly added reasons to his sermons as a means to expound on doctrines.82

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Hooker provided three reasons in his sermon: (1) “because the foundation of authority is laid 1stly in the free consent of people”; (2) “because by a free choice the hearts of the people will be more inclined to the love of the persons and more ready to yield obedience”; (3) “because of that duty and engagement of the people.” A review of these reasons shows that they accord with the sermon’s doctrines. Regarding the first reason, “because the foundation of authority is laid 1stly in the free consent of people,” this appears to parallel the first doctrine, “that the choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people by Gods own allowance.” With Deuteronomy 1:13 as the biblical authority underlying the sermon, the importance of this first reason is the language that “the foundation of authority is laid”—which points again to the role of God as the source of all authority. It was God who “laid” the “authority” to choose leaders, in the “free consent of people.” The second reason, concerning the effect of civil elections on the people, reasonably aligns with the second doctrine, concerning the manner in which people should exercise their choice for magistrates. In that context, Hooker’s message that elections would enhance the people’s “love” for their leaders and encourage in them “obedience” suggests that God’s bestowal of civil elections on a people is indeed a gift to them—a gift that bears a variety of fruits. “Obedience” in itself follows from God’s sanctioning the authority of civil leaders, of course, but all the better that people understand and embrace their obedience toward the magistrates. Finally, Hooker’s third reason, which dealt with the “duty and engagement of the people,” appears to support his third doctrine, about the people’s power to set “bounds and limits” on magistrates. It certainly accords with the sermon as a whole.

While this juxtaposition of Hooker’s doctrines and reasons can be little more than suggestive, it rests on a sounder historical basis than the existing alternative—that is, that Hooker with these reasons was arguing for the merits and design of civil government. Little in Hooker’s life work supports a conclusion that, for instance, his first reason—“the foundation of authority is laid 1stly in the people”—amounted to a proposition of political theory rather than an expansion on the first of his biblical doctrines. While in England, Hooker never criticized the essentially monarchical form of government; this, despite his full knowledge of and active membership in the participatory covenantal practices of Puritan religious society. His criticism of England—along with those of his fellow Puritans—was instead directed

83. For further elaboration of Hooker’s interpretation of biblical authority directing obedience to magistrates, not only out of “love” but for “conscience sake,” see text below at notes 98–99.
at its tolerance for the Church of England and its suppression of Puritan initiatives for reform.\textsuperscript{84} Hooker—again, along with almost all his fellow Puritans—would have preferred to remain in England, even under a monarchy, if he could have had the freedom to practice the purified form of Protestantism.\textsuperscript{85}

The “uses” for the sermon that Hooker provided his congregation support this new understanding of the doctrine and reasons. The use, according to Ames, was the preacher’s direction to his listeners about how they were to apply the lessons drawn from the text, as set forth in the doctrines and explained in the reasons. As Ames described the link between the doctrine and the use, the latter “is drawne from the doctrine, shewing the profit, goodnesse or end of it.”\textsuperscript{86} Perkins insisted on the same linkage: “Application is that, whereby the doctrine rightlie collected is diverslly fitted according as place, time, and person doe require.”\textsuperscript{87} Although doctrine and use were linked, the use was the more important of the two because the purpose of the sermon was to move persons on the path to righteous lives and salvation. Ames emphasized this in his \textit{Marrow of Sacred Divinity}: “Every doctrine being now sufficiently explained must presently be brought to use, in which part also, unless some speciall reason doe otherwise require, we must most insist: \textit{because it contains the end and good of the other and is more joyned with the chiefe scope of the Sermon namely the edification of the hearers.”}\textsuperscript{88}

Hooker’s reputation as a highly regarded preacher followed largely from his emphasis on the use in his sermons. He strove to “convey the complex theology of Calvinism to a congregation of simple people,” not to demonstrate his own scholarly abilities but to assist those who hoped for salvation. Hooker “had a most excellent Faculty at the Applications of his Doctrine,” Cotton Mather noted, “and he would therein so touch the Consciences of his Auditors, that a Judicious Person would say of him, \textit{He was the best at an Use that ever he heard.”}\textsuperscript{89}

In the May 1638 sermon, Hooker advanced three uses: “here is matter of thankful acknowledgement in the apprehension of Gods faithfulness

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\item \textsuperscript{84} Foster, \textit{The Long Argument}, 108–37.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 123 (Hooker, in 1626, as yet “not without hope for the English”). In his 1626 sermon “The Church’s Deliverances,” Hooker referred to the English Crown as “anointed of the Lord.” Williams, \textit{Thomas Hooker: Writings in England and Holland}, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ames, \textit{The Marrow of Sacred Divinity}, 158.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Perkins, \textit{Arte of Prophecying}, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ames, \textit{The Marrow of Sacred Divinity}, 157 (emphasis added).
\item \textsuperscript{89} Bush, \textit{Writings of Thomas Hooker}, 15, 21; emphasis in original.
\end{thebibliography}
towards us and the promotion of those mercies that God doth command and vouchsafe”; “use of reproof to dash the conceits of all those that shall oppose it”; “use of exhortation to persuade us as God hath given us liberty to take it.” Notable about these uses is that each identifies the type of intended use: “acknowledgement,” “reproof,” and “exhortation.” There were many types of uses that might be appropriate for a particular sermon. Perkins and Ames had cataloged lists that included uses of “information, confutation, instruction, reproof, consolation, exhortation, and direction,” as well as “humiliation, . . . thanksgiving, . . . wonderment.”90 Through the articulation of what we today might call the “take-away message,” the preacher made clear the import of the entire sermon.

The uses itemized in Hooker’s sermon establish that he intended his congregation to appreciate three principal points. First, they were to “acknowledge” “Gods faithfulness” in them and that, therefore, the people were charged to “promot[e]” what “God doth command and vouchsafe.” This first use accords well with both the general understanding of Deuteronomy 1:13 and the doctrines that followed from that verse: elections are a gift to a people, which must be exercised according to God’s will.

Second, Hooker added that biblical authority served as a “reproof,” that is, “to dash the conceits of all those that shall oppose it.” While the referent for the “it” is not entirely clear, it probably points to the principal theme, that God provided the privilege of and manner for elections among a people. Those who opposed this view—perhaps those who denied God’s Providence regarding the imposition of government, disagreed with the style of government, or doubted the authority of the elected magistrates—should have, according to Hooker, such “conceits” dashed. This use, in fact, appears to undermine later claims that Hooker used his sermon to instruct the colony’s leaders about choice over forms of government. God, not a people, grounds the authority for political order, and to argue otherwise is little more than a “conceit.”

Third, though the gift of election depends on God, once it has been given, the people should embrace it. They should by no means neglect such a privilege. The final use, then, “exhort[s]” the people to “take” the “liberty” that “God hath given us.” But nothing in the sermon suggests that the liberty Hooker mentioned mirrors that found later in the political theories of Hobbes, Locke, and others, in which the liberty existing in a state of nature provides a people the occasion to come together to design a form of

90. Ibid.
government. Rather, this use parallels Calvin’s injunction to his Genevan audience to embrace God’s gift of the liberty of election and warning them not to disregard God’s command by turning elections into tavern-based—and therefore base—events.

These uses—and not the preliminary doctrines and reasons—mark the sermon’s immediate import. To appreciate the sermon’s fuller significance, the next section reviews political developments that marked Connecticut and New England society in the 1630s and outlines likely implications of this new assessment on our understanding of those developments. As for the sermon itself, however, there is no sound basis to conclude that Hooker was advocating adoption of any particular political system. Rather, he preached uses that would have reminded his congregation about the fortune that God had granted them and their duties within a system that permitted elections—for some, the obligations that came with the franchise; for all, obedience.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The effects of Trumbull’s assumption that Hooker spoke, in May 1638, to “lead the way to the general recognition of the great truths which were soon to be successfully incorporated in the Fundamental Laws” have been strong and lasting. On the one hand, the existing interpretations serve a variety of celebratory ends—that Connecticut under Hooker advanced a new style of government that, in time, flourished into our modern democracy. As Perry Miller observed, this view has “constituted the basis for the usual encomiums of the Connecticut regime.”91 On the other hand, even less-than-celebratory assessments relied on the assumption to draw important conclusions about New England political history. Charles Andrews considered the emigration of Hooker and others from Massachusetts Bay in the context of attitudes about the Bay colony’s political system, which apparently had vested stronger authority in magistrates and enacted greater limits on suffrage.92 Hooker “did not like the Massachusetts system,” according to Andrews, and in Hooker’s disagreement with Massachusetts Bay he found the seeds of a popular rather than oligarchic basis for political authority.93 These various interpretations placed Hooker at the center of a new development in politics, government.

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92. Andrews, *Colonial Period*, 86–88. Andrews also considered issues such as religious doctrinal disputes between Hooker and John Cotton. Ibid., 84–86.
93. Ibid., 88, 101–2.
something sui generis, which both culminated in the Fundamental Orders and shaped New England political history.

Undoing the effects of Trumbull’s assumption is difficult. To begin the task of correcting the accepted view, this essay has established the likely meaning of the sermon—a religious rather than a political meaning. This essay now concludes with some preliminary suggestions of how correction to the reigning presumption will probably affect our understanding of New England political history.

