

Calvin: Interpreter of the Prophets

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Abstract

This article explores the hermeneutical principles behind John Calvin's commentaries and lectures on Isaiah (1550/1559), Hosea (1557), the Minor Prophets (1559), Daniel (1561), Jeremiah (1563), and Ezekiel 1–20 (posthumous, 1565). Calvin is not the founder of historical-grammatical exegesis, the precursor of the historical-critical method, or a literalist. He crystallizes earlier medieval practices with his expanded *sensus literalis*. His use of history, grammar, allegory, anagogy, and analogy receive attention, as do the sources of Calvin's historical and chronological errors. Calvin takes ancient Israel's return from exile, Christ's death and resurrection, and the church's present condition as embraced within the *literal* sense of the prophetic word. This inclusiveness allures us as Calvin's pastoral passion comes out and the prophetic word addresses us.

If God has endued me with any aptness for the interpretation of Scripture ... I have faithfully and carefully endeavored ... to preserve genuine simplicity, adapted solidly to edify the children of God, who, being not content with the shell, wish to penetrate to the kernel.¹

¹ John Calvin, dedicatory epistle to King Gustavus of Sweden, January 26, 1559. Preface to *Hosea*, volume 1 of *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, Latin original, trans. John Owen, Calvin Translation Society (Edinburgh, 1846). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/cal-com26.iii.html>. All commentary citations are from this Edinburgh edition (1844–56), also available in reprint from Eerdmans (1948–63), and Baker Book House (2004); henceforth cited as *Comm Hosea* 1:1; *Comm Dan* 5:1, etc.; with its ccel webpage.

Introduction

John Calvin, an Old Testament scholar? That seems a strange attribution. Yet Calvin devoted himself with remarkable tenacity to the interpretation of the Old Testament, and especially to the books of Israel's prophets. "I desire to spend the remainder of my life in this kind of labor."²

He did so using the new Renaissance methods of the humanities: a contextual hermeneutic that we too easily label "historical-grammatical." In Calvin's able hands, the tools of exegesis penetrate deeply into the kernel of the text. His method refines ancient Antiochene literalism by practices developed in late medieval biblical scholarship and the literary and legal scholarship of the Renaissance in which he had been so well nurtured. His readers find powerful exposition of the prophets' ancient meaning and clear application to the life of faith.

Blithely labeling his method "historical-grammatical" diminishes our understanding of his achievement. With Calvin, both history and grammar are crucial. Yet that description fails to plumb the depths of his rhetorical sense and misses his profound use of what the medievals would have called *anagogy* and *analogy*, ancient paths to the prophetic vision of Jesus Christ, Savior and Son of God, who spoke from the burning bush.³

Calvin makes no clean break with medieval exegesis. It is misleading to claim, with Philip Schaff, that he is "the founder of modern historical grammatical exegesis."⁴ Neither can we assert, with Hans-Joachim Kraus, that "the foundations of modern biblical study are laid in Calvin's adoption of the works of Medieval Jewish scholars."⁵ Nor can we agree with Emil G. Kraeling's notorious dictum: "Calvin was purely a Biblicist. ... Supremely logical ... he interprets Scripture literally with a lawyer's precision" in arid literalism.⁶ The truth is subtler and more substantial than any of these claims.

Calvin certainly believed, with all the church, that the work of faithful Christian exegesis enjoys God's favor only in the light of Christ and under

² John Calvin, dedicatory epistle to King Gustavus, *Comm Hosea*.

³ Calvin, *Comm Exod* 3:2. Here he rejects allegories while insisting that the Old Testament saints never had any communication with God "except through the promised Mediator," https://www.ccel.org/study/Exodus_3:1-15.

⁴ Philip Schaff, "Calvin as a Commentator," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3.11 (1892): 466.

⁵ Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Israel in the Theology of Calvin—Towards a New Approach to the Old Testament and Judaism," *Christian Jewish Relations* 22.3–4 (1989): 75.

⁶ Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament since the Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 23–25.

the rule of prayer. But next come *grammar* and *history*. He takes the text in its original language and in its distinctive time, place, and circumstance. He then enriches history and grammar by broadening the definition of “literal,” extending the method of certain late medieval exegetes and astutely applying what medievals would have called *anagogy* (a term he *sometimes* resists) and *analogy* (a term he much approves). The result? Rich expositions that instruct the patient reader.

I. *Historical Exegesis*

Calvin was devoted to historical exegesis. As a young Renaissance scholar, he had mastered first the Latin and then the Greek classics. These sources, plus a remarkably thorough knowledge of the Bible, afforded him the acquaintance with antiquity that supported his interpretive endeavors. He leaned upon ancient Greek historians such as Herodotus and Xenophon for his facts about the Near Eastern world of the Old Testament, augmented by Josephus, whose chronology graced the pages of some Renaissance-era Bibles, and by various patristic, medieval and Renaissance chronographic sources. Among these, we must name Jerome’s *Chronicon*, at that time the most authoritative Christian registry of the dated sequence of ancient events.⁷ More important for Calvin’s work on the Old Testament Prophets, we must name the 1534–35 *Hebraica Biblia* of Sebastian Münster (1488–1552), the best Hebrew study Bible of the Renaissance, which printed the standard medieval rabbinic chronology unrevised.

