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John Calvin and the *Sensus Literalis*[*]

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Abstract

Calvin has been traditionally regarded as having consistently interpreted scripture according to its literal sense and having also consistently repudiated non-literal modes of interpretation. This view has been recently challenged, however, by Gary Hansen, who claims that 'Calvin's theological rules or priorities of interpretation allow for and even require non-literal interpretation of biblical texts'. The issue turns, however, on what interpreting scripture according to the literal sense actually meant for Calvin. Hans Frei claimed Calvin as a champion of the literal sense because he affirmed the primacy of the literal sense with respect to scripture's witness to the identity of Jesus Christ – that is, following the longstanding consensus of the church, Calvin proceeded on the basis that what the scriptures are *literally about* is not a concept or timeless truth, but the suffering, obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The fact that other so-called 'non-literal' modes of interpretation such as allegory appear in Calvin's exegesis should not necessarily, however, be seen as a betrayal of Calvin's commitment to literal interpretation, but rather as evidence of the *elasticity* of the concept. For Calvin, metaphorical or allegorical interpretations may, to a limited degree, be ascribed to the literal sense, but they must not offend, subvert, or be given independent or equivalent status alongside the literal rendering of the basic story about Jesus depicted in the Gospel narratives.

This essay demonstrates that the literal sense in Calvin is a much more supple notion than many have assumed, especially when one considers his *Harmony of the Gospels*. Contrary to modernist assumptions and in contrast to a strict, direct identification between *signa* and *res*, a tight, irresidual, one-to-one correspondence between what is written and what is written about, Calvin's approach to literal interpretation allows for what Frei called 'breathing space'.

The traditional view that Calvin consistently interpreted scripture according to the literal sense and repudiated 'non-literal' modes of interpretation has been challenged in recent years. Indeed, Gary Neal Hansen has recently

[*] This essay is an address that was delivered at the Eleventh Biennial Conference on Calvin Studies, 2 March 2002, on the campus of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. It followed Gary Neal Hansen's address, 'John Calvin's Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture: On Allegory'.

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argued that 'Calvin's theological rules or priorities of interpretation allow for and even require non-literal interpretation of biblical texts'.[1] But does Calvin's use of allegory necessarily constitute a violation or abrogation of the literal sense, or is there more to reading the bible according to the literal sense than we have perhaps realised? Does Calvin's use of allegory, limited and qualified as it may be, necessarily contradict his stated intention of reading the bible according to the literal sense? Was he simply inconsistent or confused in his commitment to interpreting scripture according to the literal sense, or is there another explanation for his use of so-called 'non-literal' modes of interpretation? In short, what did interpreting scripture according to the literal sense mean for Calvin?

I

Long before I settled on my own dissertation topic, it was Hans Frei who first forced me to wrestle with this question, and it is one I have been wrestling with ever since. Frei spent the last decade of his life reflecting on the church's tradition of reading the bible according to the literal sense and said that the literal sense is 'a much more supple notion than one might first suspect'.[2] I cannot begin to elaborate the significance of the *sensus literalis* in Frei's thought or to define it here in a way that anyone familiar with his work on this topic will find sufficient, but knowing that what I seek to gain in clarity I may lose in precision, subtlety, and nuance, I nevertheless offer this brief description. According to Frei, it has been the longstanding consensus in the Christian interpretive tradition to affirm the primacy of the literal sense with respect to scripture's witness to the identity of Jesus Christ as attested to primarily in the Gospel narratives. The Christian community has consistently affirmed throughout its history – though not without exceptions – that what the bible, taken as a whole, is *literally about is Jesus Christ*. Indeed, the consensus has been that the scriptures really do not make sense apart from the Gospel accounts being *literally about* the suffering, obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a storied person, and not someone else or no one in particular.[3]

[1] Gary Neal Hansen, 'John Calvin and the Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture', PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1998, p. 1.

[2] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1974). See also Frei's essays: 'Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations', pp. 94–116, and 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?', pp. 117–52, both in F. McConnell (ed.), *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); 'Conflicts in Interpretation: Resolution, Armistice, or Co-existence?', in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (eds), *Theology & Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 153–66.

