

John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics
of the Old Testament

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Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
The Department of Biblical Studies, in the
University of Sheffield

June 1987

SUMMARY

of

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John Calvin's use of the Old Testament reveals his deep commitment to it. Calvin made use of the Old Testament in all areas of his life and work as a Reformer. However, the continued use of the Old Testament within the Christian Church of the 16th Century was not without its problems. Calvin discerned in the approach to the Old Testament taken by the Anabaptists and the Roman Catholics what he saw as a 'Judaizing' tendency. Calvin's own approach and understanding of the Old Testament was shaped by his confrontation with these groups and his perception of their 'Judaizing' of the Old Testament. His Old Testament hermeneutics were in part an attempt to appropriate the Old Testament for the Christian Church. For Calvin the Old Testament belongs to the Christian Church because Christ is present in it. Hence Calvin's fundamental hermeneutical goal is to read the Old Testament with the aim of finding Christ. This goal, however, does not lead Calvin into an allegorical method of Old Testament exegesis. On the contrary, Calvin repudiates allegory and adheres tenaciously to the literal meaning of the Old Testament as discovered by a grammatical-historical form of exegesis. Calvin's historical-grammatical exegesis, however, seems to be in tension with his hermeneutical presupposition of reading the Old Testament with the aim of finding Christ there. This tension is overcome by the twin ideas of accommodation and typology which in Calvin's Old Testament Hermeneutics form a bridge between his christological hermeneutical goal and his exegetical method. Calvin's doctrine of the unity of the two Testaments can be seen to be in full harmony with his Old Testament hermeneutics and is in fact their quintessence. Thus for Calvin the Old Testament is emphatically Scripture for the Church of Christ.

Chapter 4

Calvin's Rejection of Allegorical Exegesis

First of all we must pose the question whether Calvin's interpretation of the Old Testament was not simply a form of eisegesis. Indeed, given Calvin's presupposition that the Old Testament must be read with the aim of finding Christ in it and his concept of Christ as the scopus of the Old Testament, we might quite reasonably conclude that this would lead Calvin to some form of Old Testament interpretation that was dominantly subjective. Given Calvin's basic starting point in approaching the Old Testament and the goals to which he thought Old Testament interpretation ought to lead, we might very well expect him to employ some form of allegorical exegesis. This assumption is greatly strengthened when we consider the prevailing position that allegorical exegesis held historically in the Church's use of the Old Testament.

Since its earliest days, the Christian Church had made use of allegory in her exegesis of the Old Testament.¹ The Old Testament was, after all, originally a Jewish book, and it still continued to be the holy book of the Jewish Religion, a religion which repudiated Christ and Christianity and which refused to acknowledge Christianity as having any claim whatsoever to the Old Testament. Hence the Christian Church was forced to appropriate the Old Testament for itself, it had to show vis a vis the Jews, that its own beliefs were not alien to it. In the polemical confrontation with the Jewish

Synagogue which ensued, allegory proved a most powerful weapon in the armoury of the Christian exegetes. Allegorical exegesis enabled the Church to read the Old Testament christologically and so construe it as a Christian book and thus appropriate it for the new religious context.²

The Christian fathers were, of course, not the first to employ the allegorical method of exegesis. It had been used among the ancient Greeks since the 6th. Century B.C. The more philosophically minded among them employed allegorical techniques as a means of interpreting the Homeric Mythology, which was conceived of as being divinely inspired and therefore authoritative in the religious sphere, in accordance with their own religious and philosophical viewpoint. Thus they were able to appropriate Homer for a different thought world.³ Nor were the Christian fathers the first to employ this method with respect to the Old Testament text itself. Where the Jewish religion had been influenced and refined by Greek philosophical thought, allegory proved useful in dealing with what were thought to be unacceptable aspects of the Old Testament and so harmonizing the Old Testament with Greek concepts.⁴ Hence it was widely used within the Hellenistic-Jewish community. Philo (c. 20 B.C. - c. A.D. 50), an Alexandrian Jew, steeped in the philosophical ideas of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, is perhaps the best known figure here, due to the great bulk of his writings which have survived. ⁵ As with the Homeric Myths we see the same motive at work, that is, the reappropriation of a religious document for a changed (more refined) philosophical and religious context.⁶