Calvin is usually reluctant to name such sources. However, in the Daniel commentary, where Calvin’s penchant as historical *raconteur* is most evident, he cites the ancient historians Herodotus, Megasthenes, Polybius, Plutarch, and Xenophon, and he spices his prose with citations of such poets, playwrights, and pundits as Cicero, Homer, Juvenal, Ovid, Terence, and Virgil.⁸

Calvin’s sources for the ancient Near East are thus rather meager. Today we revel in abundance: Sumerian king lists, Akkadian royal annals, Babylonian chronicle texts, Aramaic letters, and the like. Calvin lacked all these. Akkadian, the principal language of these sources, was not deciphered until

⁷ http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_chronicle_00_eintro.htm. For Calvin’s use of the *Chronicon*, see Irena Backus, “Calvin’s Judgment of Eusebius of Caesarea: An Analysis,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22 (1991): 419–37. I am also indebted to Professor Backus (private communication) for the point that Calvin’s chronology probably used Josephus’s.

⁸ These are listed in the index of “Authors, Sacred and Profane” at the end of *Comm Dan*, vol. 2:509, omitting only the geographer Megasthenes, who is cited in *Comm Dan* 5:1 (= 1:305–06) under the spelling *Metasthenes*. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom24.xi.i.html>.

1850, three hundred years after Calvin.⁹ Archaeology did not exist. Of the triad upon which Old Testament historical study steadily rests today—Bible, Akkadian, and Near Eastern archaeology—Calvin possessed but one: the Bible. He must have struggled mightily to understand how Herodotus's *Histories* or Münster's rabbinic chronology intersect the biblical narrative.

Despite his extraordinary success in interpretation, Calvin was often mistaken about questions of chronology and the identity of ancient persons. For example, his comment on Daniel 5:1 attempts to correlate the seventy years of Judah's exile with the lengths of the reigns of the neo-Babylonian kings Nebuchadnezzar and Amel-Marduk, the "Evil-Merodach" of the King James Version.¹⁰ But Nebuchadnezzar reigned not forty-five years, as Calvin's source says, but forty-three. And Amel-Marduk reigned neither twenty-three years nor thirty, as Calvin's disputing sources report, but two. *Seder Olam Zutta* and Münster report it as twenty-three.

Or again, Calvin misidentifies the elusive Darius the Mede of Daniel 6 as Cyaxares II, the alleged father-in-law of Cyrus the Great. This error stems from his misreading of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, a work about the ideal education of the Persian Empire's remarkable founder. Like Rousseau's *Emile*, the *Cyropaedia* is intentional fiction, to teach about education. The character Cyaxares II was evidently invented by Xenophon: an extra king or two adorns any checkerboard.

Ironically, on the very page on which he makes the mistake about Xenophon's Cyaxares II, Calvin correctly judges the *Cyropaedia* as fiction: in it, the author "fabled most boldly."¹¹ For this mistake and others like it we should not judge Calvin harshly.

In matters of Old Testament chronology Calvin relied on Münster's *Hebraica Biblia*, a heavily annotated work in Hebrew and Latin on facing pages.¹² Münster's Hebrew Bibles in their various editions enjoyed widespread

⁹ See Peter T. Daniels, "The Decipherment of Ancient Near Eastern Scripts," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 81–93.

¹⁰ *Comm Dan* 5:1. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom24.xi.i.html>.

¹¹ *Comm Haggai* 1:1 (= 5:318). <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom29.v.ii.i.html>.

¹² I am grateful to my former teaching assistant in Hebrew at Geneva College, the Reverend Brian Wright of Sterling, Kansas, for the delightful news early in 2015 that a fine copy of Münster's 1534–35 *Hebraica Biblia* resided less than fifty miles from my front door, in Pittsburgh, at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary's library. www.rpts.org. Later, Geneva College Reference Librarian Kathryn Floyd heroically located an obscurely listed online version. Münster's second volume (1535), containing both the *Seder Olam Zutta* and the Prophets in Hebrew and Latin is available here: <https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/metaopac/search?oclcno=164560214&db=100>.

popularity with Christian exegetes.¹³ Calvin owned a copy of the 1534–35 first edition. Münster gained fame as a polymath scholar known for his beautifully published works in Hebraica and geography, including the lavishly illustrated *Cosmographia Universalis* (1544), a Renaissance best-seller. He befriended the young Calvin when the latter arrived in Basel in 1534 or 1535, the very time this Bible was produced.¹⁴ These two Protestant scholars kept up a long and friendly correspondence. Johann Eck, Martin Luther's most able Roman Catholic opponent, ridiculed "Rabbi Münster" because of his constant citations of Jewish sources.¹⁵

Münster's rabbinic sourcing especially influenced Calvin's chronology of Old Testament Israel. Münster's chronology is, in fact, the standard rabbinic chronology developed in a Hebrew text traceable in its major features back to 160 A.D.: the *Seder Olam Rabbah*, "The Great Order of the Ages." This lengthy work was in turn abridged: the *Seder Olam Zutta*, "The Brief Order of the Ages," a work whose basic text is traceable to 804 A.D. That text is printed in full in volume 2 of Münster's Bible (pp. 7–9) adjacent to Isaiah chapter 1, both in Hebrew and in Münster's Latin translation.

