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Tracing circles: literary dimensions in John Calvin's Institutes

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CHAPTER THREE

GOD LISPED:

ACCOMMODATIO AND CALVIN'S SCRIPTURAL VOICE

It is in Scripture that all foundations for theological reflection are offered: One can know God only by Jesus Christ, who himself can be found only through the Scriptures.¹

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.²

After having described the gap that lies between God and man, affecting the modes of knowledge that man can have of God in chapter I, and the seemingly bridging function of Christ in the eucharist in chapter 2, we concluded that, to an important degree, Calvin's theology is dominated by tropes of movement; the knowledge of God, both as it is presented in the *ordo recte docendi* as well as in the eucharist, is in fact a *capacity* to both critically undermine human cognitive attempts as well as the call for a 'filling in' of this negativity with a form of affirmation that lies beyond the boundaries of descriptive language. In the second chapter we saw how the eucharist, in its signifying presence, is in fact not an exception to this mode in the sense that it breaks the human fallible nature. Instead the presence of Christ in the eucharist was presented as a process that moves the reader 'beyond' (*extra*) the confined boundaries of material pres-

1 Wendel, *Calvin*, 185.

2 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I, xiii, 1), 110.

ence, resulting in a conflation of earthly and divine presence. The *Institutes* themselves as we have seen in the example of the *sensus divinitatis*, show a textual awareness of these limits: in presenting human descriptive language as failing, the *Institutes* themselves can be said to draw the reader into its process, thereby risking the expulsion of the reader's entrance into the text. It was these tropes of movement that we saw becoming problematic in the Heidelberg Catechism, where the calvinian *sign* became a *token*, thus changing the moving connotation Calvin placed on the signification process.

Underlying both chapters though, and the *Institutes* as a whole, lies, of course, Scripture. It is in Scripture that the knowledge of man as well as the nature of God's presence in creation and the eucharist is warranted. 'One can know God only by Jesus Christ, who himself can be found only through the Scriptures'.³ It is Scripture that is the foundation under the unwavering style of the *Institutes*. Calvin saw his *Institutes* as nothing but an aid, albeit a complete one, a *summa*, to read Scripture correctly, and to draw the right conclusions from it. As we have discussed in the introduction, in the sixteenth century the *sola scriptura* functioned as a warrant for true doctrine for a variety of religious factions in Europe. The return to the direct literal meaning of Scripture was a vantage point from which many reformers staged their attack on Scholasticism. But far from being a phenomenon restricted to the variety of developing protestant factions, the return to Scripture was a phenomenon that was as broad as the humanist developments that engulfed both Catholics like Erasmus, as well as reformers such as Calvin and Luther. It has led Brian Cummings to state that the Reformation was not merely the age in which literal truth was at stake, but that in the claim for the true, literal Scriptural meaning, a literary claim was developed as well. 'The Reformation was as much about literary truth as it was about literal truth'.

3 Wendel, *Calvin*, 185.

In the era of the Reformation, the status of Scripture was undoubtedly changing, exegetical methods became more sophisticated, and the access to better sources and education with which these sources could be translated and circulated, opened up discussions not merely about the doctrinal meaning of Scripture but also of the status of Scripture in general. To put it in the words of the eucharist: in an age where the word “is” in the words of institution (this “is” my body) could generate doctrinal divisions and conflicts that divided Europe, the return to the literal meaning of Scripture is a complicated and explosive affair. It is fruitful to call to mind the succinct summary that Thomas More gave of the problematics of the literal sense of Scripture: ‘Et quis erit iudex, quodnam id verbum sit: Lutherus, an ecclesia catholica?’⁴ The sixteenth century has been described by Montaigne as a century plagued by a war fought about, and with, words, with the unfortunate side-effect that a war on words results in only more words:

I note that Luther has left behind in Germany as many – indeed more – discords and disagreements because of doubts about his opinions than he himself ever raised about Holy Scripture. Our controversies are verbal ones. I ask what is nature, pleasure, circle or substitution. The question is about words: it is paid in the same coin.⁵

As we have seen in the introduction to this study, Cummings emphasizes the literary dimension in the claim to literal truth. Literal truth poses perhaps a seductive claim to simplicity, but the claim is in fact interpretative and strategic and

4 Thomas More and Martin Luther, *A Translation of St. Thomas More's Responsio Ad Lutherum* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1962).

5 Taken from the essay “Of Experience”, Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton and William Carew Hazlitt (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 1213.

far from simple. The rise of literal-mindedness means predominantly a change in textuality, not a return to the literal sense. The same point has been made by James Simpson in his *Burning to Read*:⁶

Single-minded concentration on the simplicity of the literal sense, then, produced a much less simple multiplication of texts. The single, self-sufficient literal sense gave way in the first place to an anterior text, painfully written onto the heart. (...) Thus the entire world became pregnant with signs and portents, traces in which God's inscrutable decision might be legible. (...) Evangelical insistence on the simplicity of the literal sense paradoxically produced fathomless unnerving and ubiquitous textual complexity. (...) The literalist can only appeal to the words on the page or written on the heart.⁷

For Calvin, of course, the literal sense of Scripture and the return to it were of central importance. In scholarship, the textual implications of this have long been neglected. For, instead of taking the return to Scripture at face value, authors like Simpson and Cummings invite us to question the effects literal-mindedness has on texts that proclaim the return to Scripture. As Simpson sketches, the literal sense meant, paradoxically, that texts professing this literal sense are brought into a dilemma: 'the literalist can only appeal to the words on the page or written on the heart'. As a result, the text that claims to be the guide to the right interpretation of Scripture runs the risk of emptying itself out, of only being able to point to its own limitations. Furthermore, the literal sense has, as Simpson suggests, the tendency not

6 Simpson's book is subtitled *English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents*. It focuses largely on the English Reformation and the rise of fundamentalist readings. With a remarkable erudition, Simpson succeeds in placing the texts of Tyndale and others in a highly stimulating discussion of sixteenth-century textuality. With Cummings' work, it is the second book that offers a valuable contribution to this discussion; unfortunately for us, as with Cummings' book, it is focused largely on English religious texts.

7 Simpson, *Burning to Read*, 142.

to remain on the page: in fact, the world ‘became pregnant with signs and portents’. Fetishizing the literal sense, and the distrust in human frameworks that can vouch for this sense, runs the risk of setting the believer adrift in a universe of textuality that knows no boundaries. Without the interpretative framework to offer the foundations for this reading, ‘fathomless unnerving and ubiquitous textual complexity’ becomes a serious threat.

It is from this viewpoint that we will approach the role of Scripture in Calvin’s theology. Taking our cue from the recent insights offered by authors such as Cummings and Simpson, we will ask the question: what effect does the role of Scripture, with its literal truth and its unmediated effect, have for the text that tries to expound the very same Scripture?

§3.1 Calvin’s Scripture

In our discussion of the *ordo recte docendi* we have already seen that Calvin explicitly acknowledged the temporality of human interpretations of Scripture. Yet he refused to state that Scripture itself was time-bound. In the act of interpretation, much like the reflection on nature, or on the eucharist, the human mind should reflect upon itself and its own impurities, Scripture itself, although unable to correct this imperfection, is perfect. However, to deduce a truth from that, which is as secure as Scripture itself, is impossible. In this chapter we will zoom in on this conflation of security and insecurity; for in Calvin’s interaction with Scripture we can see that Calvin acknowledges the problematics of interpretation without relinquishing the truth-claim of Scripture. In Calvin’s theology this problem is characterized by the fact that in Scripture God stoops down to our level, ‘as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us’.⁸

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I,xiii,1), 110.

It is this notion of the accommodated statement, *accommodatio*, that is of central importance in evaluating Calvin's claims to Scriptural validity. In accommodation, a peculiar *charge* is given to the literal meaning of Scripture, that, as we will see, risks indeed blowing away the foundation out of interpretation altogether. The peculiar conflation of descriptive uncertainty and literal infallibility that characterizes Calvin's approach to Scripture raises important questions about Calvin's text itself.

In this chapter I will start by sketching the way in which Calvin's notion of accommodation is assessed by scholarship. The peculiar role that logical inconsistencies play are a tell-tale sign that for Calvin the accommodated statement is not merely an apologetic tool aimed at squaring away inconsistencies in Scripture. I will then trace some historical uses of accommodation to highlight the way in which Calvin's use of the term was a rewriting of a main-stream theological topic. Jumping ahead to modern uses of the term, an analysis of the term in the work of the seventeenth-century Genevan professor of theology, Jean-Alphonse Turretini, will shed light on a typically modern dilemma, the relationship of religion to scientific reason. This shows how Calvin's use of the term was part of a typical, mid sixteenth-century concern. Calvin's accommodation differs from modern uses of the term, in which accommodation becomes part of a certain rationalization of religion, and it is not part of the earlier tradition, where accommodation was part of the interpretative process uncovering the fourfold sense of Scripture, either. The analysis of Calvin's accommodation as a peculiar moment in between these two ages shows the idiosyncratic nature of Calvin's use of accommodation. For, after having established that accommodated notions of Scripture are used to exclude human inventions, yet retain the affirmative dimension of truth, the question arises: what is the knowledge that the accommodated statement offers?

If it cuts off metaphorical or allegorical interpretations, as well as appeals to reason, what status does that knowledge have? It becomes even more complicated that for Calvin, the accommodated statement is not just limited to passages in Scripture; it points to the mode in which God relates himself to mankind. The accommodation, as we will see, expands, until the whole of Scripture as well as creation can be seen as a lisp of God to communicate his existence. If indeed the accommodated statement points to the hidden counsel of God, and unwarranted investigation into this counsel is not to be executed, what are its modalities, what does it mean, and where does it end?

§3.2 Calvin & accommodation: scholarly problems

The notion of accommodation has drawn attention only relatively recently in Calvin scholarship. What can probably be called the first in-depth analysis of the notion of accommodation in Calvin's theology, appeared in 1952. Edward Dowey's introductory chapter in his *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* features fourteen pages of discussion on the notion of the accommodation. In this chapter Dowey gives a clear definition of the process of accommodation in Calvin's work:

The term accommodation refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.⁹

In his exposition of the topic, Dowey interprets the accommodation as inherently concerned with the knowledge of God. It is the process of accommodation that enables the

⁹ Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 6.

unknowable God to be known. Furthermore, Dowey identified two forms in which the accommodation features in Calvin's theology: as the process by which God limits himself in order to communicate aspects of himself in spite of human finitude (the 'essential' limitations of human nature), and the accommodations to human sinfulness, in which the aspect of redemption is important (what Dowey calls the 'accidental' limitations).

A second perspective on Calvin's use of the term accommodation is presented in David Willis' paper on 'Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology'. In this approach to accommodation in Calvin's thought, Willis emphasizes the rhetorical roots of the concept, tracing it to classical rhetoricians and Augustine. And, more importantly, the notion of accommodation predominantly functions, according to Willis, as a persuasive and educational device. In the accommodated statement, the readers are pushed towards the 'maturity God wills for them'.¹⁰ Willis explicitly traces the function of the accommodated statement to a God who 'strategically adjusts his dealing with his people in order to inform, delight and move them', thereby placing the activity of God in a specific rhetoric mode.

This perspective can be seen to be deepened by Louis Battles' 1977 article 'God was accommodating himself to human capacity'. Battles also links the use of the notion of accommodation to both the early Church Fathers as well as to classical rhetorical authors such as Cato and Cicero. But, more importantly, Battles does not confine accommodation to a number of specific moments in Calvin's work. Battles sees accommodation in practically all aspects of Calvin's

¹⁰ quoted in E. David Willis, "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in *The Context of Contemporary Theology*, ed. Alexander J. McKelway and E. David Willis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 4; quoted in Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 4.

theology: in Calvin's dealings with Scripture, but also in creation, in civil government and, in the 'accommodated act par excellence', the Incarnation. Battles even sees the use of accommodation as one of the defining features of Calvin's theology:

In so espousing the divine rhetoric, Calvin was no innovator; before him went a cloud of patristic witnesses who, in response to the destructive critique of Scripture by pagan and heretic alike, had contended that God in revelation was adjusting the portrait of himself to the capacity of the human mind and heart. But, unlike an Origen, or an Augustine, or a John Chrysostom, or a Hilary of Poitiers, Calvin makes this principle a consistent basis for his handling not only of Scripture but of every avenue of relationship between God and man.¹¹

In the period between Dowey's uncovering of the notion and Battles' acknowledgement of its importance, it has also become clear that the notion of accommodation is quite hard to pin down: is it merely a rhetorical strategy that Calvin employs in certain aspects of Scripture, or is it central to the way God interacts with humanity? Battles' statement that the accommodation is characteristic of 'every avenue of relationship between God and man', is a telltale sign that accommodation tends to spill over into broader topics. Battles' analysis points to the fact that if, indeed, accommodation is *the* way God interacts with mankind, interpreting what the accommodated statement *means* becomes problematic.

A third perspective emerged at the end of the twentieth century. Starting with David F. Wright's articles on Calvin and accommodation, an attack has been opened on the connection between accommodation and rhetoric as it has

¹¹ Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, no. 31 (1977): 20.

been firmly put in place by Battles and Willis. Other authors as well have objected against the folding of Calvin into a rhetorical tradition. Jon Balsarak, for instance has, first in his article ‘The Accommodating Act Par Excellence? An Inquiry into the Incarnation and Calvin’s Understanding of Accommodation’ (2002), and then in the first monograph on accommodation *Divinity Compromised* (2006) expounded upon Calvin’s use of the term. In Balsarak’s view, seeing the Incarnation as the pinnacle, the prime example of accommodation, unjustly folds Calvin’s theology as a whole into the concept of accommodation:

the link between accommodation and rhetoric made by some scholars is one which seems to this author, at best, unproven and one which (as noted earlier) tends to insist on clarity and ease of definition which are defied by the data of Calvin’s *corpus*. Echoing one of the criticisms made against this position by Wright, it may be pointed out that all three of the major proponents of it (Willis, Battles and Millet) invariably narrow the idea of accommodation down to such a degree that it does not come close to resembling the broad and diverse concept which one finds in Calvin.¹²

Oddly enough, Balsarak objects not so much to the broad scope that is given to the concept of accommodation, but to the narrow definition that is given to the process of accommodation. Accommodation, according to Balsarak, is in Calvin’s theology such a pluriform phenomenon that subsuming it under rhetoric does it no justice. In the monograph *Divinity Compromised*, Balsarak painstakingly collects practically all citations in Calvin’s oeuvre in which accommodation is mentioned, and he attempts to characterize them all, all the time paying great attention to the individual occurrence and character of each citation. Balsarak concludes that the portrait that is painted in Calvin’s work of the accommodat-

¹² Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 9.

ing God, does not lend itself to unification:

Calvin is not only inclined to leave loose ends (as stated earlier) but also to emphasize points in such a way that there is a resulting tension present in his theology. So then is this tension merely stylistic or rhetorical? This is one of the numerous questions that remain. But for now, having considered matters briefly, we will close this discussion with a summary—considering these disparate images of Calvin’s accommodating God, we can say that (1) these images are probably not irreconcilable; (2) they are consistent with the general character of Calvin’s theology; and (3) the tension present in them is often the product, not so much of the biblical text, but of his own mind and method.¹³

Balsarak’s problems with the emphasis on the rhetorical structure in Calvin’s theology, is that it seems to presuppose a theological unity, both in the form of the accommodation as well as its role in Calvin’s theology as a whole, that, if scrutinized closely, simply is not there. The varying portraits of the accommodating God have so little in common, that a simple reference to rhetoric does not compute: ‘These images are probably not irreconcilable’. Balsarak leaves the door open to a future assessment that succeeds in further defining this ‘general character’ of Calvin’s theology. He concludes by offering vistas that so far have not been investigated yet. He names for instance the possible connection between Calvin’s legal training and the role of accommodation in his theology, or the influence of Calvin’s contemporaries on his use of the term.

What is important for us here is that the ‘tensions’ and ‘disparate images’ that Calvin’s use of the concept accommodation generate might be interesting itself, precisely because it resists a systematic coherent overview. Perhaps it is interest-

¹³ *Ibid.*, 196.

ing to see why these tensions occur, how are they generated by Calvin's textuality. The following analysis is not the next step in a search for a unifying principle of Calvin's theology, but much as we have seen with the *sensus divinitatis*, it is often in the rough patches of Calvin's theology, where the opinion of scholars can differ greatly, that we are offered insights into the textual mechanisms of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Before we can see what these rough patches are in Calvin's accommodations, we first need to take a closer look at the roots of the concept: its use in rhetoric and its use in apologetic exegesis in the Church Fathers. By tracing the use of this notion, we can better distinguish where Calvin's own appropriation of the concept begins.

§3.3 *Rhetoric & accommodation*

The notion of accommodation was used by the classic rhetoricians as part of the scheme in which one can prepare a good oration. The fivefold scheme of rhetorics - invention, disposition, elocution, pronunciation and memory - functions as steps on the way to deliver an oral discourse. Invention is the selection of the topics to be treated in the discourse, disposition is the correct (good) arrangement of these topics, elocution is the choice to use the voice that is most appropriate for the intended audience, pronunciation is the actual delivery of the speech, and memory is the imprinting in one's memory of the whole. In the work of, for instance, Cicero it becomes clear how the whole practice of rhetoric is in fact one complete act of accommodation. In *De Oratore*, Cicero states: 'this oratory of ours must be adapted to the ears of the multitude, for charming or urging their minds to approve of proposals, which are weighed in no goldsmith's balance, but in what I may call common scales'.¹⁴

14 Cicero, *De Oratore*, Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), (II. xxxviii), 158.

In selecting the topic, in the disposition of the arguments, in the selection of the right style, and in for instance the gesticulation involved in delivering the speech, the orator has to constantly keep the circumstances in mind. Now it can be said that this idea of accommodation has been used as early as the Church Fathers to explain the nature of the language of Scripture.

§3.4 *Augustine & Origen*

In book VI of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes in what way the simple and crude style of Scripture formed a stumbling block on his way to conversion. Its style was too crude to please the mind of a learned man like Augustine. He prefers the smooth rhetoric of Cicero over the simple style of Scripture. In book XII Augustine praises the ‘wonderful profundity of your eloquence’. In between these two instances Augustine has opened the door of interpretation by realizing that God in choosing such a crude and unpolished style is effectively used to appeal to readers of many different natures:

And it seemed to me all the more right that the authority of Scripture should be respected and accepted with the purest faith, because while all can read it with ease, it also has a deeper meaning in which its great secrets are locked away. Its plain language and simple style make it accessible to everyone, and yet it absorbs the attention of the learned men in the wide sweep of its net, and some pass safely through the narrow mesh and come to you. They are not many, but they would be fewer still if it were not that this book stands out alone so high a peak of authority and yet draws so great a throng in the embrace of its holy humility.¹⁵

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), (VI,5), 117; this theme is discussed in more detail in: Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

When, after his conversion, Augustine describes how Genesis 1.1 ‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth’ allows for a number of interpretations, one could imagine ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ to mean different things, how it generates multiple meanings that can all be different yet equally correct. In short, what is at stake for Augustine is the literal meaning of Scripture. Augustine emphasizes that the text itself is ‘copious’, in that it can absorb multiple interpretations through its simplicity:

The account left by Moses, whom you chose to pass it on to us, is like a spring which is all the more copious because it flows in a confined space. Its waters are carried by a maze of channels over a wider area than could be reached by any single stream drawing its water from the same source and flowing through many different places. In the same way, from the words of Moses, uttered in all brevity but destined to serve a host of preachers, there gush clear streams of truth from which each of us, though in more prolix and roundabout phrases, may derive a true explanation of the creation as best he is able, some choosing one, and some another interpretation.¹⁶

As an example, Augustine gives his favored example of time: how can Scripture speak of ‘in the beginning’ since God is eternal? It is because human nature being fallen as it is, ‘we can only speak of it as if it were first in order of time, although it is last in order of value’.¹⁷ Scripture thus speaks of eternity in the mode of human cognition, and man can, to a certain extent draw truths from this simple style. This is one of the major discoveries Augustine made in his relation to Scripture: that even though its style is simple and crude, in these words lies an abundance of truth (*copia*), that can appeal to both the learned and the unlearned, each to its

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, (XII,27), 303-304.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, (XII,29), 307.

capacity:

For my part I declare resolutely and with all my heart that if I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend. I would rather write in this way than impose a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others, even though they contained no falsehood that could give me offence.¹⁸

In chapter XIII Augustine takes this insight to task in an interpretation of Genesis. The attitude engenders an analysis of Scripture through the prism of the fourfold sense of Scripture. In a section discussing the multiplication of the creatures of the sea and the land, Augustine provides a literal interpretation, an allegorical, tropological and anagogical sense at work in the same passage, all contributing to a better though not exhaustive understanding of the text:

I believe that by this blessing you granted us the faculty and the power both to give expression in many different ways to things which we understand in one way only and to understand many different ways what we find written obscurely in one way' (...) consider the verse 'In the Beginning God made heaven and earth'. Scripture presents this truth to us in one way only, and there is only one way in which the words can be shaped by the tongue. But it may be understood in several different ways without falsification or error, because various interpretations, all of which are true in themselves, may be put upon it. The offspring of men increase and multiply in this way.¹⁹

18 *Ibid.*, (XII, 31), 308.

19 *Ibid.*, (XIII,24), 335.

In this way the fourfold sense of Scripture is a way of uncovering the secrets of Scripture that God, through adapting his word in Scripture, communicates to us. In an analogy with the relation between the Old and New Testament, Augustine explains his method:

It is not the Old Testament that is abolished in Christ but the concealing veil, so that it may be understood through Christ. That which without Christ is obscure and hidden is, as it were opened up [...Paul] does not say: "The Law or the Old Testament is abolished." It is not the case, therefore, that by the grace of the Lord that which was covered has been abolished as useless: rather, the covering which concealed useful truth has been removed. This is what happens to those who earnestly and piously, not proudly and wickedly, seek the sense of the Scriptures. To them is carefully demonstrated the order of events, the reasons for deeds and words, and the agreement of the Old Testament with the New, so that not a single point remains where there is not complete harmony. The secret truths are conveyed in figures that are to be brought to light by interpretation.²⁰

'Not a single point remains where there is not complete harmony', Augustine uses the idea that in the Old Testament, a more secret version of the same expression was present, that was brought to light by the advent of Christ. Like the discovery that Augustine made over the course of the *Confessions*, Scripture entails a simplicity that should be interpreted as being 'accommodated' to human capacity. In the discrepancies between the Old Testament and the New, lies a perfect continuity if one is prepared to see, for instance, the Law given to the Jews as a temporally bound accommodation of God's truth to the human situation. The notion of accom-

²⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 87.

modation can function to explain ‘secret truths’ of Scripture. The basis of this realization is the idea that God, through a merciful act of dispensation, gave signs for fallen mankind to decipher:

If we cleave to the eternal Creator we must necessarily be somehow effected by eternity. But because the soul, implicated in and overwhelmed by its sins, cannot by itself see and grasp this truth, if in human experience there were no intermediate stage whereby man might strive to rise above his earthly life and reach likeness to God, God in his ineffable mercy by a temporal dispensation (*temporali dispensatione*) has used the mutable creation, obedient however to his eternal laws, to remind the soul of its original and perfect nature, and so has come to the aid of individual men and indeed of the whole human race.²¹

The notion of *dispensatio* granted by God that speaks differently over time in order to better reach his audience, is presented in the *Confessiones* as the discovery that opened up the truth of Scripture:

I knew nothing of the true underlying justice which judges, not according to convention, but according to the truly equitable law of Almighty God. This is the law by which each age and place forms rules of conduct best suited to itself, although the law itself is always and everywhere the same and does not differ from place to place or from age to age. I did not see that by the sanction of this law Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the others whom God praised were just men, although they have been reckoned sinners by men who are not qualified to judge, for they try them by human standards and assess all the rights and wrongs of the human race by the measure of their own customs. Any-

²¹ Augustine, “De Vera Religione,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. John H. S. Burleigh (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 235.

one who does this behaves like a man who knows nothing about armour and cannot tell which piece is meant for which part of the body, so that he tries to cover his head with a shin-piece and fix a helmet on his foot, and then complains because they will not fit; (...) The people of whom I am speaking have the same sort of grievance when they hear that things which good men could do without sin in days gone by are not permitted in ours, and that God gave them one commandment and has given us another. He has done this because the times have demanded it, although men were subject to the same justice in those days as we are in these.²²

Without this realization the style of Scripture remains crude and simple, and the two Testaments remain irreconcilable. Augustine uses the notion of accommodation to explain the mysteries of Scripture, as well as securing the unity between the Old and New Testaments. For Augustine the notion of accommodation opened up Scripture to analysis, in which, through, for instance, an allegorical interpretation, the divine intention behind the accommodated statement could be approached.²³ Essential in Augustine's approach to Scripture is the idea that language can be both transient and sacred: 'For material symbols are nothing else than visible speech, which, though sacred, is changeable and transitory.'²⁴

From the early Church Fathers onwards, there is a strong apologetical element in the use of accommodation. For in-

²² Augustine, *Confessions*, (III, 7), 63.

²³ For a detailed analysis of the role of accommodation in the theology of Augustine, see chapter 4 "The Times May Change but not the Faith" of: Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993). 93-126.

²⁴ Augustine, "Contra Faustum Manicheum," in *Opera Omnia C.A.G. Electronic Edition.*, vol. 3 (Charlottesville, Virginia: Intelix Corporation, n.d.), 19,16; 512-513, http://library.nlx.com/xtf/view?docId=augustine_la/augustine_la.00.xml;chunk.id=div.augustine_la.pmpreface.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.augustine_la.pmpreface.1;brand=default&fragment_id=; cited in: Benin, *The Footprints of God*, 107.

stance, in an early example of Christian polemical writing, *Contra Celsum*, Origen defends himself against the attack that Christians believe literally in fables:

If Celsus had read the Scriptures in an impartial spirit, he would not have said that our writings are incapable of admitting an allegorical meaning. For from the prophetic Scriptures, in which historical events are recorded (not from the historical), it is possible to be convinced that the historical portions also were written with an allegorical purpose, and were most skillfully adapted not only to the multitude of the simpler believers, but also to the few who are able or willing to investigate matters in an intelligent spirit.²⁵

Here we see as well that the adaptation of Christian truth to the ears of the audience is an essential part in early Christian apologetics. It serves to link apparent logical incoherence to a variety of interpretations that are better suited to defend them. Also, the ‘simpler’ believers are accommodated, but at the same time, the learned reader can find in the adapted statement enough to investigate. The divine orator has clothed his truth in words that are understandable for fallen mankind, but this accommodation does not mean that the accommodated statement is not true. If the learned scholar zooms in on the statement, he can find ‘secrets’ through the apparatus of allegorical interpretation. We see here the idea that accommodation gives a depth to textuality that enables a text to allow authority on multiple levels. Although at this point the authority is hierarchical, the deeper one protrudes in the text the more of its secrets it yields. Furthermore, it serves as a tactic to smooth over rough spots in Scripture. The accommodated statement was also used, for instance, by Origen to counter the argument that the emotional changes in God are incompatible with his majesty and eternity:

²⁵ Origen, “Contra Celsum,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1885), (chapter XLIX), 520.

But as, in what follows, Celsus, not understanding that the language of Scripture regarding God is adapted to an anthropopathic point of view, ridicules those passages which speak of words of anger addressed to the ungodly, and of threatenings directed against sinners, we have to say that, as we ourselves, when talking with very young children, do not aim at exerting our own power of eloquence, but, adapting ourselves to the weakness of our charge, both say and do those things which may appear to us useful for the correction and improvement of the children as children, so the word of God appears to have dealt with the history, making the capacity of the hearers, and the benefit which they were to receive, the standard of the appropriateness of its announcements (regarding Him). And, generally, with regard to such a style of speaking about God, we find in the book of Deuteronomy the following: The Lord your God bore with your manners, as a man would bear with the manners of his son. It is, as it were, assuming the manners of a man in order to secure the advantage of men that the Scripture makes use of such expressions; for it would not have been suitable to the condition of the multitude, that what God had to say to them should be spoken by Him in a manner more befitting the majesty of His own person. And yet he who is anxious to attain a true understanding of holy Scripture, will discover the spiritual truths which are spoken by it to those who are called spiritual, by comparing the meaning of what is addressed to those of weaker mind with what is announced to such as are of acuter understanding, both meanings being frequently found in the same passage by him who is capable of comprehending it.²⁶

Here as well, we see the apologetic movement that is made possible by recourse to the accommodated statement combined with the idea that through learning one can ‘discover the spiritual truths’.

26 *Ibid.*, (Chapter LXXI), 529.

The church father that used the concept accommodation most abundantly is Chrysostom.²⁷ In his *Discourse on Virginity* (382-392) Chrysostom uses a similar argument to claim the unity of the Testaments, by stating that the Israelites of the Old Testament were like children to whom God spoke in a childish tone:

Although the new commandments are superior to the old, the aim of the lawgiver is the same. What is it? To reduce the baseness of our soul and to lead it to perfect virtue. