

Calvin, scripture, and the natural order

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Abstract

By way of commemorating the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, his exegesis of Scripture in light of his understanding of the Natural Order is considered. First, Calvin's intellectual context is briefly discussed with particular reference to Natural Philosophy (the forerunner of modern science) and Christian Humanism. Taken together, these provide a broad framework for understanding how Calvin brought contemporary understandings of the Natural Order to bear upon his reading of scripture. It is noted, however, that the relative stability of Natural Philosophy and the harmonious relationship between it and theology gave rise to few, if any, problems for Biblical exegetes of the period. Second, Calvin's exegetical approach is considered with particular reference to the critically important principle of Accommodation followed by studies of two cases in which Calvin engages with understandings of Nature in his biblical exegesis: 2 Timothy 2:17 and Psalm 58:4. It is concluded that although there are valuable lessons to be learned from Calvin's exegetical approach, the evidence is too scant to state with confidence how Calvin might have responded to 21st century concerns.

Keywords

Jean Calvin, accommodation, Scripture, science, natural philosophy, mediaeval period, exegesis, scientific revolution

Although you will learn very much about a person's theological views by asking them what they think of John Calvin, you are unlikely thereby to learn very much about Calvin himself, for he has the rare privilege of being so well-known that virtually nobody knows anything about him! He is, perhaps, theology's ultimate urban legend! One popular myth is that Calvin was a narrow-minded dogmatist with a pathological fixation on predestination. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that in his own day Calvin was quite prepared to engage in a radical critique of prevailing religious orthodoxy. The success of that critique is testimony to Calvin's creativity and sophistication as both biblical exegete and theologian. How ironic that many should now regard Calvin as a fixed pillar of the religious establishment!

In this paper I wish to explore how Calvin's understanding of the natural order impacted his exegesis of scripture. Following consideration of some important background issues, I shall turn to two brief case studies: 2 Timothy 2:17 and Psalm 58:4. For reasons I shall discuss these are among the few instances where Calvin makes use of scientific¹ findings in his exegesis, yet they are sufficient to demonstrate the sophistication of his exegetical approach. It is an approach from which we can learn much, yet given the marked advances in science since Calvin's day I wish to caution against appeals to Calvin in defence of any contemporary exegetical findings. The aim is not to make mileage from the myth, but to represent Calvin fairly and do honour to him as an exegete of the first order from whom every student of scripture can profitably learn.

Calvin's historical context

'The past is not transformed into the "modern world" at any single moment.' So writes Steven Shapin (1996 p. 7) in reference to the rise of modern science. Simply put, modern science had precedents, and few historians now accept the claim that modern Western thought, the scientific enterprise included, demonstrates a decisive break from the earlier mediaeval tradition². This is not to deny that things changed decisively across the course of the 16th and 17th centuries. It is, however, to assert that this change occurred over generations rather than in moments and we cannot therefore force Calvin to stand upon one side or other of some abrupt historical divide. It will be helpful, then, to locate Calvin with respect to historical developments in scientific and religious thought.

Science and religion in Calvin's period

When we think of the way in which Calvin's scientific understanding influenced his scriptural exegesis we may fall at the outset into either of two related errors. The first is to forget that Calvin was a 16th century thinker who knew nothing of the concerns which confront us in the 21st century. The second is to impose upon Calvin the popular, but no longer credible, notion of a fundamental conflict between scientific knowledge and religious belief.³ Either error will lead us to overlook the fact that the

¹ Despite the fact that it is somewhat anachronistic to use the term 'science' to refer to the natural philosophy of Calvin's day and earlier, I will do so and trust that the reader will understand that references to 'Calvin's science' or 'mediaeval science' and so on are used so as to avoid rather unwieldy references to 'Calvin's natural philosophy' and so on.

² Although often denigrated, the mediaeval period was an age of remarkable intellectual vigour and progress which both transcended the achievements of the classical age and laid the foundations for that which would follow. The familiar dismissal of the period as a benighted 'dark age' is now widely recognised as a distortion. Other than Shapin (1996), see also Barber (2008 p. 148n3), Hannam (2011) and Stark (2005)

³ I will not here deal with the assertion that science and religion are always found in perpetual conflict as it is sufficient to show, as I do below, that such an idea does not apply in Calvin's period. That said, it is worth noting that the 'conflict thesis' is itself now largely discredited despite its lingering popular influence. Treatments of this theme are commonplace in the literature with CA Russell (2002) being a very helpful instance. See also McGrath (2005 pp. 140-43).

relationship between science and religion in Calvin's day was characterised by deep harmony rather than conflict.

This harmony was in large part due to the fact that in the 16th century natural science was very much in its infancy. Not only was the corpus of scientific knowledge markedly smaller than today, but the kind of specialisation which is part and parcel of today's intellectual life was then largely unknown. In that respect, the entire intellectual landscape of Calvin's day was markedly different from our own. We may appreciate this by noting four observations made by historian of science David C Lindberg (2002a pp. 58–59):

- 1) The notions 'science', 'Christianity', 'theology', and 'church' are abstractions that engage in neither dialogue nor dispute; 'what existed during the Middle Ages were highly educated scholars who held beliefs about scientific and theological (and, of course, many other) matters. Science and theology cannot interact, but scientists and theologians can'. (Lindberg 2002a p. 58)
- 2) The absence of any disciplinary distinction between 'science' and 'theology'. The intellectual mindset of the period was fundamentally unitive and scholars were thus 'capable of dealing with both scientific and theological matters and generally eager to find ways of integrating theological and scientific belief'. (Lindberg 2002a p. 58)
- 3) Mediaeval thinkers practised 'natural philosophy' rather than 'science'. This was a broader pursuit, less specialised or rigorous than modern science, and quite happily informed by concepts from received philosophical and theological traditions.
- 4) There was actually some diversity of opinion. As with modern scientists, theologians, and philosophers, the views of mediaeval thinkers, particularly their views on natural philosophy, should not be thought of as uniform or monolithic.

Over and above this, we should also recognise that the science of Calvin's day was a relatively settled affair, and that it had been so for some centuries. The first major conflict between science and religion—the Galileo affair—did not occur until after Calvin's death.⁴ Indeed, there are those who would argue that Calvin himself played no small part in precipitating the scientific advances which arose after his passing.⁵ This is

⁴ Calvin died in 1564, the year of Galileo's birth, and was thus oblivious to any conflicts Galileo may have had with the Roman Catholic Church. We should not, in any case, presume that Calvin would have sided with the Roman Catholic Church against Galileo. He might rather have appealed to Galileo to bolster his argument that 'popery...[represented] a perverse government compounded of lies...which partly extinguishes the pure light, partly chokes it'. (Calvin 1559 4.2.2) Indeed, much of the Roman Catholic opposition to Galileo arose precisely out of a concern that his astronomy might lend weight to Protestant claims against the authority of the Church and Papacy—see Blackwell (2002 pp, 105–16) and Hummel (1986 pp. 103–26).

⁵ Alister McGrath, for instance, argues that Calvin 'may be regarded as making two major and positive contributions to the appreciation and development of the natural sciences'. The first was encouraging the scientific study of nature, the second was eliminating a major obstacle to such study

a fascinating story in its own right and I shall touch upon it briefly below, but for present purposes we need simply note that Calvin pre-dates such scientific advances as might have compelled him to any major revision of Christian thought.

It is worth digressing at this point to clear away two significant misconceptions which often arise in this context. The first is the idea that mediaeval thinkers understood the earth to be flat; the second that Calvin opposed the new cosmology of Copernicus. In respects of the first, the reality is that even the ancients knew the earth to be a sphere and this 'was never seriously doubted after Aristotle'. (Lindberg 2002b p. 54) It is simply false that Christopher Columbus proved the earth to be a globe and what is often purported to be a major crisis for biblical authority turns out to be a rather sorry 19th century fabrication. (JB Russell 1997)⁶ The second claim, that Calvin took Copernicus to task over the idea that the Sun, rather than the Earth, lies at the centre of the universe, also appears to be a 19th century fabrication with no basis in fact.⁷ But one may go further for although Copernicus offered a heliocentric model of the solar system, he did not argue that this should be taken as representative of physical reality. He suggested, rather, that such a model would prove a convenient way of resolving the mathematical complexities of the geocentric model. It was not until after Calvin's death that Galileo advanced geocentricism as representing physical reality, and only then would it become necessary to deal with the resultant exegetical and theological implications (Blackwell 2002 pp. 105–16; Hummel 1986 pp. 102–26).