From this brief account it is clear that the allegorical method of exegesis was a widely recognized and accepted form of Old Testament interpretation at the opening of the Christian era. Hence it is not surprising that when the early theologians and apologists of the Church were confronted with the problem of the Old Testament they should turn to allegory.⁷

However, it was with Origen and the Alexandrian theological tradition that allegorical exegesis in the early Church reached its peak. Once again the influence of Greek thought and Philosophy⁸ is very much in evidence. It was Origen who elaborated allegory into its classical form of the threefold sense. The meaning of Scripture corresponds to the nature of man, which Origen conceived as trichotomic. Man is composed of body, soul and spirit, likewise in Scripture there is a literal, moral and a mystical or allegorical meaning.⁹ Needless to say, the literal sense, corresponding to the body, was regarded as the lowest, while the mystical or allegorical - corresponding to the spirit - was thought of as the highest meaning, which could be understood or perceived only by the 'spiritually mature'. Origen's mystical or allegorical sense was later further elaborated giving rise in addition to the anagogical or eschatological sense. Hence by the time of the medieval Church biblical exegesis had become fixed in the famous medieval Quadriga or four-fold sense.¹⁰

The basic presupposition of allegorical exegesis is that, in addition to the literal meaning of a text, that is, the

meaning contained in the actual words of the text as understood grammatically and historically, there is another deeper meaning which lies behind the words of the text and which is the ultimate or real meaning intended by its divine author.¹¹ It may be that this other meaning depends on the literal-historical meaning of the words of the text,¹² but nevertheless this has to be set aside or transcended and is relatively unimportant in the final analysis.¹³ Indeed for some allegorists the literal meaning of the text could be regarded not only as unimportant, but as misleading and harmful.¹⁴ Hence, the text can come to be seen as a sort of cryptic clue or cypher which has to be decoded so as to get at its true meaning.¹⁵

The harmful effects of this method within the field of Old Testament studies became increasingly clear as the Middle Ages progressed. Where it was employed, the historical dimension of the Old Testament was lost sight of. The Old Testament was increasingly seen as an enigma, full of dark puzzles which could be dangerous for the ignorant and were to be understood, that is, decoded, only by those specially trained to unravel them or who were endowed with some special charisma or gift of interpretation.¹⁶ Lacking all external, objective controls and criteria, exegesis became increasingly subjective and arbitrary.¹⁷ Allegorical exegesis, as a tool of Scholasticism sought for 'timeless' and abstract philosophical and theological concepts in the Old Testament and so dissolved its historical character.¹⁸

From the beginning voices had been raised in criticism

against allegory,¹⁹ these continued throughout the Middle Ages,²⁰ but these were never dominant until the period of the Reformation.

Even from this brief sketch, it can be seen that by the time we arrive at the period of the Reformation there existed within the Church a long standing tradition of allegorical exegesis. Allegory was the prevailing method employed by Christian interpreters of the Old Testament to illicit a 'Christian' meaning from it. They felt this could only be achieved by setting aside the literal-historical meaning and by presupposing that Scripture had a manifold meaning (multiplex sensus), and that the most important sense lay beyond the literal meaning of the words.²¹

Calvin, broadly speaking, shared the same exegetical goals in his approach to the Old Testament as the preceding Christian tradition, namely to read the Old Testament Christologically, and thus as a 'Christian book'. Moreover, we have seen that Calvin, like the early Church Fathers, engaged in polemic with the Jews and with Christian 'Judaizers' over the Old Testament. We might expect him, therefore, to walk in their exegetical shoes, and thus to find Christ in the Old Testament by reading it, as many of them did, allegorically. It seems reasonable to ask, therefore, whether Calvin too adopted their understanding of Scripture as having a multiplex sensus, and thus whether he too employed the allegorical method or one of its modifications. Was it by means of the allegorical method of exegesis that Calvin sought Christ in the Old Testament? Was it with the aid of

allegorical exegesis that Calvin was able to construe the Old Testament as a Christian book and so appropriate it for the Christian Church? We will now attempt to answer these questions by examining what Calvin's writings reveal about his attitude towards allegory.

