

by John Morrill

Not the least of the unresolved problems about the career of Oliver Cromwell is the problem of quite when, how and why he decided that Charles I had to be tried and executed. This is not quite the same question as whether he believed monarchy should be overthrown, for when in 1657 he agonised over the offer of the Crown to himself, he revealed doubts about the propriety of the latter but none about the former. On 30 January 1649 Oliver was a determined Regicide, but an uncertain Republican.

There was nothing in his career down to the autumn of 1647 that suggests that Cromwell was one of that tiny minority of Parliamentarians willing to contemplate the deposition of Charles I. Although much mud was thrown at him during the debates that led into the Self-Denying Ordinance and the creation of the New Model, no allegation was made that he wished to pull down monarchy rather than press on heedless to outright military victory over the King and an imposed settlement. On the contrary, Cromwell was at the forefront of the coalition of New Model officers and M.P.s (the so-called 'Independent' alliance) who were involved in secret negotiations with Charles based on what became known as the Heads of the Proposals. Their aim was to get themselves into office, to secure the interests of the Army, and to offer a religious settlement more congenial to the King than the one offered by their rivals in Parliament and that group's Scottish allies. They wanted the King to accept a 'Presbyterian' church settlement throughout his dominions. Members of the Independent alliance were willing to permit the restoration of the old church with Bishops and Prayer Book, so long as it was shorn of all coercive power, and so long as there was a guarantee of freedom of worship and full equality of civil rights for those who wished to opt out of the national church and into their own religious assemblies and communities. At the Putney Debates in November 1647, Cromwell fiercely defended the monarchy against republican attack and he dug in on the right of himself and his fellow senior officers (under license from the General Council) to conduct a personal treaty with

Charles I. Indeed, in a forthcoming article I will maintain that it was a threat to the future of the monarchy that led to a news blackout at Putney as Cromwell and Ireton stormed out of a meeting on 1 November and ordered transcripts of that day's proceedings to be destroyed.

Yet throughout January 1649, Cromwell was to prove the most resolute of all the military and political leaders in putting the King on trial for his life. What made it more possible for him than for so many others who had travelled with him in the wars of the 1640s to reach that decision?

There are two major areas of difficulty. The first is whether, when the Army Council committed itself - no later than the great prayer meetings at Windsor in late April 1648 - to putting 'Charles Stuart, that Man of Blood' on trial for shedding the innocent blood of his subject, Cromwell was in the lead, or following hesitantly and reluctantly behind. His actions appear to support the latter view - for Cromwell seems to have delayed his return from the North after mopping up the remains of the second civil war in Yorkshire in the late autumn of 1648; and - as the political crisis deepened in London in early December - he dawdled in Hertfordshire, only finally arriving in London after Pride's Purge on 6 December. Yet his words seem to me to suggest an earlier commitment to radical action, and to this we must return. The second area of contention concerns his actions once in London in early December. S R Gardiner a century ago gathered several shards of evidence of Cromwell's reluctance to push ahead with an *immediate* trial. For example, he seems to have thrown himself behind the decision to send yet another delegation down to the King - the so-called Denbigh mission - to see if Charles would now negotiate seriously. Only when the King continued to duck and weave did Cromwell commit himself whole-heartedly to the establishment of the High Court of Justice and the trial and execution. From then on, no-one doubts Cromwell's commitment to Regicide. But Gardiner is more persuasive in showing that Cromwell sought to *defer* the trial than to *prevent* it and the significance of that distinction has not been explored as fully as it might be.

Most of the best biographies hedge their bets over these issues. For example, Sir Charles Firth, relying too heavily on what we now know to have been the heavily bowdlerised *Memoirs* of Edmund Ludlow, argues that by the spring of 1648 Cromwell was convinced of the desirability of getting rid of the King, but not of the feasibility of it. He also believes that this remained his position even after Pride's Purge and the removal of more than half of all M.P.s from the Houses on 7 December: 'he approved of the seizure of the King and had no doubt of the justice of bringing him to trial. But he doubted the policy of the King's trial and condemnation.' It was the King's refusal to treat with the Denbigh commission that Cromwell helped to set up, that finally persuaded him that 'the king preferred to part with his life rather than with his regal power'.

Barry Coward believes that

what converted Cromwell to the use of force against parliament and to regicide were his experiences in the Second Civil War...There was no overnight conversion, but during the period he was away from London...he gradually came to see events in a totally different light from those who did not take part in the war...