Whether *Seder Olam*'s chronology entered Christian exegesis through Münster, I cannot say. However, Münster seems the main source for Calvin's Old Testament chronology.¹⁶ Determining the exact source—or independence—of many a chronological claim in the commentaries remains a vexed question.

Classic moral theology makes a worthy distinction between sins of *vincible ignorance*, a lack of knowledge that could have been overcome by honest effort, and sins of *invincible ignorance*, a lack of knowledge that could not have been overcome by even the most strenuous effort. In regard to historical puzzles, Calvin mainly suffers from an invincible ignorance, though in a few cases, I deem, Calvin suffers from vincible ignorance. Nonetheless, with what meager historical materials he had, and with what

¹³ Raymond A. Blacketer, "Calvin as Commentator on the Mosaic Harmony and Joshua," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33 and n. 18. Cf. Wulfert de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms," trans. Raymond A. Blacketer, in McKim, ed., *Calvin and the Bible*, 87 and n. 6. See also Anthony N. S. Lane's judicious study of the sources used in Calvin's Genesis commentary, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 232–34. Among Lane's conclusions is this: "Calvin is rightly regarded as one of the great commentators of all time. This is all the more remarkable when we consider how little time he had and how little he read" (ibid., 234).

¹⁴ Was Calvin's copy a gift from its famous editor?

¹⁵ So Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 51.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Professor Irena Backus (private communication) for the suggestion that Calvin used Münster's *Biblia Hebraica* for chronology.

limited leisure he had to study amid an astonishingly busy, controverted, and internationally significant pastorate, he did very well. With his ever-present ingenuity, he made maximal use of minimal sources.¹⁷

II. *Grammatical Exegesis*

Along with historical exegesis, Calvin was also committed to grammatical exegesis. This interest he held in common with contemporary Renaissance humanist scholars. Foundations for this grammatical interest lie in part in the legal studies of his youth. In 1528 the nineteen-year-old Calvin enrolled as a law student at Orléans, drawn by what biographer Bruce Gordon calls the “magnetic force” of Frenchman Pierre de L’Estoile, whose mastery of the vast corpus of legal literature was renowned. Calvin was impressed. De L’Estoile’s method divided legal texts into topical genus and species categories, yet without much regard for the historical origins of the individual texts. For him, mastery of the topics in their detail was the key to understanding law.

After study with de L’Estoile, Calvin traveled to Bourges to seek out the university lectures of de L’Estoile’s archrival, the Italian jurist Andrea Alciati, famed for his rhetorical and historically situated analyses of classic legal texts.¹⁸ It seems that Calvin’s biblical scholarship combined the best of both methods: mastery of the vast contents of holy Scripture abetted by detailed attention to social, historical, grammatical, and rhetorical analysis.

Those who heard Calvin lecture on the Old Testament report that he carried nothing with him to the pulpit except a Hebrew Bible. He would open to the text for that day, extemporaneously translate the text into something close to word-for-word Latin, and proceed to lecture, again extemporaneously, in clear unadorned Latin without any notes.¹⁹ One might think such lectures assuredly dull, yet in the late 1550s and early 1560s

¹⁷ Nicholas de Gallars, one of Calvin’s apt young secretaries, tells us with breathless amazement that Calvin “was harassed by so much business that he scarcely had leisure to read.” See his “Prefatory Advertisement to the Readers,” in *Comm Isaiah*, 2:ix. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom14.iii.html>. For Gallars’s life and friendship with Calvin, see Machiel A. van den Berg, who calls him “a trusted friend”: *Friends of Calvin*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 174–84. For Calvin’s “maximal use of minimal sources,” see Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 6 and 234.

¹⁸ Gordon, *Calvin*, 19–21. Wulfert de Greef calls Alciati the “founder of the historical approach to the study of law”; Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 5.