[3] Frei, 'Conflicts in Interpretation', p. 165.

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Thus, when the church has read verses such as John 1:14 – 'And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' – it has consistently identified them not with a concept or timeless truth, but with the man Jesus of Nazareth. By grace through the Holy Spirit, the church has claimed to see in the Gospel narratives a fit or correspondence between '*verbum* and *res*, sense and reference, signifier and signified, "Sinn" and "Bedeutung" . . . between the narrative sequence and what it renders descriptively'.[4]

However, affirming the primacy of the literal sense has not necessarily always excluded the possibility of reading portions of scripture allegorically. Yet according to Frei, even when allegorical readings have been permitted, the overwhelming consensus of the Christian community has been to grant priority to a more or less literal reading of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Metaphorical or allegorical interpretations may be *ascribed* to the literal sense, but they must not offend, subvert, or be given independent or equivalent status alongside the literal rendering of the basic story about Jesus depicted by the Gospel narratives. In other words, allegorical or metaphorical readings may occur *in service of* the literal sense, but they may not come at its expense.

The rub has come, as Frei observed, when the primacy of the literal sense has been ignored or regarded as up for grabs. Such was the case with 'the school of Origen in which the Old Testament received a kind of *independent* allegorical interpretation' apart from Jesus being 'the center or focus of coherence for such reading'.[5] According to Frei, such is the case today with disciples of Paul Ricoeur, such as David Tracy and Sallie McFague, who make much of the metaphorical character of scriptural language and particularly the parables, which they claim thrust beyond the literal sense to 'redescribe reality'. (Here the subversion of the primacy of the literal sense is indicated by the fact that for McFague it tends to be more important to understand Jesus in the light of the *parables* than the parables in the light of *Jesus*.)[6] And finally, such was the case for the Reformers, who felt that the primacy of the literal sense was being threatened in their day.

Now it may well be that Frei was mistaken in his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, when he said that Calvin 'was *never* tempted into allegorising',[7] as Gary Hanson et al. have suggested. I am still not sure, however, that it has been demonstrated that Calvin ever engaged in *independent* allegorical

[4] Frei, 'Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative', p. 103.

[5] Frei, 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition', p. 121.

[6] Why this reversal? Because reality for McFague is 'a mode of being in the world' and is more readily disclosed by the parables than Jesus as he is literally depicted in the Gospel narratives.

[7] Frei, *Eclipse*, p. 31. Italics mine.

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interpretation like that of Origen. However much Calvin and the Reformers continued wittingly or unwittingly to employ allegory, Frei's point is that Calvin and the Reformers never saw allegorical interpretation as equivalent to, but always as dependent (indeed, parasitic) upon, the literal sense. For Frei, it may be that in their polemic against allegory the Reformers overstated their case in forbidding *all* forms of allegorical interpretation. As far as Frei is concerned, so long as the primacy of the literal ascriptive sense is sufficiently 'guarded', then 'why not a recrudescence of other internal textual devices [such as allegorical interpretation]?'[8] In response to the question he posed in his most lengthy essay on the topic, 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?', Frei was convinced that there is an *elasticity* to the literal sense in the Christian tradition and that it *would stretch* to include other internal textual devices or modes of interpretation such as metaphorical or allegorical interpretation, *but only if the literal sense remains the basic, primary sense*. I am not so sure, however, that Frei would have referred to these other internal textual devices or modes of interpretation as 'non-literal', given their dependence on the literal sense. But I do think Gary's thesis demonstrates that whatever conception of the literal sense Calvin had, his understanding was, at least in practice, elastic enough to include qualified use of allegory.