Coward places great weight on Cromwell's use of the word 'necessity'. In what proved his eventual commitment to Regicide on 26 December 1648, Coward believes, Cromwell said that 'providence and necessity had cast them upon it.' My problem here is with Coward's definition of 'necessity' as 'the dictates of political reality'. We shall return to this.

Peter Gaunt has a similar view of the timings: 'slowly, hesitantly and perhaps unwillingly, Cromwell came round to support both the trial and execution, driven forward by the messages which he felt God was sending to him personally and the army in general'. He too sees him as resisting Regicide until the last days of December.

It may be so. Few years in Cromwell's life after 1640 are as poorly documented as 1648. We get a series of tantalising glimpses of his state of mind in a total of some fifteen public and private statements. We do not know where he was at many crucial junctures - for

example, on 28 April when the House of Commons was reneging on its pledge not to enter into any communication with the King, and simultaneously the Army Council was at prayer in Windsor beseeching God to show them the way forward. He may have been at either or neither meeting. But on the other hand, we do have letters in which he appears to lay bare the inner workings of his mind - letters to Fairfax, to Lord Wharton, to his cousin St John, letters whose principal function is to share the significance of particular biblical passages to present affairs; and above all there were the four letters to a remoter relative, Robert Hammond (son-in-law of John Hampden, brother of a future Regicide and nephew of one of the King's favourite chaplains) whose wavering support for the Army's political and religious priorities he seeks to steady.

Time and again, Cromwell resorts to the Bible *and acted on it*. Historians have often spoken of his discussions of these Biblical texts as unclear, vague or ambiguous, and implied a deliberate lack of clarity. I want to suggest that a more careful attention to the biblical rhetoric, content and context (such as those he was addressing would have had) offers clarification, not obfuscation.

Cromwell knew large parts of the Bible by heart, as his habit of quoting extracts from it containing phrases from both the King James and the Geneva versions shows. At all the crucial junctures of his life - for example after each of his greatest victories - he combined factual accounts of the battle with his sense of what that victory revealed of God's purposes. In all his more intensely personal as well as in his most excited public utterances, he would commonly write a paragraph that was a dense cluster of Biblical references, built around a core text. For example, the famous letter of 1638 in which he described his conversion experience to his cousin, Mrs St John, contains two paragraphs in which Cromwell drew on eight psalms and five epistles. But the spine of the letter, the text around which it is based and to which the others are decorations, is Philippians chapter 4, in which St Paul gives thanks for the support he has been given during his imprisonment and calls for the unity and purposefulness of the faithful under persecution. The imprisoned Paul tells of the all-sufficiency of Christ in all circumstances. Similarly his speech to the Nominated Assembly in July 1653 contains an extended meditation on what Cromwell

termed 'that famous Psalm, sixty-eighth psalm, which indeed is a glorious prophecy...of the gospel churches' - 'Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered...Let the righteous be glad, let them rejoice before God, let them rejoice exceedingly...'.  
I believe that a study of his speeches in 1648 allows us a clear sense of a man increasingly convinced that God is willing the King's death.

Throughout his life Cromwell had a strong sense of God's providence. It was rooted in his reading of the Old Testament, which at one level is the story of God's personal appearances - in dreams, visions, burning bushes, pillars of fire - to challenge his chosen people and to give them stark choices: obedience and reward, disobedience and punishment; obedience and the rewards of Canaan, disobedience and slavery in Egypt or Babylon. Cromwell makes more references - especially in his writings to 1649 - to the Psalms than to any other book of the Bible; and amongst the psalms, to those with the strongest sense of God's palpable presence and activity in the activities of mankind. This sense of God's visibility in scripture and human events had no doubt been developed from his childhood by his teacher Thomas Beard, who was the author of one of the standard works on God's active presence in the world rewarding virtue and punishing vice - *The Theatre of God's Judgement* - but much more he had learned from the absolutely routine rhetorical device of godly preachers as exemplified by the Fast Sermons that there was an actual and real parallel between the choices offered to the people of the Old Testament and the people of the present time. The particular dilemmas and choices of the people of England in 1648 were *precisely* the same as particular dilemmas and choices of the people of Israel. It was appropriate and necessary for men to identify the parallels in their own lives and to act on them. We will see shortly that in 1648 Cromwell seems to have meditated upon three such parallels.