¹⁹ So reports another of Calvin’s apt young secretaries, John Budé, in his preface to the Hosea commentary: *Comm Hosea*, 1:xxvii = <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom26.v.html>. The report in the printer’s preface to the Daniel commentary is similar (*Comm Dan*, 1:lxii).

crowds of perhaps a thousand people crowded around to hear them.²⁰

In his lectures, Calvin's Latin renderings of the Bible conform neither to the Vulgate nor to any known version. His Latin sometimes reappears in variant form later in the lecture, especially in phrases where the original Hebrew is difficult. These two observations underscore that Calvin was proficient in Hebrew. Moreover, they support Calvin's own self-assessment: he clearly deemed himself competent enough to make independent lexical, grammatical, and syntactical judgments about the Hebrew text, and competent enough to criticize the judgments made by other scholars. This is a far cry from the charge leveled by the Hebraist and Roman Catholic polemicist Richard Simon (1638–1712) that Calvin was familiar with little more than the Hebrew letters.²¹

When, where, and from whom Calvin learned Hebrew remain a mystery.²² Kraus, a well-known Old Testament scholar, believed that Calvin became fluent enough in Hebrew to read the great medieval Jewish commentators, not in the Latin compendia made by the Christian scholar Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349) used by many including Luther, but in their Hebrew originals. This claim is surely overstated.²³

Like Luther, Calvin too remarked that it is useful to consult the rabbis concerning Hebrew grammar but not about biblical interpretation.²⁴ In his

²⁰ Peter Wilcox, "The Lectures of John Calvin and the Nature of His Audience, 1555–1564," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 87 (1996): 136–48. During Calvin's ministry in Geneva, the population of the city more than doubled from roughly 10,000 in the mid 1530s to between 12,400–13,893 by 1550, to a much-crowded 21,400 by 1560. The sharp increase sprang from the disruptive influx of refugees fleeing religious persecution. Most of these were French. See William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 227. The population figures cited above are found on p. 21 and p. 140, n. 4. Naphy also reports that from October 1538 to October 1539, the only year for which we possess such accurate records, some 10,657 "poor strangers" received material assistance as they passed through the city (*ibid.*, 122). Geneva's resources must have been strained to the breaking point.

²¹ See the discussion of Simon's charge in Darryl Phillips, "An Inquiry into the Extent of the Abilities of John Calvin as a Hebraist" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1998), 3–7 (hereafter, Phillips, "Inquiry").

²² Phillips, "Inquiry," 14–17.

²³ Kraus, "Israel in the Theology of Calvin," 75. For Lane's doubts about this claim, see *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 228–29. He nonetheless calls for further investigation of Calvin's use of rabbinic sources. See also the discussion about Kraus's claim in Phillips, "Inquiry," 7, 361–66. Phillips says that when Calvin cites a rabbinical opinion, a parallel French or Latin source can nearly always be readily found (*ibid.*, 363). This observation does not disprove but sheds doubt upon Kraus's claim.

²⁴ On Luther's comment, see Basil Hall, "Biblical Scholarship: Editions and Commentaries," in *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 3 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 71.

Daniel, Calvin shows familiarity with the recently published Daniel commentary, titled *Wells of Salvation* (Ferrara, 1551), written by Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508), referred to by Calvin as “that proud Barbinel.”²⁵ But he confesses that his access to that great rabbi’s exegesis is through consultation with the Geneva Academy’s Professor of Hebrew, “Dominus Antony,” that is, Antoine Rodolph Chevallier (1523–1572), at one time French tutor to the future Queen Elizabeth I and later Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University.²⁶ It seems Calvin had not actually read Abrabanel but relied on the accuracy of his young colleague’s report. Raymond Blacketer suggests that Calvin’s knowledge of rabbinical opinion is mainly through Nicholas of Lyra’s compendia, the work of other Christian commentators, and (“even more certain”) Münster.²⁷

There is an excellent unpublished dissertation devoted to the assessment of Calvin’s skills as a Hebraist by Darryl Phillips, who, perhaps more than any other, has examined Calvin’s use in comparison to the work of contemporary Hebraists.²⁸ In Calvin’s published lectures and commentaries, he says, “there is a great deal of linguistic observation.” Calvin “translates competently ... [and his] translations are by and large on a par with those of his contemporaries.” Sometimes, with warrant, he claims that his solution to a textual puzzle is “unique.” All in all, though, “Calvin regularly and intelligently used a Hebrew Bible in his studies.”

Calvin makes numerous grammatical and textual observations in his Latin exegetical works. Many of these are not paralleled in the other sources consulted. Such observations suggest an intelligent and often independent handling of the Hebrew text.

While “he sometimes makes errors in translation and textual observations of dubious merit,” “this does not, however, detract from the fact that over all his work is sound.”²⁹

These commitments to the original language of the Old Testament and to its detailed grammatical analysis characterize not only Calvin’s exegetical work but also the exegetical work of the Protestant and Reformed movement he helped build.

²⁵ For an example of Calvin’s distinction between (good) Jewish grammar and (bad) Jewish exegesis, see *Comm Dan* 4:13–16 (= 1:258). <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom24.x.ix.html>.

²⁶ For Calvin’s interaction with Abrabanel’s exegesis, see also *Comm Dan* 2:44–45 (= 1:183–87). <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom24.viii.xlii.html>. For comments on Abrabanel’s messianically focused Daniel commentary, *Wells of Salvation*, see B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (1953; 5th ed., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). “Dominus Antony” is also mentioned for his opinion in *Comm Dan* 2:1 (= 1:116).