II

Yet the reason Frei regards Calvin as such a champion of the *sensus literalis* is not that he recognises its *elasticity*, but that with the other Reformers he recognises the *sufficiency* of the biblical text. He recognises its sufficiency, by the Spirit's grace, to bear witness to the being and acts of God. As Frei puts it:

> The Reformers tell us that the text is the Word of God: 'Do not seek God beyond the text,' for you may find, instead of the God of grace, the *Deus absconditus* or *Deus nudus* . . . But the Reformers also propose that even though the text is 'sufficient,' we ought not to worship it. . . . [They proposed that] the text is 'witness' to the Word of God and that its authority derives from that witness rather than from any inherent divinized quality.[9]

To put it positively, Calvin and the other Reformers recognised a fundamental distinction between text and truth, between *signa* and *res*, between what is written and what is written about. But they also believed that the condition

[8] Frei, 'Conflicts in Interpretation', p. 166.
[9] Ibid., p. 163.

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for the possibility of their recognising such a fundamental distinction was based on the presupposition that by the Spirit's grace God *had* spoken and *would continue to speak through* the human words of the biblical text. They believed that by the Spirit's grace (which means always beyond our control and without any guarantees), there was a *fit or correspondence* between text and truth, between *signa* and *res*, between what is written and what is written about. And it is the nature of this fit, this correspondence, in Calvin's exegesis that is so interesting.

As I have suggested, the Reformers' commitment to interpreting scripture according to the literal sense was born out of their conviction that by the Spirit's grace there is a fit between text and truth, between what is written and what is written about. But as Frei has said, what tends to distinguish their exegesis (and pre-critical exegesis generally) from modern, Enlightenment exegesis is that 'in the period of modernity interpreters have been so ardent, so hot in pursuit of the truth of the text [and particularly the historical truth behind the text], that texts were often left little "breathing space"'.[10] Little 'breathing space' was left between text and truth, between what is written and what is written about. This is an important point when it comes the question, What did interpreting scripture according to the literal sense mean for Calvin? I think that given what Frei says, it is probably safe to say that whatever interpreting scripture according to literal sense meant to Calvin, it did not mean what it means to many of us, namely, a strict, direct identification between the literal, grammatical sense of the text and its ostensive historical referent. It did not mean what it means to most fundamentalists and liberals, namely, a 'sheer equation', a tight, irresidual, one-to-one correspondence between what is written and what is written about. To interpret scripture according to the literal sense, for Calvin, meant (among other things) that there is 'breathing space' between what is written and what is written about.

I am aware that in recent years much has been written to emphasise quite the opposite case, viz., that what we see in Calvin's exegesis is a lack of 'breathing space' between what is written and what is written about. Even Barth, who regarded Calvin as his chief exegetical exemplar,[11] said in 1922 that Calvin's exegesis 'often borders on . . . historicism'.[12] I am also aware of

[10] Ibid., p. 162.

[11] Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2001), pp. 250f.

[12] Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Calvins*, ed. Hans Scholl (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1992), p. 530; ET *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 392.

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what George Stroup said to us a few years ago in the light of his analysis of Calvin's exegesis of Gen 22 and Mark 14:

> Calvin does make the text say more than it does say. Calvin appears to know more about the thinking and feeling of figures in biblical narrative than the text allows him to. . . . Calvin allows himself to be caught up in the text; but when he does so, he is unwilling to accept the shadows in the text, the text's silence on some matters, and even its ambiguity. Calvin is not content with the shadows, the ambiguity, because . . . he is unwilling to allow the text to be silent on theological matters that are of overriding significance for him. Calvin resolves the text's silence and ambiguity by speaking for it. He explains what the text refuses to explain.[13]

This is certainly the case at many points in Calvin's exegesis (although I must add that it is precisely Calvin's willingness to allow himself to be caught up in the text and to engage in *eisegesis* that was, as far as Karl Barth was concerned, one of Calvin's greatest strengths as an exegete, for, as Barth often said, 'if we read nothing into the Bible we will also read nothing out of it').[14] Yet I am also convinced that to emphasise Calvin's unwillingness to accept shadows, ambiguity, or the bible's silence at various points is to emphasise only one side of it.

