

A Town Petitions against Arbitrary Government
Primary Source Analysis

Petition from the Inhabitants of Hadley, Massachusetts Bay Colony, April 25, 1665
Massachusetts Archives CVI.107 [spelling and punctuation have been modernized]

Questions for discussion:

1. How did the inhabitants of Hadley view the responsibilities of elected leaders? The responsibilities of ordinary townspeople?
2. What kinds of liberties were these colonists concerned about in 1665 and why? According to the petition, where do liberties come from?
3. How did Hadley inhabitants use biblical examples to justify questioning, or even defying, a ruler they saw as making unjust demands?

Further reading:

Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Tim Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and His Kingdoms, 1660-1685* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

Barry Levy, *Town Born: The Political Economy of New England from its Founding to the Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

Adrian Chastain Weimer, "The Resistance Petitions of 1664–1665: Confronting the Restoration in Massachusetts Bay," *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 2 (June 2019): 221-262.

Michael Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Transcription with Annotations:

To the much honored General Court of the Massachusetts now assembled at Boston,
The humble petition¹ of the inhabitants of the town of Hadley

Honored and worthy fathers,

If we call you fathers and gods too, we speak but after the most high.² One of these relative titles bespeak the tender and natural love we confide in you. For the other tells us what power you have in your hands to help us and the end for which God has clothed you therewith. Both show us our duty of repairing to you for help in time of danger under him who is over all.³

If ever there were appearances of danger towards us, we think now more.⁴ The cry of our sins as well of the Lord's threatenings being so manifest to them that have ears to hear. Had the Lord but spoken by the meanest [lowest] of his messengers, tender hearts would have trembled. But when the Lord has seconded so many voices of his precious servants by the midnight cries of those portentous signs in the heavens⁵ once and again, and that in conjunction with the disastrous state shakings among us,⁶ we would not Pharaoh-like harden our hearts or refuse to see the lifting up of the Lord's hand.⁷ Either of these might administer sad thoughts of heart. Both together give us more cause to look out, that with the prudent we may foresee the danger and hide ourselves rather than with the simple pass on and be punished.⁸

¹ The [1641 Body of Liberties](#), the Massachusetts Bay colony's law code, said with regard to petitioning: "every man whether Inhabitant or Forreiner, free or not free shall have libertie to come to any publique Court, Councill, or Towne meeting, and either by speech or writeing to move any lawful, seasonable, and materiall question, or to present any necessary motion, complaint, petition, Bill or information, whereof that meeting hath proper cognizance, so it be done in convenient time, due order, and respective manner."

² Psalm 82:1-3 (KJV): God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah. Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy.

³ The absence of any monarchical language here is notable. Hadley inhabitants are putting their trust in the local Massachusetts magistrates and deputies (the upper and lower house of the General Court) rather than in the king.

⁴ The inhabitants of Hadley were worried about a general threat and a specific threat. The general threat had to do with the civic and religious liberties of nonconformists (non-Anglicans) within the realm. In a backlash against puritans and others, new legislation was suppressing the freedom of worship and political access of nonconformists in England. And the new king, Charles II, and his "Cavalier" parliament were working to bring colonies, especially puritan-led colonies, into line with the priorities of their regime. Four royal commissioners had arrived in New England in July 1664 and were currently traveling through the region attempting to renegotiate charters on terms favorable to the crown. The specific threat to Hadley had to do with the regicides, two men who had sat on the 1649 court that condemned Charles I, the current king's father, to death. Capturing and executing these puritan regicides, Edward Whalley and William Goffe, was a priority for the king. The minister of Hadley's church, John Russell, had secretly taken Whalley and Goffe into his home and was committed to protecting them, an action Charles II would consider treasonous.

⁵ Recently a comet had appeared in the sky, widely understood to be a portent of political turmoil.

⁶ The fall of the Cromwellian regime and restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660.

⁷ For the hardening of the Egyptian Pharaoh's heart see Exodus 7.

⁸ Proverbs 22:3 (KJV): A prudent man foreseeeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.

The Good Lord our God forever blessed be his name has in a day of danger in the world bid us enter into our chambers and has kept us safe with himself.⁹ His eyes have been upon us his salvation for walls and bulwarks. When we [neither] had nor could have any other, he has graciously made his word to be verified to us. That he would go before us and be our reward himself, creating on all our dwelling places his cloud and smoke and flaming fire and upon all the glory causing a defense, to be affording here a tabernacle for a shadow from the heat and a place of refuge and covert [cover] from the storm.¹⁰ Have we seen the Lord assaying [endeavoring] so to do to any other since he brought his own redeemed, his son and first born out of Egypt? May we not look from one end of the earth yea and heavens too to the other and not see it?