Mediaeval scholasticism and Calvin the Christian humanist

Despite the relative stasis in the scientific thought of Calvin's day, however, we must also observe that there was a seismic shift in thinking underway which was laying a foundation for subsequent developments. In its full details the story is a complex one to which we cannot here do anything like full justice. Our simplified account will regard Calvin as a Christian humanist, working in reaction against the limitations of mediaeval scholasticism.⁸ But what does this, even in rough outline, mean?

through his advocacy of the very principle discussed in this paper, that of 'accommodation'. See McGrath (2000 pp. 10–11).

⁶ This paper presents the essential points of Russell's book length treatment (1991).

⁷ Or, at least, the words often attributed to Calvin ('Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?') have never been found in his writings despite extensive attempts to locate them. Indeed, there is some question as to whether Calvin ever heard of Copernicus. See the extensive discussion in Young (2007 pp. 43–49) Young concludes that Calvin might have had some familiarity with Copernicus' work but, if so, he saw no need to make any comment.

⁸ For a helpful introduction to Christian humanism and mediaeval Scholasticism, as well as the relationship between them, see McGrath (1998 pp. 101–23).

In trying to understand scholasticism, we must not begin with the comments of its detractors. I have already mentioned the variation which was found in mediaeval thought, and scholasticism was no exception. Yet its various strands shared a common emphasis upon reason and a desire to bring together classical philosophy and Christian theology in a comprehensive way. Such interests lent credence to later caricatures, particularly the claim that scholasticism was obsessed with the trivial, yet the actual achievements of scholasticism are considerable. Significant here is the extensive engagement with the philosophy of Aristotle and it was the scholastics who, following the translation of Aristotle's works into Latin in the 12th and 13th centuries, caused Aristotelianism to become the pervasive influence in mediaeval thought. It was not until a generation after Calvin that Aristotle's influence would begin to wane (Losee 1993 pp. 31, 54–83), and although Calvin disliked aspects of Aristotle's philosophy, particularly its materialism (Young 2007 p. 16), he must nevertheless be regarded as viewing the world with a by and large Aristotelian cast of mind.⁹

Even more significant is that in their engagement with classical philosophy and Christian theology the scholastics were great interpreters of texts. The Christian humanists shared this interest in textual exegesis and although they varied greatly from the scholastics in their exegetical approach we may still say that the Christian humanists were at least taking the scholastic interest in texts as a point of departure. Calvin was no small part of this trend. He was both caught up in its momentum and gave it impetus by virtue of his own unique contribution. Against this background we can see that it is by no means accidental that Calvin's first published work was a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* for commenting on the textual authorities was a central practice through the period. Nor was textual exegesis particularly the domain of theologians. All scholars, regardless of discipline, were familiar with textual interpretation—a point to which we shall return when we consider the contribution made by Calvin's physician, Benedictus Textor, to Calvin's exegesis of 2 Timothy 2:17.

I have referred to Calvin as a 'Christian humanist' but we must not be tempted to load the term 'humanist' with modern connotations for in this context it is certainly no synonym for 'secularist.' There is, in the Christian humanism of Calvin, 'a recognition of the value of human experience as a guide in the search for truth' (Farmer 1917 p. 113) and this extended to an interest in the thinkers of pagan antiquity. Yet the Christian humanists also attached great importance to the church fathers and worked within a Christian philosophical and moral framework (Ganoczy 1966, p. 195). Christian humanism was, simply put, 'Humanism with its face toward God' (Farmer 1917 p. 115).

⁹ Again, such a comment does little justice to the fine details. Characteristic of the age was the rise of Platonism and Calvin did not escape this influence. See chapter 8 in Partee (1977 pp. 105–25).

We may observe how the interests of Christian humanism play out in Calvin's case:

...it is legitimate to argue that Calvin's thought and intention is primarily Scriptural and confessional rather than systematic and rational. That is to say, Calvin is concerned to expound the word of God with the Scripture as the source, the theological tradition as an instructor, and with some attention to philosophy as an aid.

Partee 1977 p. 21

When we recall that in Calvin's day philosophy included natural philosophy, or what we might now regard as science, then we see that he is prepared to allow the sciences some part 'as an aid' in the exegetical process. Just what this means in detail, we shall now consider.

Calvin's exegetical approach

The principle of accommodation

When it comes to theological and biblical engagement with the natural sciences the mediaeval respect for tradition gives rise to a quite unexpected blessing for 'apart from the Bible, the only strong authority for the whole Reformation was Augustine'. (Barth 1995 p. 20) And, as it turns out, when it came to biblical exegesis in light of the sciences, Augustine was a remarkably advanced thinker:

Augustine stressed the importance of respecting the conclusions of the sciences in relation to biblical exegesis. As Augustine himself stressed in his commentary on Genesis, certain passages were genuinely open to diverse interpretations; it was therefore important to allow further scientific research to assist in the determination of which was the most appropriate mode of interpretation for a given passage.

McGrath 2000 p. 5

In writing this McGrath has in mind a well-known passage from Augustine:

In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we may find treated in Holy Scripture, different interpretations are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture.

Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1:18

The point being simply that 'biblical interpretation should take due account of what could reasonably be regarded as established facts'. (McGrath 2000 p. 6)

Calvin shared this Augustinian perspective and was therefore willing to draw upon all the sources of knowledge which God had provided—including the sciences—in order to clarify otherwise obscure passages of scripture. The issue here was never the truth of scripture—for Calvin this was a given. The issue was always whether one's exegesis brought one to a correct understanding of what God intended to communicate. Should scripture speak with an uncertain voice on matters which can be resolved by a study of nature, then Augustine and Calvin regarded it as entirely appropriate to allow such a study to inform biblical exegesis. Latent in Calvin's approach is an idea which would give rise in subsequent centuries to the 'two books' tradition which insisted that a proper understanding of God can come only if one correctly reads both 'the book of nature' and 'the book of scripture'¹⁰. Subsequent exegetes would not, however, always show Calvin's magisterial sense of balance, often privileging one or other 'book' over the other in quite cavalier manner.

Calvin's willingness to bring extra-biblical considerations to bear on biblical exegesis was informed by his awareness of the distorting influence of human weakness and fallibility. He was sufficiently attuned to this problem to realise that such factors not only bore upon biblical exegesis, but even restricted God's ability to communicate to fallen humanity. As a consequence,

if God...wants us to know him he has to come down to our level and accommodate himself to our limited, finite, human consciousness and speak to us in human language.

Bavinck 2003, vol 2 p.104

This notion of accommodation had a long pedigree in Christian thought and we can cite proponents including Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Hilary of Poitiers. Indeed, Calvin was of the view that that Moses had employed accommodated language in the writing of the Genesis creation account and he regarded Genesis 1:16 as written in:

...the language, not of scientific discourse, but of appearance. Although scientifically the moon is not the next great light, to the naked eye it is. The reason why Moses writes in this way, says Calvin, is so that '...all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand'. He adapts 'his discourse to common usage' otherwise 'the uneducated might have pleaded in excuse that such subjects were beyond their capacity'.

Tinker 2004 p. 345

The idea of accommodation would have been familiar to Calvin given his classical education with its emphasis on rhetoric. Calvin scholar Ford Lewis Battles suggests that Calvin would have seen an analogy between human and divine rhetoric:

¹⁰ The relationship between the later 'two-books' concept and Calvin is briefly discussed in McGrath (2000 pp. 141–42).

As in human rhetoric there is a gulf between the highly educated and the comparatively unlearned, between the convinced and the unconvinced, a gulf which it is the task of rhetoric to bridge so that through simple, appropriate language the depths of human thought yield up their treasure, or at least the views of the speaker are persuasively communicated—analogously in divine rhetoric the infinitely greater gulf between God and man, through divine condescension, in word and deed, is bridged. And the divinely appointed human authors and expositors of Scripture express and expound the divine rhetoric under the Spirit's guidance for the benefit of all.

Battles 1996 p. 118

This last sentence is of especial importance because it points to the fundamental rationale of the notion of accommodation. It is primarily a pedagogical and pastoral tool which 'unlocks for Calvin God's beneficent tutelage and pedagogy of his wayward children'. (Battles 1996 p. 118) The principle of accommodation is not, for Calvin, an apologetic principle to be used to defend the truth of Scripture. Rather it is a fundamental principle which God employs in his communication to humanity. It is therefore quite appropriate—when the biblical exegete is in possession of knowledge not possessed by the original audience—to regard the divine communication in scripture as accommodated to the ignorance of those original hearers.

A model for understanding

Modern philosophy with its distinction between propositions and sentences offers us a convenient way to think about the notion of accommodation. Here a proposition is taken to be an idea or concept whilst a sentence is the representation of that concept in human language. A proposition may be 'expressed by any two sentences, from the same or different languages, that are synonymous, or correctly intertranslatable'. ('Proposition' in Blackburn 1996 p. 307) So, for example, the statements 'it is raining' (English), 'es regnet' (German), 'llueve' (Spanish), or 'il pleut' (French) all represent the same proposition using different sentences.

The sentences, however, need not be restricted to simple descriptive language, nor need our use of language be even remotely economical. For instance, the idea of torrential rain is very well captured in the poem 'First Winter Rain' by the great Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō (1664-1694):

First winter rain—
even the monkey
seems to want a raincoat.

He might, of course, simply have said 'it rains heavily at the start of winter'. Similarly, moral advice such as 'be patient' can be conveyed in a short saying ('All good things come to him who waits') or a lengthy story such as Aesop's famous fable 'The goose that laid the golden egg'.

Propositions, then, may be clothed in many different forms of language and if communicating with our hearers is our goal then we will keep this in

mind when giving form to our message. This is the critical point which undergirds the notion of accommodation. When applied to God's efforts to communicate with humanity it means simply that God clothed propositions in a form of language most appropriate to convey his message to a particular group of hearers. The greatest error we can then make is to confuse the form of language with the message it is intended to convey. Calvin recognized the possibility of just such an error. Indeed, much of his exegetical approach was devised precisely so that such a confusion of form and meaning might be avoided.

Case studies in Calvin's exegesis

It was emphasised above that the scientific knowledge of Calvin's day, being relatively settled, caused him little exegetical difficulty. So whilst Calvin's references to nature are pervasive¹¹, there are nevertheless very few instances where scientific knowledge bears upon his biblical exegesis. Indeed we may say that Calvin's understanding of nature was in large part no more developed than that of the writers of scripture, and I hope I state the obvious when I say that he was unaware of the problems which modern science causes the present-day exegete. One thinks of the difficulties involved in reading the Genesis creation accounts in light of the findings of modern geology and biology, as just one example. This said, however, there are two clear instances in which Calvin makes use of scientific knowledge in the task of exegesis. The first shows Calvin's willingness to defer to scientific knowledge over against a well established exegetical tradition; the second shows just how radical Calvin understood the notion of accommodation to be. Both illustrate how extra-biblical knowledge can clarify what is otherwise obscure.

2 Timothy 2:17

The problem which Calvin here confronted is relatively simple to describe. The Greek text of 1 Timothy 2:7 speaks of heresy spreading like γάγγραινα (gangraina). But despite the obvious linguistic parallel between the Greek γάγγραινα and English 'gangrene', we should not be hoodwinked into thinking that Paul actually had the disease gangrene in mind. Indeed, if one consults the various English translations, one finds the translators split roughly 50-50 between gangrene and cancer. The question is, of course, precisely how is one to decide the most appropriate reading?

Desiderius Erasmus, one of the most highly regarded of Calvin's contemporaries, had perhaps been influenced by the example of the Vulgate when he opted for cancer in his Latin translation of the Greek New Testament and it is Erasmus' translation to which Calvin specifically objects. What is of vital importance for present purposes is what first moved Calvin to comment, for it appears that Calvin notices the problem only when it is pointed out to him by his personal physician: 'Benedictus Textor, the physician', Calvin writes, 'has drawn my attention

¹¹ For a comprehensive treatment see Young (2007).

to the fact that Erasmus has translated this passage badly...’ (Calvin 1964 p. 314)

This may seem trivial until we remind ourselves of the intellectual context that Benedictus Textor shared with Calvin. Both were thoroughly grounded in the religious, linguistic and textual world of the late mediaeval period. As Calvin’s personal physician we can be assured that Textor was conversant with Calvin’s theological views. Both would have been fluent in Latin, and perhaps also Greek. And Textor’s medical training would have involved engagement with the classical texts which were the basis of late mediaeval medical science. As a physician his interest would naturally have been drawn to biblical texts touching on medical matters. And as the disciplinary boundaries between natural philosophy and theology were muted, it is no real surprise that Benedictus Textor felt it appropriate to remark on Erasmus’ translation. Nor is it much surprise that Calvin was prepared to listen. I suggest this as an example of the sort of science/theology dialogue which we ought to aspire to in the modern age: theologically and biblically aware scientists in discussion with scientifically informed theologians and bible scholars working together to determine the best possible understanding of all of reality. Prompted by the advice of Textor, and in consultation with the authoritative medical texts of the day—Galen, Paul Aegineta, Aetius, Cornelius Celcus—Calvin rejects the translation not just of one of the most erudite and highly regarded scholars of his day, but of the authoritative Latin textual tradition. He chooses in their place the scientifically informed option; ‘their word will eat as doth a gangrene’.

What is of primary importance here is Calvin’s method, rather than his conclusions. That is to say, even if we could show Calvin’s translation of γάγγραινα is in error, it will not much affect the point being made: that, in seeking to clarify the meaning of scripture, Calvin is prepared to allow science a voice at the exegetical table. Here science serves two purposes. At the outset we may note that Calvin himself saw no problem with Erasmus’ translation until Textor drew it to his attention and so we may say that scientific findings may well serve to bring our exegetical traditions into question. Secondly, science may serve to illumine our exegesis and guide us toward the correct reading. It should be clearly stated that Calvin does not allow science to determine his reading of the text, the situation is far more nuanced. Yet he is clearly of the view that our understanding of the natural world can cast light on our interpretation of scripture and that we should reject such interpretations of scripture as are inconsistent with received scientific opinion. For us the lesson is a simple one: we ought to allow the natural sciences a place in our interpretation of scripture such that our biblical interpretation is informed by, and consistent with, that which the natural sciences give us good reason to affirm as true.

Psalm 58:4

In his *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* article on ‘Accommodation’, W Broomall concludes with the words ‘God’s revelation cannot be intermingled with human error’ (Broomall 1984 p. 9), which seems an

entirely reasonable thing to say. But I will attempt to show, by reference to Calvin's comments on Psalm 58:4-5, that the claim is in need of some qualification. The principle of accommodation is, in Calvin's usage at least, far more radical than Broomall seems to allow.

Making reference to his enemies, David¹² remarks that:

Their poison is like the poison of a serpent:
they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear:
which will not hearken to the voice of the enchanter,
charm he never so wisely.

Psalm 58:4-5

Now, it should be clear that this is poetic language, the ultimate meaning of which is really not in question. But that said it is not too pedantic to point out that the passage contains two errors of fact, one of which Calvin comments upon whilst the other escapes him.

Commenting upon the notion of 'enchantment' in v.5 Calvin states:

If a man demand whether there is any art of enchantment, I answer; If there were no enchantments it were a childish and fond saying which is spoken here; for he would take a similitude from that which was not: unless any man perchance think rather that David speaks according to the error of the common people. Nevertheless he seems to give an intimation that serpents are enchanted with witchcrafts; and so much one may admit without peril.

Calvin 1840, vol 2 p. 122

This amounts to a stark choice between two options: either 'serpents are enchanted with witchcrafts', or 'David speaks according to the error of the common people'. Calvin states as an apparent concession that 'one may admit without peril' the former, but as one follows his argument it is clear that he actually has strong sympathy for the idea that enchantment is a very real phenomenon; 'if there were no enchantments, it were in vain for the law of God to forbid them and condemn them, Deut. xviii. 11' (Calvin 1840, vol 2 p. 122). This makes all the more interesting the fact that in his argument Calvin side-steps any potential debate about the matter by adopting the counter-position: 'But if we would cut off occasion of curious questions, let us follow that which I touched upon just now, that David borrowed this similitude from the common error' (Calvin 1840, vol 2, p.122). What is remarkable about this is that in the course of his discussion Calvin comes very close to arguing 'there must be such a thing as enchantment, Psalm 54 verse 5 says so!' but then turns entirely about to take the view that David speaks of enchantment 'according to the error of the common people'. Even if Calvin is taking this position 'for argument's sake' it should be clear just how radical he is prepared to be. Calvin clearly believes that, in accommodating his revelation to human

¹² For present purposes the question of authorship is not relevant and I will simply assume the traditional Davidic ascription to be correct.

weakness, to the limitations of 'the common people,' God is indeed prepared to 'intermingle' his revelation with human error.¹³

The plot thickens, however, when we recognise that there is a scientific objection to be raised against the imagery used here, for snake charming relies not upon the snake's response to sound, but rather upon its response to movement. Indeed, there is some question as to whether even speaking of snakes 'hearing' is entirely proper. They do employ something like an ear to detect airborne and ground borne vibrations but it is hardly an organ they can 'stop up'. So in speaking of snake charmers using enchantments and of snakes 'closing their ears' scripture twice adopts errors, or (as Calvin would say) 'accommodates its language' so as to effectively convey its message.¹⁴