In his dedicatory letter to Simon Grynaeus in the preface to his commentary on Romans, Calvin not only praises the exegetical virtue of 'lucid brevity', but also the virtues of 'discretion and moderation'.[15] And it appears to be particularly in the light of the virtues of discretion and moderation that Calvin assesses the contributions of various contemporary commentators on Romans. For example Melanchthon is, Calvin claims, too selective in his exegesis. He discusses some things in great detail, but he 'deliberately passes over many [other] matters which can cause great trouble to those of average understanding'.[16] Bucer, who Calvin claims is the most 'precise and diligent' biblical interpreter of his day, on the other hand, tends to be 'too verbose' and to go into too much detail about too many things. Calvin remarks: 'So many subjects are suggested to him by his incredible and

[13] George W. Stroup, 'Narrative in Calvin's Hermeneutic', in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 168.

[14] Barth, *Die Theologie Calvins*, p. 527; ET, p. 390.

[15] John Calvin, *Calvini Opera* in *Corpus Reformatorum* edn, ed. Baum, Cunitz and Reuss (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1872), vol. 10/2, pp. 402f., Epistola 191 (1539). Hereafter cited as CO. ET *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 3. Hereafter cited as *Romans*.

[16] Calvin, CO 10/2, p. 404; *Romans*, p. 2.

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vigorous fertility of mind, that he does not know how to stop writing.'[17] Similarly, in his letter to Viret, Calvin offers mild criticism of Zwingli's and Luther's exegesis of the book of Isaiah. 'Zwingli', Calvin says, 'although he is not wanting in a fit and ready exposition, yet, because he takes too much liberty, [he] often wanders far from the meaning of the prophet. Luther is not so particular as to propriety of expression or historical accuracy; he is satisfied when he can draw from it some fruitful doctrine.'[18] In each of these cases, the problem is that of saying either too much or too little. Calvin's solution, therefore, is to aim at 'moderation and discretion', though not at the expense of oversimplification.

III

Of course this is what Calvin says in terms of theory, but what does he actually do in practice? Is he himself really so moderate and discreet? I think Calvin's *Harmony of the Gospels* provides fascinating material related to this question. Surely if there is any place an interpreter might be tempted to say more than the bible actually says, *not* to accept shadows, ambiguity, or the bible's silence at various points, it would be in the attempt to harmonise the synoptic Gospels. After all, the very purpose of a harmony of the Gospels, as Calvin saw it, is to demonstrate *harmony*, which implies explaining certain discrepancies, ambiguities, and shadows in the Gospels in the light of some sort of coherent unity. Indeed, call him naive, call him 'pre-critical', but for Calvin that is what a commentary was for! One of the main reasons for writing a commentary was to help clarify and explain certain connections, questions, ambiguities, and shadows in the text. And there are certainly plenty of examples throughout his *Harmony of the Gospels* where Calvin says more than the text actually says, or where he refuses to accept shadows, ambiguity, or the bible's silence at various points. But to focus on these instances, I believe, is to miss the forest for the trees, especially when we compare his exegesis to that of his contemporaries.

For example, Calvin begins his *Harmony of the Gospels* by praising 'faithful and skilled commentators [who] have expended most of their efforts on reconciling the three [Gospel] accounts'. However, he says his own approach will be to 'treat the three narratives together in a continuous line, on

[17] Calvin, *CO* 10/2, p. 404; *Romans*, pp. 2–3.

[18] Calvin adds: 'No one, as I think, has hitherto more diligently applied himself to this pursuit than Oecolampadius, who has not always, however, reached the full scope of meaning.' Calvin's letter to Viret, cited by P. T. Fuhrmann, 'Calvin, the Expositor of Scripture', *Interpretation* 6 (1952), p. 174.

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one form so to speak, where readers [can] see at a glance the points of likeness *and difference*'.[19] Far from ignoring or glossing over differences between Gospel accounts, i.e. ambiguities, shadows, etc., Calvin obviously thought it important to display them freely. And in contrast to many commentators before and after him, Calvin admits throughout his *Harmony* that the evangelists did not pay much attention to times, dates, or the exact sequence of events. 'They neglected', he says, 'the order of days and were content to put together the chief events in Christ's career as they saw them . . . they freely confuse the miracles which occurred at much the same period and this we shall see clearly from a number of cases.'[20] 'We know that it happens everywhere in the Evangelists that one of them will pass over what is said by the others, and again what is omitted by them, the one will explain more clearly.'[21] 'The Evangelists were not precise in the way they wove together Christ's discourses, but often assembled a variety of sayings.'[22] Nor were they 'scrupulous to relate everything that Christ did'.[23] Calvin, in other words, was *more relaxed* about conflicting details in the Gospel narratives than perhaps many have given him credit for. He was certainly more reluctant to *press* such details than many of his contemporaries.