The sweep of Cromwell's writings throughout 1648 suggests a man who feels guided by God and clear of the end though not quite of the means. The change can be traced back to his histrionics in Parliament on 3 January 1648 when, gripping his sword handle, he

asserted that the King had broken his trust and that this represented a fundamental change. The Army had previously committed itself to monarchy 'unless necessity enforce an alteration'. Note that word 'necessity' again. We shall return to it. He never again discussed the King except as someone who had put himself outside the protection of God's people. For the whole of 1648 Cromwell's concern was not whether to remove the King but when and how. A letter to Robert Hammond written on 3 January about the Vote of No Addresses is already robust in its language about that. Cromwell saw the second civil war as a sacrilegious act, as an affront to the sovereignty of God, and he called for condign punishment upon all its authors. And so after each of the major episodes in the second war, unlike any of those in the first, the leaders were put on trial and some were executed in cold blood. And the language of judgement on the authors of the war had to extend to the King himself. The questions were when and how, not whether. Cromwell spoke of providence throughout his life, but never with the persistence or confidence of 1648. Twelve letters speak of Providence and eight of Necessity.

By the time of Pride's Purge, Cromwell's encounter with the bible had caused him to see in the choices God had presented to his chosen people in ancient Israel the same choices he was presenting to his new chosen people. The choices were strictly comparable, but they were false choices: to follow God's preferred route and enter the Promised Land, to ignore it and trek back to Egypt. My suggestion is that if we are to understand the confidence, drive, certainty that allowed Oliver Cromwell to abandon his belief in the inevitability of Charles I and the necessity of monarchy, this is it.

By 6 December 1648, I do not believe that Cromwell doubted the need to put the King on trial. The only question was whether it was to be the culmination of the trials and investigations into the events of the previous year, or an immediate act. Cromwell was aware of the desperately narrow basis of support for what was intended. If the trial of the King was the culmination of a sequence of trials revealing the depths of his duplicity, he could hope that the civilian Independents, at least, would come back on side. Furthermore the Army had called the 'King a Man of Blood' and the Book of Numbers predicted that God would harden the heart of the Man of

Blood and that he would bring destruction on himself. Is this what lay behind the Denbigh mission: not a hope it might succeed, but a certainty that it would fail and that the King's inability to deal honestly even in extremis would become all the more obvious? I would suggest that Cromwell was not hesitant and wavering in 1648. He was letting God's plan unfold at its own pace.

As I suggested earlier, in 1648 Cromwell seems to have found three parallels between Old Testament times and present times, the first two relating directly to himself and the first and third drawn from nearby chapters of the book of Numbers. The first of these parallels was between himself and Phineas, the High Priest of the time of Moses who saved the Israelites from a great plague by standing out against idolatry and by by-passing due legal process and summarily executing a leading member of the Israelite community caught in an adulterous embrace with a Midianite (heathen) woman. This story was the basis of a sermon preached to Parliament in December 1648 and applied to current politics, and it is referred to by Cromwell both at the time and in a letter to Lord Wharton after the event.

Much more significant, however, was Cromwell's references to the story of Gideon. Let us recall the story of Gideon, who had been called from the plough to lead the armies of Israel. He winnowed the armies, reducing it to a small, compact force made of Israel's russet-coated captains and he destroyed the Midianites and harried their fleeing army for 200 miles as Cromwell did after Preston. He then executed the Kings of the Midianites, denying them quarter because they had shed innocent blood on Mt Tabor. He then refused to take the crown himself and returned, loaded with honours, to his farm. It is not surprising that Cromwell found this a powerful story and suitable to his condition in 1648. He made reference to the story of Gideon on four occasions. Indeed his account of the battle of Preston, written the day after the battle and sent to Speaker Lenthall, reads less like other accounts of the battle of Preston than it does of the Biblical account of Gideon's defeat of the Midianites at Ain Harod. Perhaps the most graphic use of the story came in an early outburst to Fairfax in the middle of letter full of nitty-gritty military matters as he swept through South Wales in June 1648:

I pray God teach this nation...what the mind of God may be in all this, and what our duty is. Surely it is not that the poor godly people of this Kingdom should still be the objects of wrath and anger, nor that our God would have our necks under a yoke of bondage; for these things that have lately come to pass have been the wonderful works of God; breaking the rod of the oppressor, as in the day of Midian, not with garments much rolled in blood but by the terror of the Lord.