And in what way the Lord has done this for us, and what statutes and judgments he has caused us to keep, which has been our wisdom and made us great in the sight of the nations! [It] has been a thing too public and glorious to be concealed or doubted of.¹¹ By what shepherds [has] the Lord led and fed us here and what has been the integrity of their hearts and skillfulness of their hands?¹² [It] would be wretched ingratitude if we should so soon forget, especially having so often and lately sang the Lord's praises for the same.¹³

That we have not so carried toward [appreciated or acted in accordance with] these as we ought we know and desire to be humbled for. We know also that there is a dreadful difference between serving the Lord under these and other services [conditions]. That we may not know this as fools come to understand good and evil [meaning, when our blessings are taken away] is our humble petition and request to yourselves [the General Court], who under God are the only means to save us therefrom, and whom we have trusted with all we have for this very end. We humbly but most earnestly beseech you that the same¹⁴ may be kept for us and for the Lord. Nor do we herein ask any more than the Lord allows and commands us to do.

We would fear God and honor the king. Whatever royal grants of grace we have received either from the Lord in Heaven or kings on earth the accepting holding fast and maintaining of the same with due thankfulness is the true magnifying of that grace. And to throw away or cowardly to suffer ourselves to be flattered or frightened from it [civil and religious liberty] is the despising and dishonoring thereof. The faster we hold the grace of God, even when he seems to be angry and thrust us away, the more we honor and please him. The king of heaven will give his poorest subject on earth leave to challenge resolutely his right and not to let it go for frowns or threats. And why should we think that a just and gracious king on earth will not do in like manner? We have right from God and man to choose our own governors, make and live under our own laws. Our liberty and privileges herein as

⁹ Isaiah 26: 20 (KJV): Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast.

¹⁰ Isaiah 4: 5-6 (KJV): And the LORD will create upon every dwelling place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night: for upon all the glory shall be a defence. And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the day time from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain.

¹¹ Many colonial puritans understood their freedom to reform the legal system and to redesign church governance on a New Testament model to be a divine gift and work.

¹² The "shepherds" could be clergy or magistrates/deputies or (probably) both.

¹³ Most likely a reference to thanksgiving days, spontaneous holidays organized by the General Court and led by local ministers.

¹⁴ I.e., the current structures of government in church and state, which the Stuart regime was trying to influence or alter.

men we prize and would hold as our lives.¹⁵ This makes us freemen and not slaves. Our privilege herein as Christians in regard of the kingdom, name, [and] glory of our God is far more precious than our lives. Hereby we enjoy and are not without God in the world. And we must give an account of our holding and improving thereof, to the hazard of much more than the worth of our lives. We would not live so accursed as to live having betrayed our trust herein. We should then be ashamed to live, and afraid to die when now through the maintaining of the same through the Lord's grace we are neither [ashamed nor afraid]. Nor is it our own portion only that we trade with in this case, but our children's stock also, even their advantages as men and Christians to serve the Lord and be accounted to him for a generation forevermore. Can we bear to think that they should rise up and call us cursed for betraying them in their successive generations and to publish the same to the ends of the earth?

Honored and endeared in the Lord, you are our nail, we hope in a sure [secure] place. On you we hang our enjoyments: houses, lands, liberties, wives, children, lives, and all our sanctuary vessels [our sacred possessions]. At your hands we look for them again, and the Lord will require them. True, what danger [there] is, you are in the forefront of it.¹⁶ But is it not the Lord that set you there? And he that gave Joshua so many charges to be strong and very courageous knows what all his Joshuas need, and will withhold no good thing from them that walk uprightly.¹⁷ Your place is not worse than David's valley of the shadow of death. He that was with him will be with you and then no fear of ill.¹⁸ Nor is your help less than Jonathan's when the Lord wrought such deliverance for and by him.¹⁹

We with our prayers and endeavors, heads and hearts and lands and estates and lives, will be with you and subject unto you. He can deliver if he will. If not we are not careful [discerning] in this matter. We again beseech you: Let us give fear, honor, tribute, [and] obedience to the Lord and the king, with all humility, constancy, and willingness as his due. And what is given us for ourselves and for our God, let us never bereave ourselves, nor rob him of. We crave pardon for the length and plainness of our speech, which yet we hope has not been rude. Our hearts have been and are full of affection. We desire to leave this testimony of it [our affection] with yourselves and to pour out the remainder before the Lord in our earnest and hearty prayer. [We pray] for his presence with and blessing upon you and your resolves [decisions], to your own comfort, [to] the continuance and increase of the prosperity of our Zion,²⁰ and [to] the advancement of the honor of his most glorious name. And so, hoping in the Lord, we rest your humble suppliants.

Hadley
April 25th, 1665

¹⁵ I.e., would hold onto even if it costs us our lives.

¹⁶ The magistrates and deputies would be held accountable if they defied the king. Soon, in 1666, Charles II would demand the presence of the governor and other colonial leaders (called by name) in London, a demand the General Court would refuse.

¹⁷ Joshua 1:7 (KJV): Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper withersoever thou goest.

¹⁸ Psalm 23:4 (KJV): Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

¹⁹ See for example, 1 Samuel 14.

²⁰ "Zion" refers to the colony, including its churches. Colonists did not, however, understand themselves to be Israel in any unique sense. They thought of themselves as one hub of an international reformed community, including, for example, Huguenots in France.