A good example of this is seen in Calvin's attempt to treat certain stories multiply attested to in the Gospels. It was common among many of Calvin's contemporaries to think that if an incident in the Gospel narratives is reported more than once, though in a different context or with significantly different details, then it probably occurred more than once. This was the practice of, for example, the Lutheran theologian Andreas Osiander, who had written his own harmony of the Gospels in 1537,[24] as well as later harmonisers such as Carolus Molinaeus (1565) and Johannes Codomannus (1568).[25] Calvin, by contrast, tends not to be nearly so rigid about variations in detail. As to the

[19] Calvin, *CO*, vol. 45, p. 4; ET *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vols 1–3 in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, trans. A. W. Morrison, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:xiii–xiv. Italics mine. Hereafter cited as *Harmony*. Calvin adds: 'There is no question of my seeking the credit for the innovation – I freely confess . . . that the method derives from imitation of others. I have particularly copied Bucer . . . ' (*CO* 45:4).

[20] Calvin, *CO* 45:148; *Harmony*, 1:155, Matt 4:18. See also Matt 4:5; 8:27; 9:18; 27:51; Luke 4:5; 19:1, 39–49; 24:12; etc.

[21] Calvin, *CO* 45:560; *Harmony*, 2:278, Matt 20:29.

[22] Calvin, *CO* 45:359; *Harmony*, 2:66, Matt 13:12.

[23] Calvin, *CO* 45:461; *Harmony*, 2:172, Matt 15:29.

[24] Andreas Osiander, *Harmoniae evangelicae libri quattuor* (Basel, 1537).

[25] Ronald Youngblood, 'From Tatian to Swanson, from Calvin to Bendavid: The Harmonization of Biblical History', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25/4 (Dec 1982), pp. 416f.

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healing of the centurion's servant in Matt 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10, Calvin says: 'Those who believe that Matthew and Luke are telling different stories make a fuss over nothing . . . it would be ridiculous to make two miracles out of the one.'[26] As to Jesus' healing of the blind man (or blind men) in Mark 10:46–52, Luke 18:35–43 and Matt 20:29–34, Calvin says: 'Osiander thinks he is clever to make one blind man into four. In fact, there is nothing sillier than this idea . . . no sane man can believe these were different stories.'[27] There are other such examples.[28]

Yet if there is any polemic running throughout Calvin's *Harmony*, it is against those interpreters who speculate beyond the meaning of the actual words of the text. Again and again, Calvin spurns the speculations of other interpreters[29] which he describes as: 'ingenious',[30] 'absurd',[31] 'impure',[32] 'obscene',[33] 'frivolous',[34] 'unfounded',[35] 'vain',[36] childish',[37] and above all, 'idle'.[38] The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example. Calvin cites various ways it has been interpreted allegorically, but he says: 'None of these strikes me as plausible: we should have more reverence for Scripture than to allow ourselves to transfigure its sense so freely. Anyone may see that these speculations have been cooked up by meddlers . . .'[39] Calvin repeatedly warns against the 'idle curiosity' of those who try to 'examine the details' of some parables too 'precisely';[40] or those who, for example, ask such questions as what kind of food it was that Christ in his resurrected body ate, or how it was digested, etc.;[41] or those interpreters who elaborate with great specificity on the meaning of Christ's phrase 'the furnace of fire' (which Calvin refers to