Here, I think it important to return to the earlier point that the principle of accommodation is a pedagogical tool intended to open the meaning of scripture, not an apologetic tool by which we can defend the factual truth of scriptural assertions. It is not that we must give a condescending nod to scripture, pretending that it maintains its theological value despite being riddled with the scientific inanities of a bygone age. Rather we should recognise that the use of culturally appropriate language and imagery is the only way that any message can be meaningfully conveyed. The analogy here is the professor of physics who utilises the billiard ball model of the atom in order to give an understanding of Brownian Motion—that seemingly random movement of particles which occurs when they are suspended in a fluid. Atoms are not solid billiard-ball like entities, and to say so is technically an error. To say so deliberately is to engage in a deception. But because the issue at hand is the motion of particles rather than their structure we don't call the professor's purposeful use of such language either a deception or an error. It is, rather, an accommodation to the capabilities of the audience. If the professor of physics is justified in using such pedagogical tools, then so too the theologian, so too the authors of scripture, and so too God.

¹³ It is worth mentioning that I have taken the above cited translation for the simple reason that other translations suggest Calvin is even more ambivalent about the question of enchantments. For instance, the 1846 Calvin Translation Society gives; 'He [David] would certainly seem, however, to insinuate that serpents can be fascinated by enchantment; and I can see no harm in granting it.' (Calvin 1846, vol 2 p. 372) If this is a case of Calvin merely 'granting' the possibility of enchantment, rather than having a genuine belief in their occurrence, then this strengthens considerably my point. After all, if Calvin rejected the idea of enchantments then he would necessarily have to regard the metaphor of snake charming as grounded in nothing but an accommodation to popular misconceptions.

¹⁴ As an aside, verse 8 of the same Psalm speaks of 'the snail, which melts away'. The Hebrew term translated 'snail' occurs only here and its translation is, accordingly, uncertain. The Calvin Translation Society edition selects 'snail' because the idea of 'melting away' 'seems to apply to the snail, which, in its progress from its shell, leaves a slime in its tract till it altogether melts away and dies'. (Calvin 1846, vol 2 p. 375n1) This footnote is, of course, to be ascribed to the translators and has nothing to do with Calvin himself. I point it out only to further illustrate how scientific knowledge (or lack thereof!) can impact biblical translation and thereby biblical exegesis.

Calvin's Legacy

All too often the Reformers are seen as the champions of dogmatic orthodoxy. We forget that they are called 'Reformers' for a reason, and familiarity, it seems, has blinded us to the radical nature of their teachings. Far from being a slave of orthodoxy, Calvin, along with Luther, Zwingli, and many others, was prepared to allow his reading of scripture to lead to a radical reappraisal of received views regarding Christian faith and practice. Underlying this were very nuanced ideas concerning the proper exegesis of Scripture, the notion of accommodation being particularly significant, and if one should one day sit down to read any of Calvin's commentaries, it is remarkable the extent to which he places his finger on matters of primary concern. Indeed, his discussions are often of contemporary relevance even 500 years after his death. It is little wonder, then, that many see Calvin as an exemplar of biblical scholarship and that his name is often invoked in support of one position or another.

At the close of the present paper, however, I wish to make no such appeal. I think it frankly impossible to say how Calvin might have handled those matters which are of concern to us in the present age. I think we can learn much from his approach, and I certainly think his exegesis of passages such as those considered above give clear hints as to how he might have approached such questions as the reading of Genesis in light of evolutionary theory. But the simple fact is that such problems are ours to resolve not Calvin's, and we, and we alone, must bear responsibility for how we resolve them. So although I finish with something of a eulogy for Calvin, I do in certain respects come to bury Calvin not to praise him. He was, in my view, one of history's greatest biblical exegetes. His insights were, and remain, fresh and penetrating. His theological and scriptural vision was magisterial. And whether one love him or loathe him, I think believers of any Christian tradition can gain from a reading of his works. Such insights we can glean suggest that Calvin the biblical exegete in engagement with contemporary science would have been remarkable to behold. And although such a vision is forever withheld from us, there are nevertheless left a few signposts which can guide us on our way. May we follow them with gratitude, humility, and respect. But may we also acknowledge that the path we tread is one of our own making. May we not forget John Calvin. May we also allow him to rest in peace.

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