²⁷ Blacketer, “Calvin as Commentator of the Mosaic Harmony and Joshua,” 33.

²⁸ Phillips, “Inquiry.”

²⁹ So Phillips, “Inquiry,” 23, 374, 376, 377, 378, 384, and 388.

III. *Anagogical Exegesis and an Expanded Literal Sense*

Thus, Calvin adroitly follows a historical-grammatical approach. However, his exegesis is not reducible to literalism. It is enriched by what David Steinmetz calls “a greatly expanded literal sense” that can accommodate much of the content of what patristic and medieval interpreters considered “spiritual” or “allegorical” exegesis.³⁰ This expanded *sensus literalis* is not new with Calvin. It can be traced back two centuries earlier to Nicholas of Lyra, who wrote voluminously both to champion and to nuance the literal sense. Nicholas spoke of an authorially intended but double literal sense—a literal-historical sense and a literal-allegorical sense. The first was earthly, the second heavenly. The first was intended by Scripture’s human author; the latter by its divine author.³¹ Lyra’s expanded literalism gained serious attention in the two centuries that followed.³² Likewise, Calvin often speaks in his expositions of two levels of authorial intention, human and divine.³³ In the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit speaks through human lips, yet in such a way that neither divine authority nor human personhood is diminished.

Calvin clearly benefited from the ancient controversy too-simply described as the rivalry between Antiochian literalists and Alexandrian allegorists. This controversy contributed mightily to the definition of orthodoxy in the ancient church. In the controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, neither side could exclude the other: both contributed to what became ancient Catholic Christianity. Antiochene “literalists” such as John Chrysostom (d. 407, praised by Calvin above all other patristic commentators), Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), and Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 458) excelled at understanding the Old Testament in its ancient historical setting, while Alexandrian “allegorists” such as Origen (d. 254), Didymus the Blind (d. 398), and Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) excelled at rendering the Old Testament doctrinally and practically relevant to Christians.³⁴

³⁰ David Steinmetz, *Taking the Long View: Christian Theology in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 164.

³¹ Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 81; and Jitse M. van der Meer and Richard J. Oosterhoff, “God, Scripture, and the Rise of Modern Science (1200–1700): Notes in the Margin of Harrison’s Hypothesis,” in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700*, ed. Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 2:371–72; cf. 2:394–96.

³² See Steinmetz’s brief but telling review of the *sensus literalis* from Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) through Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples or Faber Stapulensis (1455–1536), in David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32–37.

³³ On Scripture’s dual authorial intention according to Calvin, see especially David Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 26–37.

³⁴ For articles on each of these, see Donald K. McKim, *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007). Theodore of Mopsuestia’s youthful Psalms commentary,

Calvin *seems* to side with the Antiochenes. But he wants to refine the historical-grammatical methods of the former in order to achieve the spiritual and theological goals of the latter, the edification of the church in the faith. This melding of the multiple medieval spiritual senses of the text into the literal sense, or better, the expansion of the literal sense, was well underway in Lyra and the best exegetes of the fourteenth century.³⁵ Thus Calvin is less an innovator and more a crystallizer of earlier exegetical trends. He contributed mightily to making this method dominant in Reformed Protestantism.

Unlike the medievals, but much like St. Paul, Calvin's sense of the Old Testament witness to Christ comes only rarely by way of allegory.³⁶ Rather it is by way of a disciplined christological exegesis: the Old Testament, God's true and valid word to ancient Israel, necessarily leads to Jesus Christ through the divinely directed history of redemption. One of Calvin's approved words for his approach is *anagogy*: the Old leads to the New, promise to fulfillment, protology to eschatology, the earthly to the heavenly.

This approved word, *anagoge* or *anagogy*, from Greek, "to lead upward," had a history in biblical interpretation long before Calvin. It was an essential part of the *quadriga*, the medieval fourfold sense of Scripture. Earlier teachers of Bible, such as the prodigious Nicholas of Lyra with whom it is closely associated, often recited a favorite Latin couplet to their students:

which counts only four psalms as messianic (Pss 2, 8, 45, and 110), is usually considered the prime example of Antiochene extremism.

³⁵ C. L. Patton, "Nicolas of Lyra," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 116–22; and in general, David C. Steinmetz, "Calvin and Isaiah," in *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95–109; idem, "The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38.

³⁶ "How anyone can say that Paul didn't mean 'allegory' when he used the word *allegoroumena* (Galatians 4:24) to explain the Sarah/Hagar comparison is beyond me." – Rev. Nick Batzig, Facebook 4.27.17. My whimsical reply is titled "Allegedly"—

This allegation of allegory in all its gore appalls!
 All who glory to so allege?—"allegators" they'll be called!
 An allegator's but a crock! May his clock bear a crooked dial!
 And a crocodile bears a tale as false as a simile's smile.
 The sober love their allergy to all that's allegoric
 and saintly stiffs will weep and sniff, preferring paregoric.
 For Holy Writ should bear no wit; no figure to figure out.
 And all alleging otherwise ain't wise—or so I pout.
 But if Hagar is Mount Sinai, and Sarah the celestial city—
 If Jews are Ishmael writ large, then all the Moor's the pity.
 If heathens who believe in Christ enroll as Zion's denizens—
 If even now they're kosher saints and Heaven's future citizens—
 If indeed it's true in such a view that Sarah's then our mother,
 I guess Paul's GOT an allegory—though he never wrote another.