This passage draws on Galatians, on Acts and on the Second Letter to the Corinthians, but the central image with its reference to the breaking of the Midianites is from Isaiah chapter 9, and as we will see shortly, that might in the end be the more important point. For against my hope and desire, Cromwell's allusions to Gideon are all passing ones; there is no sustained meditation on his story.

The third possible Old Testament parallel was with the typing of 'Charles I' as 'the Man of Blood' - that is a man who had shed innocent blood and against whom God required justice at human hands. It was this that led many junior officers and soldiers to demand in Cromwell's hearing at Windsor that Charles Stuart as 'a man of blood' should atone for his shedding of innocent blood in accordance with the requirements of the Book of Numbers [35 v. 33]:

Ye shall not defile the land wherein ye are: for blood it defileth the land; and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.

The application of this to that man of blood Charles Stuart sustained many in the months that followed. But Cromwell himself never endorsed it, although he did for the only time that I can discover, twice draw on references from the Book of Numbers in the course of 1648.

In the end, these personal applications tantalise more than they convince. But the more general point, that Cromwell returns again and again to key texts and themes is, I think, more persuasive. Thus the June letter to Fairfax was just one of several occasions on which

he meditated on Isaiah chapters 8 and 9. Indeed he wrote to Oliver St John on 1 September 1648, a week after the Battle of Preston, telling him that 'this scripture hath been of great stay with me, Isaiah eight, 10. 11. 14. Read the whole chapter...'. The early chapters of Isaiah are a sustained and bitter attack on the arrogance and hypocrisy of the rulers of Israel, and chapters 8 and 9 are about how most of the people have missed out on righteousness and those who follow the idolatrous leaders of Judah and Israel will be destroyed. So

Associate yourselves, o ye people, and ye shall be broken in pieces...gird yourselves and you shall be broken in pieces...But I will wait upon the Lord that hideth his face from the house of Israel, and I will look for him, Behold I and the children whom the Lord has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel...

Within days he was writing in wonder at how a godly minority had seized power in Scotland, expelled the corrupt majority from the Scottish Parliament and set up godly rule: 'Think of the example and of the consequences, and let others think of it too.' The connection between this wonderment and the subsequent purge of the English Parliament is palpable.

Cromwell was working out his own destiny in relation to God's plan, and God was no democrat. He had worked through a godly remnant in the days of Isaiah and he could and would do so again. This is the essence of those remarkable letters Cromwell wrote to Robert Hammond in the late autumn of 1648, pleading with him to discern God's providential hand in current affairs. Nowhere was the clustering of biblical gobbets more dense. One paragraph alone in the letter of 25 November has 24 citations from eleven biblical books, with especial focus on the Epistle of James [ch.1 vv. 2-6] with its exhortation to Christians 'to ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed', and from Romans 8, with its great cry that, freed from the law, the true Christian must look beyond present deprivations to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Life in such a situation, says both St Paul and Cromwell, is life beyond hazard.

Cromwell's encounter with scripture empowered him and his only way of explaining and justifying himself to himself in his most intimate letters and to others in his public statements was by taking his auditors through his own process of discovery and revelation. Time and again, he tells his critics that their arguments are intellectually strong - unanswerable indeed - but that they are not *necessary* arguments. And necessity for Cromwell meant the process of discernment and falling in with the will of God. Power, he told the Nominated Assembly on 4 July 1653, 'has come to you by way of necessity: by the wise providences of God'; and in rejecting the offer of the crown in 1657, he begs those negotiating with him to show him that the 'necessary grounds' and he clearly means the God-given grounds. He could not rebut their arguments, he told them, they were 'so strong and rational.' They were arguments of expediency and 'probability towards conclusiveness'. But they were not rooted in Necessity, for God had appeared providentially in striking down the person and office, and the only argument that could convince him was a providentialist one, that God had revealed his Will to be the restoration of the title and office. That would be the 'necessary ground'.

So when Cromwell says in 1648 that 'providence and necessity' had cast him and his fellow-officers upon Regicide, he meant not that they had fallen in with political reality, but with the revealed Will of God. As Colin Davis put it: the concern for religious liberty in the English Revolution had 'less to do than we care to think about the preoccupation of groups and individuals than with the freedom of God Almighty', but the ability to discern and identify with God's freedom could be and was for men like Oliver Cromwell utterly liberating and utterly empowering. Like all forms of belief in divine mandates, it troubles the modern secular mind. But when it comes to explaining the only true revolution in British History, it has an explanatory force whose depths we have not yet plumbed.

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