In the Institutes (II.v.19), Calvin makes the following statement, 'Allegories ought not to go beyond the limits set by the rule of Scripture, let alone suffice as the foundation for any doctrines.'²² Such a statement could be understood as allowing the use of allegorical interpretation, albeit within certain limitations, and in fact has been so understood.²³ The fact that Calvin himself on many occasions actually employs the terminology of the fourfold sense might be seen as confirming this.²⁴ The occasional commendation in his commentaries of the allegorical interpretations of other exegetes could also be construed in this way.²⁵ Finally, the fact that Calvin recognized the presence of allegorical passages in Scripture might be seen as further confirmation. Calvin admitted that Christ himself made use of allegories to convey his teaching,²⁶ as did the prophets in the Old Testament, especially Daniel and Zechariah.²⁷

Such evidence, however, is quite misleading and the conclusion drawn from it quite unwarranted. That Calvin recognizes the presence of allegories in Scripture is in fact irrelevant to the point in hand. Calvin can quite easily admit the presence of allegory in Scripture as a literary device without feeling at all constrained to use it as an interpretative tool since the two are, in reality, quite distinct. Moreover, in such circumstances Calvin is quite careful to define exactly what he means by allegory. Thus commenting on Daniel 4.10-16, he tells us that,

The entire discourse is metaphorical, indeed, properly speaking, it is allegory since allegory is nothing else

than extended metaphor (continua metaphora). Had Daniel merely depicted the king by the figure of a tree, it would have been metaphor, but when he pursues his figure of speech in an uninterrupted course, his speech becomes allegorical.²⁸

In this definition of Allegory as 'extended metaphor' Calvin's early humanist training clearly emerges.²⁹ Indeed Calvin's background in humanism is a powerful influence to dispose him against allegorical exegesis.³⁰ The important thing about the definition given here is that it shows us that Calvin could define allegory purely in terms of a literary figure of speech. Hence Calvin's retention of the term does not necessarily say anything about his approval of allegory as an exegetical method. As we shall see, he can reject allegory in the sense of a technical term for the method of exegesis derived from the early and medieval Church while retaining the word in a less technical sense as a term to denote a literary form or mode.³¹

This may also help us to understand Calvin's statements in Institutes II.v.19. The word 'allegories' here could be taken as a reference to allegorical passages of Scripture. Thus the meaning would be that those parts of Scripture which make use of allegory as a literary device should be interpreted in the light of those parts of Scripture which do not and that, consequently, allegorical passages of Scripture are not in themselves a sufficient basis on which to found some doctrine. In other words in this passage we would have a statement of the familiar principle that the more obscure passages of Scripture should be interpreted in the light of the clearer ones.

Finally, Calvin's usage of the traditional terminology of the medieval four-fold sense is really quite fluid, for he does not use the terms with the same meanings or connotations.³² For example the word anagogé in the terminology of the four-fold sense refers to the eschatological sense of a text.³³ Thus in the classic example of Jerusalem, anagogically it will refer to the heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the glorified Church. Calvin's usage of the word is very different to this. He uses it in the sense of 'application' or 'transference' of a biblical text to some particular situation or truth.³⁴ This is made clear by his comments on Genesis 3.15, where he writes,

We must now pass over (transitum facere; literally- make a transition) from the serpent to the author of evil himself; and this is not only a comparison but a true literal anagogé.³⁵

The word 'literal' is important here, it shows that Calvin understood anagogé as an application which arises out of the very letter of a text. Calvin's usage of the word here and on other occasions³⁶ makes it clear that he does not use anagogé in the traditional four-fold sense. The same could be said of the usage Calvin makes of other terms traditionally used in the medieval quadriga.³⁷

In fact far from allowing allegorical exegesis, Calvin is deeply hostile to it and rejects it as being in any sense a valid tool in the task of biblical interpretation. Calvin's criticisms of allegorical exegesis, its practitioners and fruits are frequent and uncompromising. It is Origen, in Calvin's eyes, who is chiefly to blame for introducing this contagion into the Church. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 3.6ff., a locus classicus proof text for the

allegorists,³⁸ Calvin leaves us in no doubt of his attitude towards allegory and that in his view it is Origen who is its infamous progenitor.

This passage has been distorted and wrongly interpreted first by Origen and then by others, and they have given rise to the most disastrous error that Scripture is not only useless but actually harmful unless allegorized.³⁹

He then goes on to give us a list of the harmful effects that this kind of exegesis has had on biblical interpretation.

This error has been the source of many evils. Not only did it open the way for the corruption of the natural meaning of Scripture but also set up boldness in allegorizing as the chief exegetical virtue. Thus many of the ancients without any restraint played all sorts of games with the sacred Word of God, as if they were tossing a ball to and fro. It also gave heretics a chance to throw the Church into turmoil for when it was an accepted practice for anybody to interpret any passage in any way he desired, any mad idea, however absurd or monstrous, could be introduced under the pretext of an allegory. Even good men were carried away by their mistaken fondness for allegories into formulating a great number of perverse opinions.⁴⁰

Here we find some of Calvin's major criticisms of allegorical exegesis, criticisms which are echoed innumerable times throughout his writings and especially his Old Testament expositions. Allegory sets aside the 'natural meaning of Scripture' - a crucial idea in Calvin's exegesis - and so opens the way for purely arbitrary interpretations. Having set aside the objective criterion of the text, it opens the way for the full play of human subjectivity. Thus the true meaning of Scripture is distorted and men can foist on Scripture any meaning they wish. This is dangerous since it destroys Scripture as an objective canon and so gives room for heretics to enter in.⁴¹

Elsewhere, Calvin characterizes allegory as a form of 'speculation'⁴² - a word which in Calvin's vocabulary has

very negative overtones - and feels that it is a natural tool of Scholastic theology which he also characterized as 'speculative'.⁴³ Wherever free reign is given to human speculation, there is a loss of simplicity and sobriety, men loose their level headedness and wander away from the truth which is basically clear and simple. This is what has happened in both Scholastic theology and in allegory, its exegetical hand-maid.⁴⁴

In the final analysis, allegory, for Calvin, is no more than a form of eisegesis, something which Calvin, in his own way, tried painstakingly to avoid. The allegorists weave their so called 'expositions' from their own imaginations. Their interpretations are no more than the creations of their own brains and fancies. They do not read their ideas out of Scripture but they read them into Scripture.⁴⁵ Thus by seeking a meaning that is hidden behind the words of the text, they twist the true and plain meaning of Scripture which is to be found in the actual words of the text as literally understood, that is, grammatically and historically.⁴⁶

Since the allegorical method has no objective controls, but is almost entirely subjective, there can be no rules governing the meaning that is to be given to a particular passage. Who is to say why one allegorical interpretation should be preferred to another? For example, some explain the fact that, according to Exodus 26.19, there were to be two bases under every board of the Ark of the Covenant as a reference to the two Testaments, whereas others take it as

referring to the two natures of Christ, '... because believers rest on these two foundations'! Calvin has no trouble in showing the absurdity of such interpretations. He suggests a third possibility, 'With no less probability we might say, that two bases were placed beneath each of the boards ... because godliness has the promise of this life and that which is to come'. A fourth absurdity suggests itself, perhaps it was '... because we must resist on both sides the temptations which assail us from the right and from the left' and finally there is a fifth possibility, '... because faith must not limp nor turn to the right nor the left'! In this way Calvin destroys the allegorical interpretation of this passage by showing the absurdity of the sheer numbers of possible interpretations. One could go on for ever inventing new interpretations, '... thus there would be no measure (or limit) to game playing (sic nullus erit ludendi modus)'.⁴⁷

Then there is another problem, how far are we to go in the allegorical interpretation of the details of a passage? Once again the allegorical method can provide us with no guide in this matter. For example, the Jews were to eat only those animals which chewed the cud and were cloven hooved. The literal meaning of this command seems quite straightforward, but the allegorists are not content with that, they must seek some deeper, more profound meaning. Thus this command really concerns the two Testaments, and it means that we must make a difference between the Old Testament and the New. Chewing the cud, say they, really means that we must inwardly digest the doctrine of Scripture. If this is so, Calvin says, then let them tell us what the scales of the fishes mean!⁴⁸ Again

the tabernacle was to be covered with rams' skins; this, say the allegorists, is obviously a reference to Christ, the lamb of God, 'whose blood covers and protects the Church'. Very well, Calvin asks, but what do the badgers' skins mean with which the ark was also covered or again the goats' hair?⁴⁷ There is, of course, no answer.