[26] Calvin, *CO* 45:234; *Harmony*, 1:247, Matt 8:5.
[27] Calvin, *CO* 45:560; *Harmony*, 2:278, Matt 20:29.
[28] Calvin, *CO* 45:100; *Harmony*, 1:103, Matt 2:16; *CO* 45:268; *Harmony*, 1:283, Matt 8:23; *CO* 45:467–8; *Harmony*, 2:179, Matt 16:6; etc.
[29] Calvin, *CO* 45:124; *Harmony*, 1:129, Matt 3:12; *CO* 45:278; *Harmony*, 1:295, Matt 10:12; *CO* 45:352–3; *Harmony*, 2:58, Matt 12:39; *CO* 45:614; *Harmony*,3:39, Luke 10:30; *CO* 45:771; *Harmony*, 3:199, Matt 27:40; etc.
[30] Calvin, *CO* 45:278; *Harmony*, 1:295, Matt 10:12; *CO* 45:161; *Harmony*,1:168, Matt 5:2.
[31] Calvin, *CO* 45:299; *Harmony*, 2:2, Matt 11:2.
[32] Calvin, *CO* 45:529; *Harmony*, 2:244–5, Matt 19:5.
[33] Calvin, *CO* 45:529; *Harmony*, 2:244–5, Matt 19:5.
[34] Calvin, *CO* 45:698; *Harmony*, 3:125, Matt 26:14.
[35] Calvin, *CO* 45:385; *Harmony*,2:93, Luke 12:20.
[36] Calvin, *CO* 45:136; *Harmony*,1:142, Matt 4:10.
[37] Calvin, *CO* 45:683; *Harmony*, 3:110, Matt 25:1.
[38] Calvin, *CO* 45:381; *Harmony*, 2:89, Luke 10:38; *CO* 45:499; *Harmony*, 2:213, Matt 18:1; *CO* 45:533; *Harmony*, 2:311, Matt 20:22; *CO* 45:570; *Harmony*, 2:289, Matt 25:24; etc.
[39] Calvin, *CO* 45:614; *Harmony*, 3:39, Luke 10:30.
[40] Calvin, *CO* 45:547; *Harmony*, 2:265, Matt 20:1–16.
[41] Calvin, *CO* 45:814f.; *Harmony*, 3:243–4, Luke 24:41.

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as a 'metaphorical expression'). He says: 'I know that some have investigated more subtly every minute detail [of this phrase]. But there is a danger that these indefinite discussions may lead us into foolishness; and so I prefer to be sparing in philosophizing and to be satisfied with the simple and genuine sense.'[42]

There are many other places where Calvin warns against 'forced interpretation' of the text.[43] But it is difficult to read Calvin's *Harmony* without wondering if Calvin isn't sometimes guilty of this same sort of thing. Is he really always satisfied with the simple, genuine, literal sense of the text, or does he sometimes speculate beyond it? Calvin would deny that he indulges in speculation, but he does allow for a modest degree of conjecture. In fact, Calvin conjectures quite a bit throughout his *Harmony of the Gospels*. So what is the difference between speculating and conjecturing? It has to do with the strength of the textual or contextual warrant (and obviously one man's conjecture can be another man's speculation). But Calvin tends to be relatively conscientious about stating when he is offering his own conjectures, and he distinguishes between different kinds of conjecture. There are 'reasonable' conjectures, 'probable' and 'improbable' conjectures. There are 'unfounded and altogether absurd' conjectures as well as 'idle' and 'foolish' conjectures. And there are occasions when, even after acknowledging the 'wise' or 'judicious conjecture' of such a trustworthy exegete as Bucer, Calvin opts nevertheless for a more 'simple' reading of a particular verse or passage.[44]

[42] Calvin, *CO* 45:370–1; *Harmony*, 2:77, Matt 13:41.

[43] Calvin, *CO* 45:214–15; *Harmony*, 1:226, Matt 7:1; *CO* 45:244; *Harmony*, 1:258, Matt 9:2.

[44] Calvin, *CO* 45:807; *Harmony*, 3:236, Luke 24:27. In the light of the history of the interpretation of most passages, Calvin's move is almost always from complexity to simplicity, from extravagance to modesty. However, this is not because he always saw only one possible interpretation of any given text, as some seem to suppose on the basis of his statement on Gal 4:22: '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 sensum scripturae, qui germanus est et 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*)': Calvin, *CO* 50:237; ET *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 84–5. Calvin clearly rejects a double, triple or quadruple sense of scripture and claims to seek only the *simplex sensus*, but this does not mean that he always knew what it was. And as he elaborates in his letter to Simon Grynaeus, this is to be expected. See Calvin, *CO* 10/2:405; *Romans*, p. 4.

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Granted, Calvin is often unwilling to accept the text's silence, shadows, and ambiguities. Still, one of the most striking features of his *Harmony* is how often one runs across such statements as: 'It is not clear . . . ';[45] 'I am not quite sure . . . ';[46] 'I dare not be [too] definite';[47] 'I leave it open';[48] 'I must admit that it cannot be certainly established';[49] 'some take [this] in another sense . . . I do not reject this interpretation';[50] or 'If any care to follow [that] conjecture . . . I have no great objection'.[51] At many points in his *Harmony* Calvin freely admits that the meaning of the text is opaque or ambiguous. There is, for example, much about the genealogies in Matthew and Luke that Calvin finds very perplexing.[52] He has no idea how many Magi there were and says: 'It is better to say that we do not know how many there were, as the Evangelist does not state exactly, than rashly to assert for sure something which is dubious.'[53] Calvin is not at all sure when the slaying of the innocents occurred, but he wonders why Josephus doesn't say anything about it.[54] As to claims of Mary's perpetual virginity based on Matt 1:25, 'And he knew her not', Calvin says: 'Let one thing suffice for us, that it is foolishly and falsely inferred from the words of the Evangelist, what happened after the birth of Christ. . . . And we may be sure that no one will ever raise questions on such a matter except from curiosity.'[55] Calvin does not know where or when the Sermon on the Mount was delivered, or if it represents a single sermon or several. 'It should be enough', he says, 'for reverent and humble readers that here, before their eyes, they have a short summary of the teaching of Christ, gathered from many and various discourses.'[56]

The point I am trying to make is that there is a lot about the text Calvin was willing to leave open, a lot he was willing to leave unresolved. A good example of this is Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Christ's baptism. Ever since Augustine, interpreters have debated whether the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove, a *real* dove (with a real beak, wings, and feathers), or in the *form* of a dove. Aquinas, for reasons I cannot elaborate here, argues

[45] Calvin, *CO* 45:528; *Harmony*, 2:244, Matt 19:5.
[46] Calvin, *CO* 45:622; *Harmony*, 3:47, Matt 23:2.
[47] Calvin, *CO* 45:524; *Harmony*,2:239, Mark 9:38.
[48] Calvin, *CO* 45:57; *Harmony*, 1:56, Matt 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38.
[49] Calvin, *CO* 45:55; *Harmony*, 1:54, Matt 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38.
[50] Calvin, *CO* 45:383; *Harmony*, 2:90, Luke:10:42.
[51] Calvin, *CO* 45:645–6; *Harmony*, 3:71, Luke 11:53. See also Luke 2:14; 4:19; 6:30; 17:20.
[52] Calvin, *CO* 45:54f.; *Harmony*, 1:51f., Matt 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38.
[53] Calvin, *CO* 45:81; *Harmony*, 1:82, Matt 2:1.
[54] Calvin, *CO* 45:99; *Harmony*, 1:102, Matt 2:16.
[55] Calvin, *CO* 45:70; *Harmony*, 1:70, Matt 1:25.
[56] Calvin, *CO* 45:160; *Harmony*, 1:168, Matt 5:1.

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at considerable length that it was a real dove.[57] However, Calvin, who is obviously aware of at least some of the interpretive history of this text, says: 'Some look with more curiosity than usefulness into whether this dove were a solid body or a ghost. Though Luke's language appears to suggest that there was no substance to the body, but only a form, I prefer to leave the matter unsettled, and avoid provoking a dispute over it.'[58] We find similar openness in Calvin's interpretation of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. What was it that the disciples actually saw? Was it the actual figures of Moses and Elijah or was it a dream or a vision? Calvin says he does not know, but he says it could have been a vision.[59] As far as Jesus' ascension is concerned, Calvin does not have the slightest interest in speculating beyond what the literal sense of the text says, and he chides those who do. Indeed, the fact that Luke says that 'a cloud took him out of their sight' (Acts 1:9), Calvin says, should serve to warn us against letting our imaginations wander and should instead incline us to modesty. '[God] wished this mystery of faith to be known more by the preaching of the Gospel than by the eyes.'[60]