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The letter teaches events,
allegory what you should believe,
Morality teaches what you should do,
anagogy what mark you should be aiming for.³⁷

Littera, “the letter,” encompassed the historical-grammatical sense of the biblical text. No spiritual sense could be propounded that violated the literal sense of any scriptural text.³⁸ However, according to the greatest Christian biblical scholar of the third century, Origen (185?–254 A.D.), for some texts the literal sense is absurd. What could be more absurd, he suggests, than the insistence upon a literal reading of the first three evenings and mornings of creation in Genesis 1, when there was not any sun until the story’s fourth day? Hence, other more appropriate meanings must be found for these texts, via spiritual exegesis.³⁹ For good reason, Origen is known as the father of Christian allegory.

The spiritual sense is based on the literal but is figurative and threefold: the allegorical, the moral or tropological, and the anagogical. *Allegoria*, the allegorical sense, is not so free as to be permitted to violate the literal sense; its figurations teach theological truths found elsewhere in Scripture’s literal sense and lead us to meditate on its mysteries. *Moralis*, the tropological or moral sense, used figurative interpretation to instruct the faithful in obedience and (for monastics especially) asceticism. *Anagogia*, the fourth and final sense of the interpreter’s *quadriga*, the anagogical, was defined a thousand years before Calvin by the revered monastic John Cassian (ca. 365–ca. 435 A.D.), who writes,

Anagoge climbs up from spiritual mysteries to the higher and more august secrets of heaven, such as what the apostle adds, “The Jerusalem above is free, and is our mother” By means of [anagoge] words are moved to the plane of the invisible and the future.⁴⁰

³⁷ Quoted from Henri de Lubac, *The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1 of *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. Mark DeBanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1. The Latin couplet is given on 271, n. 1. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Rome: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994), endorses the *quadriga*, quoting Lyra’s lyrics: §118 and n. 87.

³⁸ “That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1, q. 1, a. 10.

³⁹ Origen, *On First Principles* 4.3.1 and 4.3.4., trans. G.W. Butterworth (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 2013), 383, 391.

⁴⁰ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985), §14.8 (= 160–61). Cf. Origen, *On First Principles* 4.3.9 (pp. 400–402).

In a famous paragraph Cassian brings all four senses together to exegete Saint Paul's "Jerusalem" in Galatians 4:

The one Jerusalem can be understood in four different ways, in the historical sense as the city of the Jews, in allegory as the church of Christ, in anagoge as the heavenly city of God, "which is mother to us all" (Gal 4:26), in the tropological sense as the human soul which, under this name, is frequently criticized or blamed by the Lord.⁴¹

According to Cassian, predictive prophecy must be interpreted anagogically, that is, with a view to *the future unfolding of the heavenly kingdom*. Anagogy is both onward and upward, future and heavenly. Calvin will all but jettison allegory; in its place, he will embrace anagogy.

In some ways, Calvin's exegesis is more like medieval exegesis than much "modern" historical-grammatical work. Calvin and the medievals alike are deeply concerned to produce *a resolutely Christian theological understanding and practice* of the sacred text—alas, not a prime concern in a number of the Bible commentators of the last 150 years.

Nonetheless, there is a morsel of truth in Schaff's 1892 assessment of Calvin as the "founder" of modern exegesis. In his commentary on Galatians 4:22–26, the famous Pauline "allegory" of Sarah and Hagar and the source for Cassian's famous illustration of the *quadrige*, Calvin himself says that he aims for the "simple" or the "natural" meaning of the text. Excoriating Origen for "twisting Scripture this way and that," Calvin praises "the genuine sense," "the literal sense," which is not "meager and poor."⁴²

In place of the "ingenious speculations," a "deadly poison" that silences the Word, Calvin writes that in the Sarah–Hagar story of Galatians 4 "we see ... the image of the Church figuratively delineated." "An *anagoge* of this sort is not foreign to the genuine and literal meaning, when a comparison was drawn between the Church and the family of Abraham *This is not a departure from the literal sense.*"⁴³ And so Calvin goes on to narrate circumcision, the sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, and indeed Abraham's two wives as legitimate "allegory," that is, *figurative* meanings resident *within* the historical-grammatical sense of the text. The family of Abraham, the church of the old covenant, anagogically points toward the church of the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Calvin, *The Epistle to the Galatians* in John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, vol. 11 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 84–85. The anti-Origen sentence is from *Comm Jeremiah* 31:33 (= 4:131). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom20.iii.xli.html>.

⁴³ Ibid., 85 (my emphasis).

new covenant and is of one essence with it. Thus, Paul's allegory is all but swallowed whole by Calvin's anagogy.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin develops the anagogic relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism, "for circumcision was for the Jews their first entry into the church."⁴⁴ Yet he rails against a "perverse anagogical interpretation," namely, the teaching on the part of some patristic writers that renders the Eucharist a "renewed sacrifice," a teaching that leads to the idolatry of the Roman Mass. Its true anagogy is twofold: (1) "the sacrifice of expiation ... accomplished in reality by Christ alone"; and (2) the "sacrifice of praise and reverence," which the redeemed owe to God with "their whole selves and all their acts."⁴⁵

Sometimes Calvin surprises us with reticence about anagogy. For example, in his exposition of Jeremiah 33:17–18, which promises God's people a future Davidic king and Levitical priesthood, he writes,

The time of [Israel's] return [from exile] ought to be connected with the coming of Christ, for it is not necessary nor expedient to introduce an anagogical sense, as interpreters are wont to do, by representing the return of the people as symbolical of what was higher ... for it ought to be considered as one and the same favor of God He brought back his people from exile, that they might at length enjoy quiet and solid happiness when the kingdom of David should again be established.⁴⁶

These two remarkable events, Israel's astonishing return and Christ's redemptive work, make a unity, one event. Since they are one, there is no anagogy. Here Calvin also speaks of a future Davidic kingdom at the second advent of the Christ, whose victory is not yet consummated. That future event stands in unity with Christ's first advent. Medievals would have called that "anagogy," but Calvin resists.

This feature of the Jeremiah commentary confirms what Peter Wilcox first found in his study of the Isaiah commentary: Calvin teaches a threefold sense of the progress of Christ's kingdom in the new covenant. As he explains Isaiah 40:1's "Comfort, comfort, my people," he states that this text "relate[s] not only to the captivity in Babylon, but to the whole period of deliverance, which includes the reign of Christ."

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battle (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.16.4.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.18.11 and 4.18.13.

⁴⁶ *Comm Jeremiah* 33:17–18 (= 4:260). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom20.v.xvi.html>.

Nor did it begin at the time when Christ appeared in the world, but long before, since the time of God's favor was clearly revealed Afterwards [Daniel], Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Nehemiah, Ezra, and others, down to the coming of Christ exhorted believers to cherish better and better hopes.⁴⁷

Interpreters who miss this ancient beginning, Calvin writes, "make themselves ridiculous to the Jews," for "we must date its commencement from the period of the building of the temple after the people's return from their seventy years captivity ... until he shall appear at the last day."⁴⁸ Likewise, interpretations that miss the present church's inclusion within the literal sense are "frigid." This threefold fulfillment demands that Calvin include the church of his own stormy time (and ours) within the *expanded* literal sense. Christ's kingdom in the Prophets embraces the entire history of the church.

Hence, alongside Nicolas of Lyra's literal-historical and literal-allegorical meanings, John L. Thompson persuasively suggests that Calvin lays out a third kind of literalism, the literal-eschatological, an aspect of meaning that looks from the Old Testament to the New and to "our participation in the kingdom of Christ."⁴⁹ This looks like anagogical interpretation, whether the Genevan Reformer wants to call it that or not, but it is anagogy wedded to literalism. In Calvin's dexterous hands it comprises other, now better known, exegetical practices: (1) typology, the prefiguring of redemptive persons, events, and institutions from Old to New; and (2) redemptive history (*Heilsgeschichte*), the category that shall be developed much later and in different ways by figures as diverse as Princeton's Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) and Heidelberg's Gerhard Von Rad (1901–1971).⁵⁰

IV. *Analogy*

Reading the church within these prophetic texts brings out another characteristic: Calvin identifies the fledgling faith communities of the Reformation era as the latter-day equivalents of Isaiah's "remnant" of Israel, or of exilic or

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Comm Isaiah* 40:1 (= 3:199). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom15.ix.i.html>. The French version, perhaps made by Calvin, says, "which includes the reign of Christ to the end of the world."

⁴⁸ *Comm Ezek* 17:22 (= 2:207–8). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom23.vi.xvii.html>. Cf. Peter Wilcox, "Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets," in McKim, ed., *Calvin and the Bible*, 121; and idem, "The Restoration of the Church in Calvin's Commentaries on Isaiah the Prophet," *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 85 (1994): 68–95.

⁴⁹ John L. Thompson, "Calvin as Biblical Interpreter," in *The Cambridge Companion to Calvin*, ed. Donald A. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 69.