Calvin's criticisms begin to give us some idea of the reasons behind his hostility to allegorical exegesis. But we must probe deeper to find its roots. It can be traced to two basic sources, his doctrine of Scripture and its authority and, closely linked with this, his doctrine of revelation and the nature and function of language in general.⁵⁰ Thus Calvin's attitude to allegory as an exegetical device can be seen as a necessary corollary of his basic theological position, founded as it was upon Scripture conceived as being the final and authoritative communication of God in verbal form.

Calvin, as Emile Doumergue tells us, was 'tormented by an incomparable need for certitude'.⁵¹ Such a need could only find satisfaction in a very high doctrine of Scripture. Calvin's mind could only find the rest and security it sought in the certitude of an absolutely reliable, objective and infallible authority. It was in Scripture that Calvin found such an authority. Scripture conceived of as being absolutely trustworthy in every detail and word,⁵² in other words, Scripture conceived of as without error and thus infallible. Scripture could only be thought of in this way if it had its origin solely in God, if there was, to use one of Calvin's common phrases, 'no human admixture' in it,⁵³ since

anything originating from the corrupt and fallible nature of man is necessarily defective as a religious authority⁵⁴ Thus God's control over the production of Scripture must be total, that is, it must extend to the very words of Scripture themselves. To use the language of later dogmatics, Scripture, if it is to satisfy the function of an absolute authority that Calvin sought to give it, must be verbally inspired.⁵⁵ In Calvin's mind, though he did not use the term, infallibility and authority are inextricably linked to verbal inspiration. Only a Scripture conceived of as being verbally inspired could be taken as an absolutely reliable and infallible guide.

Calvin, therefore, speaks of the biblical writers as 'the instruments or organs of the Holy Spirit' (*Spiritus Sancti organa*).⁵⁶ They are God's or the Holy Spirit's 'amanuenses or secretaries' (*Spiritus Sancti amanuenses*)⁵⁷ who record only what He dictates to them,⁵⁸ and 'pass on nothing of their own'.⁵⁹ Scripture is thus 'dictated by God' or 'the Holy Spirit'.⁶⁰ Even the style and language used in Scripture is determined by God, thus it can be called 'the style of the Holy Spirit'.⁶¹ The very words used and even the individual letters fall under God's control.⁶² Hence, for Calvin, Scripture is 'God himself speaking in his own words'.⁶³ In Scripture 'God opens his own sacred mouth'.⁶⁴ Thus when we read or hear it we are hearing God himself speak.⁶⁵ For this reason '... we ought to pay to Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from the Lord alone and has nothing human mixed in.'⁶⁶

However, and it may seem somewhat paradoxical, this does not mean that the human instruments are totally irrelevant and so can be forgotten, nor does it mean that they are totally passive. On the contrary, they are important precisely as the instruments that God himself has chosen and prepared to convey his revelation to us. If God, who in his majesty is infinitely exalted above all that is human, is to reveal himself to us he must condescend to finite human capacity by accommodating himself to the use of a human medium and human thought forms etc.⁶⁷ This he has done by using men to be the authors of Scripture. These men, though inspired, are not bereft of their own minds, they are in control of their own reason and capacities,⁶⁸ thus the authors have different characteristics and styles.⁶⁹ However, these men have been so chosen and prepared by God that they convey exactly the message, down to its very words, that he has determined.⁷⁰ Hence the human authors are significant, and whilst their significance is but that of instruments, they are none the less human instruments and continue to be so during the process of inspiration.⁷¹ This is important for Calvin's concept of divine accommodation in revelation. God comes down to the human level and to human capacities so as to make his revelation appropriate and intelligible to mankind.⁷² He does so by revealing himself through men and using them as men, not by somehow negating that which is human in them.⁷³ Thus the human authors of Scripture cannot be ignored if the Scriptures are to be understood correctly. This is very important for Calvin's concept of exegesis and his rejection of the allegorical method. The meaning of

Scripture, that is the message of God in Scripture, can only be grasped and understood by understanding the meaning intended by the human instruments. In the event of inspiration the divine and human somehow become one. God's meaning is their meaning. In turn, the meaning of the human authors can only be arrived at by understanding the language and words they used.⁷⁴

This, in effect, brings us to the second source of Calvin's hostility to allegorical exegesis, his concept of the nature and function of language in general. It will become clear as we proceed that what Calvin has to say here is closely connected with his doctrine of revelation and inspiration as we have sought to outline it here.

It should be clear by now that for Calvin inspiration is verbal. This is also true of his doctrine of revelation in general. Not only is inspiration verbal, but, Calvin points out, the revelatory events which are recorded in Scripture always involved some form of verbal communication. They were either purely verbal,⁷⁵ or if there was a vision or some kind of physical event, it was always followed or accompanied by some kind of verbal communication.⁷⁶ Calvin is always very careful to emphasize the verbal nature of revelation in his Old Testament commentaries and sermons. Typical examples of this can be found in his Commentary on Genesis and his Sermons on Psalm 119. Commentating on Genesis 46.2, Calvin writes,

It is, however, needful to recall what I have often stated, that the word was joined with it, because a silent vision would have profited little or nothing.... Since no living image of God can exist without the word, whenever

God has appeared to his servants, he has always spoken to them.⁷⁷

He goes on to speak about 'visions' which 'require to be animated by the word' and of a 'mutual connection' between vision and word, such that '... the word immediately follows' visions. In short, the word is '... as it were the soul of the vision'.⁷⁸

A vision without some verbal communication is, for Calvin, dumb. Calvin did not draw the same distinction between revelation and Scripture as the record of revelation, or between the Word of God and Scripture as is drawn by modern theologians.⁷⁹ If we must speak of Calvin in such terms as these, I believe that to be true to Calvin we should have to say that Scripture is a revealed (in the sense of verbally inspired) record of revelation.⁸⁰

Whatever view we take of Calvin's doctrine of inspiration it is clear that, for Calvin, Scripture, when accompanied by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, is now the only locus of revelation.⁸¹ Redemptively speaking, God is not now revealing anything new about himself. All that he has chosen to be made known of himself is to be found in Scripture.⁸² Nor do we have direct access to Christ and the Holy Spirit, or to any revelatory events, but only an indirect access through the Scriptures.⁸³ This means that God's redemptive revelation of himself to man is to be found in the very words of Scripture and, we might add, only there.⁸⁴ Hence, for us too God's revelation is verbal.

Therefore, in Calvin's thought, God's revealing himself to

man necessarily involves language, that is, some form of verbal communication. Calvin, it is true, nowhere in his writings systematically develops or states a concept of language and communication. As scholars have observed, 'Calvin was no philosopher'.⁶⁵ However, from various references scattered about in his writings, it is possible to form a good idea of what his views must have been. Language and communication were very important issues for the Humanism in which Calvin was schooled as a young man.⁶⁶ Calvin, we can easily imagine, would be forced to form some ideas on the subject during his years of involvement with humanism as a classical scholar, the statements he makes in his writings would seem to bear this assumption out.

Calvin's general concept of language can be stated in his own words very briefly. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 2.11 he writes,

For since language is the character mentis, men communicate their own thoughts to one another, so that others become aware of their thoughts.⁶⁷

The phrase character mentis used here, and reiterated elsewhere,⁶⁸ is especially significant. The Latin word 'character' is derived from the Greek word and means 'the impression left on wax by a seal'.⁶⁹ It can thus come to mean 'image' or 'representation'.⁷⁰ Hence, in Calvin's view, language is a representation or image of the mind or thought.

This same idea is brought to expression and further developed in his comments on Genesis 11.1, where, commenting on the statement that before the building of the Tower of Babel the

earth had 'one language', Calvin makes the following observations:

Truly the diversity of tongues is to be regarded as a prodigy. For since language is the impress of the mind (nam quum mentis character sit lingua), how does it come about that men who partake of the same reason and who are born for a social life, do not communicate with each other in the same language?⁹¹

It is clear that, in Calvin's view, if all men possess the same reason then they should all speak the same language. Why? because language is the 'character mentis', the representation of the mind. The fact that men do not speak the same language is something 'unnatural', indeed, it is the result of God's judgment and curse on human pride, as Calvin goes on to argue from this same chapter of Genesis.

This defect, seeing it is repugnant to nature, Moses states is adventitious; and pronounces the division of tongues to be a punishment divinely inflicted on men because they impiously conspired against God.⁹²

Elsewhere, Calvin demonstrates the great importance he placed on language by designating it, 'the bond of society'.⁹³ A designation which arises out of the underlying concept of language as the character mentis. The 'division of tongues' in the tower of Babel story thus represents an undermining of human society. Calvin himself makes the point that many of the conflicts and misunderstandings between various nations are directly attributable to differences in language.⁹⁴

However, what is most interesting from the point of view of Calvin's exegetical method is that he thinks that this concept of language is also applicable to God. Commenting on John 1:1, Calvin writes,

For just as in men speech is called the expression of the thoughts, so it is not inappropriate to apply this to God and say that he expresses himself to us by his speech or word.⁹⁵

In other words, just as human language is the character mentis and therefore an adequate vehicle for the expression of human thoughts the same can also be said of the language God uses in revealing himself in Scripture.

Calvin also defines language as the effigies mentis. This is, perhaps, an even stronger expression than the former. In his commentary on Isaiah 59:4 he quotes favourably the 'common proverb' that 'linguam esse effigiem mentis'.⁹⁶ The word effigies signifies a copy or an imitation, a likeness or portrait and an image. In the above proverb, it implies that language is a copy or an imitation of the mind or of the thoughts of the mind.

This concept of language as the character/effigies mentis, taken together with his doctrine of revelation and inspiration, is an important aspect of Calvin's biblical hermeneutics and constitutes a crucial factor in his idea of correct exegetical method. It forms the basis of his rejection of allegorical exegesis.

As we would expect, Calvin's idea of the true task of the exegete quite naturally flows from these related concepts of Scripture and language. As T.H.L Parker has put it, speaking with reference to Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, 'Since language is the character mentis, it follows that the expositor encounters the mentem scriptoris in the language he uses - that is, in the text of the document.'⁹⁷ In other words, for Calvin, the chief task of the biblical exegete must be to discover and explain the mind (mens) of

the author as it is revealed in the text of Scripture. Calvin himself states this programmatically in the dedicatory epistle to his commentary on Romans, addressed to Simon Grynaeus.

Since it is almost his [the interpreter's] only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound (*mentem scriptoris, quem explicandum sumpsit, patefacere*), he misses the mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of the author (*quantum ab ea lectores abducit*).⁹⁸

Recent studies have drawn attention to the fundamental importance of this letter for Calvin's hermeneutics.⁹⁹ In it he refers to certain discussions he had had with Grynaeus during their time together in Basel in 1535-36. During these discussions they had debated the function of a commentary and the task of exegesis. Thus three years before he embarked upon his work as a commentator Calvin had already formed a clear view of his task. Indeed the dedicatory epistle as a whole would seem to give expression to Calvin's ideals of exegesis and the goals he had set himself as an interpreter.¹⁰⁰

As we have seen since language is the character/effigies mentis it is an adequate vehicle of communication which faithfully represents the meaning intended by the author.¹⁰¹ Hence the exegete will approach the text in a different way to the allegorist. He will not approach it as some sort of hindrance to attaining the mind of its author, or as an obstacle that has to be laid to one side before the author's thought can be reached, nor will he see the text as a system of enigmatic signs or symbols which point beyond themselves to the true (hidden) meaning. On the contrary, the text, that is, its very words, is a copy or representation of

the writer's thoughts and since the task of the exegete is to discover and lay bare the mind of the author it is with the words of the text that he will be concerned.