To begin, we can consider the significance of the sermon in 1638 Connecticut. The Puritan settlers of 1630s New England, including those in Connecticut, had brought with them the established, determinative experience of selecting their church leaders; some also had limited experience with electing local authorities. In a land free from the full force of political rulers in England, they sought to extend this type of practice more fully into the civil realm. Their new world offered a variety of liberties to do so—as David Hall has noted, “the liberty that flowed from a general weakening of restraint, [and] the liberty of local self-government.”94 That Connecticut’s civil order developed in a democratic direction ought not, therefore, to surprise. In other words, there was probably little reason for Hooker to advocate a democratic government—it was developing, in one form or another, regardless. But, Hall also stressed, the liberty that the new land provided the Puritans caused concern among the religious leaders. “The land meant liberty of other kinds than those Puritanism sanctioned,” including not only those of weakening restraints and self-government, but also the liberty of excessive religious “zeal” and “the liberty of disorder.”95 Indeed, by the time of Hooker’s sermon, political events in Massachusetts illustrated well the ramifications of these liberties: John Winthrop had already once been denied reelection as governor, only to return to office in 1637 following a dramatically contentious election.96 The people were not a passive audience fully controlled by religious and civil authorities, but a participating force that actively shaped the new orders.97

95. Ibid.
97. See also, for example, David D. Hall, Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 156 (on the role of “lay colonists” in shaping religious interpretation and practice). For Hall’s most recent extension of these observations in the context of political development, see his A Reforming People.
Figure 2. Frederic Edwin Church, Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636 (1846).
Hooker presided as the leading member, then, among the three Connecticut towns that had both established political figures in authority and populaces with increasing expectations to be heard. Given the reality of their lives in a new land that provided the opportunity to pursue not only their spiritual mission but also other forms of liberty that challenged the success of this mission, Hooker probably had little choice but to address issues related to civil matters. Hooker’s commitments to the Puritan cause and his congregation suggest that he would have appreciated the need to confront such circumstances and to provide direction to the faithful. And he would have done so, of course, animated by his fundamental concern with fostering a godly community among those with hopes for salvation.

As a more emergent democratic order pressed demands on the existing political leadership, Hooker’s sermon would have served as a religious reminder to temporize extremes among opposing forces. Recall that the sermon contains within it evidence of a balancing of these forces. It recognized the fact of the fledgling democracy while it reminded the people that this gift of choosing magistrates was God’s design for them. Accordingly, this right to choose civil leaders was to be exercised according to God’s directives. In the sermon Hooker noted two such duties that accompanied the privilege. One was that the voters exercise the right to choose “not . . . according to their humors but according to the blessed will and law of God.” That is, they were to elect only known and proven persons. The other duty was that concerning the “bounds and limits of the power” on those magistrates that they did elect. To the extent that Connecticut was experiencing the emerging democratic impulses, from the Puritan perspective these were still subject to God’s strictures. As these duties suggest, Hooker’s explication of biblical doctrine was not simply to empower the people at the magistrates’ expense.

Regarding the magisterial power, Hooker clearly embraced the full authority of the colonial leaders over the populace. This is evident in a sermon he preached on December 26, 1638.98 The text of that sermon—delivered within a month of the January 1639 adoption of the Fundamental Orders—was Romans 13:5, which concerns the authority of civil leaders. Hooker announced the text, “wherefore ye must needs be subject not only for wrath

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98. Wolcott included this sermon in his notebook as one of the thirty-nine Hooker sermons he recorded. It appears as if this sermon has never been noted, let alone discussed, in published scholarly literature. The existing transcription appears in Shepard, “Wolcott Shorthand Notebook,” 115.
but for conscience sake.” He noted the biblical doctrine that “men should be carried out of conscience to yield subjection unto superior power.” In other words, while civil leaders—God’s anointed to rule on earth—held power, the people should submit themselves to those rulers, not out of fear of civil punishment, but because ofbiblically sanctioned duty. To make this point clear, Hooker provided two uses. First, a “use of instruction,” that “those that are in subjection should take the oath of fidelity.” Second, a “use of exhortation,” which actually comprised two commands: the use “to governors” was that “they should punish those that are opposite to subjection”; the use “to all” was that “they should be subject for conscience sake.”

The people owed an oath of fidelity to the magistrates; the magistrates had the duty to punish those who opposed subjection.

The December 1638 sermon establishes that Hooker was in no way a simple advocate for a “people first” political order. Rather, it demonstrates that he appreciated the various aspects of recent political developments. In May and December 1638 Hooker did not rise in the pulpit to provide a guide for the Fundamental Orders. He instead attempted, on both occasions, to bring a Christian perspective to considerations about the political order. By reminding all—magistrates and populace—that issues of politics were subordinate to and guided by God’s word, he could have hoped to preserve and foster a civil society that, in the context of these political developments, made possible the continued commitment to the Puritan religious cause.

This view invites further examination of the place and development of democratic practices in early New England. The standard story is that, while political society in Massachusetts Bay proved rather restrictive, Connecticut—with Hooker at the helm—adopted more liberal policies. This standard view underlies arguments that explain the migration of Puritans to Connecticut as the result of political disagreements. But perhaps Connecticut’s political practices were not so novel. Connecticut’s practices under the Fundamental Orders actually appear to connect to those that existed in

99. Ibid.

100. See Trumbull’s interpretation of a 1638 letter that Hooker wrote to Winthrop. “Rev. Thomas Hooker’s Letter, in Reply to Governor Winthrop,” in Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, 16–17. This letter has often been read in light of the assumption that Hooker, in his 1638 sermon, revealed his democratic leanings; the letter has then been deemed to support the conclusion that political disagreement regarding Massachusetts Bay was an important cause underlying Hooker’s departure for Hartford. See also, e.g., Andrews, Colonial Period, 88.
Government in Connecticut should not be understood, then, as a feature of local origin that developed under Hooker’s watchful guidance. For instance, the colony’s elections might be better understood as an expression of the populace’s participatory demands and, thereby, as an extension of the Massachusetts and trans-Atlantic experiences. Elimination of the “political” intent from Hooker’s sermon—which would remove the major basis for the view that Connecticut’s democratic features were novel—would make it easier to examine the relationship of old and New England political practices.

Regarding these imported practices, to the extent that Connecticut differed from Massachusetts Bay, it is likely that it did not because of any fundamental disagreement over democratic foundations as such. And there was not necessarily a disagreement about the basic authority of magistrates who held offices ordained by God. But a stronger adherence to constraints on the scope of magisterial power, as Calvin first articulated the concept, appears to represent an important distinction. Hooker the preacher differed from Winthrop the magistrate in that Hooker reminded his local magistrates that biblical authority belied any claim to unfettered discretion. As Calvin had preached, “Let us therefore note well, that such as are armed with the sword, must constrain themselves within their bounds: and not challenge to themselves any Lawless liberty to say: What? I commandeth nothing but that which is good, and therefore you must do it. No: for there is no constraining, where there is no law.”

Further study might show that


102. Among the existing commentaries, David Hall in *A Reforming People* provides the most nuanced appreciation of Hooker and New England political development. Hall does treat the sermon as a political statement; the sermon is Hooker’s “statement” about “civil government” (40). But Hall avoids attributing any necessary causal significance to the sermon: Hooker “did not write the Fundamental Orders, but the barriers it created against arbitrary rule were consistent with his sermon and letter of 1638” (42). The constraints on magistrates enshrined in the Fundamental Orders accord with Hooker’s reference to the doctrine-based “bounds and limits,” as they also accord with Calvin’s articulation of biblical authority for limiting magisterial discretion. Perhaps, then, it is appropriate to consider the constraints listed in the Fundamental Orders as a reflection more of Puritan religious doctrine than of civil political theory. In the text above I continue on this point about magisterial discretion.


religious perspectives and not political disagreements formed the bases of Hooker’s and Winthrop’s competing understandings. If so, then Hooker’s expression of Puritan thought might indeed prove to have had an effect on politics, but in a way very different from that imagined to date.105

As these points also suggest, this essay takes no issue with claims that Puritan religious practices had effects on the development of New England political society. At one level, to the extent that sermons concerned the subject of civil elections, they probably did have effects on the politics of the day, if only to guide those who were to vote, to direct all in their relations with their civil leaders, and to remind the leaders of their bounded duties to the people.

More generally, whether because of church covenantal practices that emphasized participation, or other theologically based commitments, Puritanism can very well be appreciated to have shaped paths of political development. But any such effects would be secondary consequences of the religious practices. Regarding Hooker, his advocacy of Calvinist positions to “strengthen and incourage the soul in every holy word and work” might have had effects that shaped, broadly, Connecticut’s and New England’s political society.106 But this was not because he put political concerns first or ahead of his religious commitments and duties. Secondary effects, even those that might have shaped political society, should not affect our understanding of what it was that Hooker stood for and advocated in the first instance.

These examples do not exhaust the subjects that deserve reconsideration in light of this new understanding of Hooker’s sermon. Regardless of the findings that will follow from new assessments of early New England political history, Hooker’s sermon can no longer be deemed political commentary. But, as this preliminary assessment of implications suggests, the change in perspective from “political” to “religious” does not strip the sermon of important meaning. It remains vital to understand Hooker’s sermon and to appreciate its significance in the story of the Puritan errand into the New England wilderness.

105. See note 102, above.