IV

The conclusion I draw from these and other passages in Calvin's *Harmony of the Gospels* is that whatever commitment he had to interpreting scripture according to the literal sense, Calvin was not a *literalist*. As in his *Institutes* he rejects the literalism of the anthropomorphites, which he refers to as 'boundless barbarism',[61] so in his *Harmony* he refuses to read everything *literalistically*. For him there was – at least in principle, if not often in practice – a certain amount of 'breathing space' between what is written and what is written about. In contrast to Luther's famous 'chasing after deer',[62] Calvin

[57] Richard E. Burnett, 'The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture according to Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin', an unpublished seminar paper written for George Lindbeck's course 'The Theology of Thomas Aquinas', Yale University Divinity School, 1 Feb 1993.

[58] Calvin, *CO* 45:127; *Harmony*, 1:131–2, Matt 3:16.

[59] Calvin, *CO* 45:486f.; *Harmony*, 2:198f., Matt 17:3. Though Calvin says, 'it seems more likely to me that they [Moses and Elijah] really were brought to that place', he subsequently refers to the incident as a 'vision'.

[60] Calvin, *CO* 45:827; *Harmony*, 3:256f., Luke 24:50–3. And see esp. Calvin's 'De L'Ascension de Nostre Seigneur Jesus, Quatrieme Sermon: Des Propos Tenus Par Les Anges Aux Disciples Et Apostres', *CO* 48:613–22.

[61] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.17.23.

[62] Luther's 'chasing after deer' can be seen in many places, e.g. his commentary on Galatians of 1535, but Hans Frei relates another more humorous example: 'I was unable to check a graduate student's claim that Luther interpreted the story of Legion passing into the herd of swine in the following way: They were not actually drowned.

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tries to stay closer to the text. Yet there are times, he says, when we must not 'press single words too exactly'.[63] And this applies to narrative as well as to parenetic passages.[64]

In short, I think there is a lot to be said for Karl Barth's assessment of Calvin's approach to exegesis: 'The feeling of being engaged in battle on a long and extended front enabled [Calvin] to deal with detailed passages in a relaxed and sober manner. He had his eye on the whole, and therefore he did not need to break out and win victories at every point which could be in his view only sham victories.'[65] The reason such victories could only be 'sham victories' is that for Calvin, as for Barth, the only real victory for the Christian interpreter comes when the connection between text and truth, between what is written and what is written about, is made not merely as a result of exegetical skill or our ability to penetrate the text, but as a result of him who, beyond all exegetical skill, by grace penetrates our hearts and minds.

They swam. They swam and they swam and they finally went ashore – in Rome!' Frei, 'Conflicts in Interpretation', p. 158.

[63] Calvin, *CO* 45:84; *Harmony*, 1:85–6, Matt 2:6.

[64] There are many examples of this in Calvin's *Harmony*. For example, whereas 'enthusiasts' had taken John the Baptist's words in Luke 3:11, 'He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none', literalistically to the point of calling the concept of private property into question, Calvin says: 'I do not need to make a long debate with revolutionaries [fanatics] of this sort, who fasten their teeth on the letter. If it is forbidden to have two coats, we shall have to say the same of pans, of salt-cellars, of underwear, and all our furnishings. But the context makes it obvious that nothing was further from John's thoughts than to subvert the order of society. So we infer that this whole instruction was for the rich, according to their means, to disburse to the poor, as their necessity demanded. In other words, See what basic necessities of life your neighbors lack, and which you have in plenty; let your supply meet their need. And the kinder God is to us the more we must beware of being kind to ourselves alone. Let the needs of our brothers press more upon us, and as often as God's favors come to our hands, so let them invite our generosity.' Calvin, *CO* 45:120; *Harmony*, 1:124, Luke 3:11.

[65] Barth, *Die Theologie Calvins*, p. 529; ET, p. 391.

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