Now, as we have seen, for Calvin as for the allegorists the ultimate author of Scripture is God, the Holy Spirit. This means that the expositor must, ultimately, seek the mind of God, the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Thus both Calvin and the allegorists had the same exegetical goals, however, there is one crucial difference between them. For Calvin the *mens Dei*, the meaning God himself intended to convey through Scripture, was to be found in the words and concepts employed by the human authors. The mind of God is to be found in and through the mind(s) of the human authors of Scripture. The allegorists, on the other hand, came to a very different conclusion. Pursuing the same goal as Calvin, the mind of God in Scripture, they were led away from the literal meaning of the Old Testament. Because God is the author of Scripture, they felt that it must have some deeper, more profound meaning than that which is contained in the literal meaning of the words. The literal meaning of the Old Testament, according to Origen, is often too trifling or crude to be attributed to God, hence one must plumb below its surface to find the deeper truths which lie hidden there and which were really intended by God.¹⁰² Thus the allegorists were led to attribute a multiplex sensus to Scripture and to place the greatest emphasis upon its non-literal, allegorical or mystical meanings.¹⁰³ The historico-grammatical meaning of the Old Testament, the meaning intended by the human authors, was by and large considered to be inferior,¹⁰⁴ or,

at most, a springboard for 'the true', allegorical meaning.¹⁰⁵

Calvin outrightly rejected the idea that Scripture, including the Old Testament, had a manifold meaning (*multiplex sensus*) along with his rejection of the allegorical method. He categorically argued that Scripture has a unitary or single meaning (*simplex sensus*).¹⁰⁶ Commenting on Galatians 4.22-24, which raises issues about the allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament and which was another favourite proof text for the allegorists, Calvin writes,

Scripture, they say, is fertile and thus bears multiple meanings. I acknowledge that Scripture is the most rich and inexhaustible fount of all wisdom. But I deny that its fertility consists in the various meanings which anyone may fasten to it at his pleasure. Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one (*verum sensus scripturae, qui germanus est ac simplex*), and let us embrace and hold it resolutely. Let us not merely neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the literal sense (*a literali sensu*).¹⁰⁷

Thus while Calvin does not deny the fertility of Scripture, he will not allow it to consist in what the exegete himself reads into the text. The meaning of Scripture is *simplex*. Its fecundity and depth, put there by God, consist in the words of the text as understood literally.

Calvin's interpretation of this passage shows us the depths of his hostility to allegory as an exegetical method and the lengths to which he was prepared to go in opposition to it. It would seem clear that Paul, in this passage, is interpreting the Old Testament allegorically.¹⁰⁸ Indeed he even uses the term.¹⁰⁹ In spite of this, however, Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, endeavours to show that

Paul is not really allegorizing, but is simply drawing a comparison, or anagogé.¹¹⁰ Calvin argues that there is no 'departure from the literal meaning', and that Paul uses the term allegory in this passage, as Chrysostom pointed out, in an imprecise way.¹¹¹

It will be helpful at this stage to summarize our findings. We closed the preceding chapter by pointing to the fundamental presupposition of Calvin's interpretation of the Old Testament. That is, that Christ is the scopus of Scripture and therefore that Scripture, the whole of Scripture, and thus the Old Testament, should be read with the aim of finding Christ. In the present chapter we have begun to ask how Calvin proposed carrying this aim out, that is, how Calvin proposed reading the Old Testament so as to find Christ there. In the light of Calvin's explicit aim it seemed likely that he might seek to achieve it by some form of non-literal exegesis. Thus we posed the question whether Calvin, to accomplish his goal, employed the allegorical method as did a great deal of exegetical tradition before him. It should be clear by now that a negative response must be given to this question. Calvin's Christological orientation, in spite of what we might expect, did not lead him away from the literal-historical meaning of the Old Testament. The task of the Old Testament interpreter is to discover the mind of the author, ultimately, of course, this is God the Holy Spirit, but in the production of Scripture God has employed and accommodated himself to human instrumentality. Thus Scripture is at once divine and human. Therefore to understand the mind of God in Scripture we must understand the mind of its human authors. And since language is the character mentis, to understand their meaning we must seek to understand what the authors meant when they wrote or said what they did. It is this understanding of the interpreters task that radically shaped Calvin's Old

Testament exegesis, as will become clear through a discussion of his exegetical principles.