⁵⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962–1965).

restoration Judah. Here not only anagogy but also *analogy* seem to be a guiding principle. Both Kraus and Richard A. Muller have written about the important role “kerygmatic analogy” plays in this exegesis.⁵¹ Muller quotes Calvin’s dedicatory epistle to the Daniel commentary, wherein the Genevan Reformer declares that “the similarity of the times [*temporum similitudo*] adapts these [predictions] to us and fits them to our use.”⁵² Indeed, the entire epistle, addressed “to all the pious worshippers of God who desire the kingdom of Christ to be rightly constituted in France,” expounds the times and tumults of the persecuted French Protestants against the background of the book of Daniel. The whole Daniel of the *praelectiones* is a grand kerygmatic analogy for Huguenot France, spoken just at the time (1559–60) when Geneva was making its most strenuous missionary efforts to win that beautiful, tortured land. His applications of the messages of the prophets to his own troubled times in Geneva and the broader European world illumine how we might apply the prophetic text today, in our own troubled times.

Consider how remarkably Calvin expounds Zechariah 1:18–21, the vision of the four “horns” that had exiled Israel, now beaten down by four “blacksmiths”:

There is here set before us by the Lord as in a mirror, *the real condition of the Church at this day*. Let us not then wonder if the world rage on every side against the Church. ... Though we may be struck by our enemies, [God] will find smiths to break them in pieces, *and this indeed is what we have found by experience*. ... For what do all monarchies desire more, or with greater avidity, than to extinguish the memory of the gospel? ... But God does not permit them; on the contrary he excites them to mutual wars to destroy one another. ... It is certainly a wonderful instance of God’s providence, that *amidst so violent and turbulent commotions the Church should take breath, though under the cross*.... We now then see that this prophecy ... ought not to be confined to the ancient people, but *extended to the whole body of the Church*.⁵³

This is kerygma! It is just this element in his Prophets commentaries that many readers find alluring: Calvin’s angst-laden hope, identifying the

⁵¹ Hans-Joachim Kraus, “Calvin’s Exegetical Principles,” *Interpretation* 31.1 (1977): 12. Richard A. Muller, “The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom,” in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David C. Steinmetz, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 11 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 72–73. *Kerygma* means “proclamation” in the Greek of the New Testament and is the term chosen by biblical scholars to designate the announcement of the gospel.

⁵² Muller, *ibid.*, 74. Quoted from *Comm Dan* 1:lxix. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom24.iv.html>. Muller relates the similitude to the technique in classical rhetoric called *complexus*, indicating “a connection in discourse as important to the meaning of a text as the grammatical *sensus*” (*ibid.*, 73). The *complexus* allows Calvin multiple spiritual applications without recourse to allegory. Muller expresses it as “one *sensus* [with] multiple referents” (*ibid.*, 81).

⁵³ *Comm Zech* 1:18–21 (= Minor Prophets 5:55). <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom30.iii.ii.xviii.html>. Emphases mine.

prophets' Israelite remnant, or exilic and restoration Judah, with the fledgling state of the Reformation church of Europe—exiled from its true home, constantly endangered, and—humanly speaking—of uncertain future.

This conflict, expressed so vividly both in Zechariah's vision and in Calvin's commentary reminds us of the road-blocking campaign of Francis I of France and Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor in 1536 that sidetracked the young Calvin in a fateful visit to spend what he thought would be a single night ... in Geneva. Calvin's lectures on Zechariah, which must have been given from about January to July 1558, took place while the Hapsburg-Valois War of 1551–59 set Henry II (ruled 1547–59) and the French against Charles V, and, at Charles's abdication in 1556, against Phillip II of Spain. The great Spanish victory at Saint-Quentin in August 1557 humiliated Henry and prevented French domination of Europe. In Calvin's thought, Henry would have been a much more successful persecutor of Protestants had he not been distracted by war.⁵⁴

In Calvin's kerygmatic analogy with the restored Judeans, "like men who dreamed" (Ps 126:1), the Reformed church is near miraculous, the restoration of the gospel in clarity and power, requiring now the most urgent efforts from all its members to establish more surely its witness to the true God, "*under the cross.*"

Armed with these theological convictions and exegetical methods, Calvin applied himself to the biblical texts of the prophets of Israel. He was often successful at getting to the kernel—what the prophets meant—and often insightful in applying the prophetic message to his hearers and readers. For we must not forget, Calvin was a pastor and exegeted the Bible for a pastoral purpose: the good of God's people—including us. Hence, his prayer at the conclusion of his Daniel lectures:

Grant, Almighty God, since you propose to us no other end than that of constant warfare during our whole life, and subject us to many cares until we arrive at the goal of this temporary race-course: Grant, I pray you, that we may never grow fatigued. May we ever be armed and equipped for battle, and whatever the trials by which you test us, may we never be found deficient. May we always aspire towards heaven with upright souls, and strive with all our endeavors to attain that blessed rest which is laid up for us in heaven, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ For the life-and-death struggles of Protestantism in France, and the city of Geneva's precarious military position amid the great European powers of the age, see the chapter "Churches and Blood: France," in Gordon's *Calvin*, 304–28. See also the once-ground-breaking piece by Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France, 1555–1563*, *Travaux d'Humanisme at Renaissance* 22 (Geneva: Droz, 1956).

⁵⁵ *Comm Dan* 1561. Prayer, Lecture 66. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom25.vii.xv.html>.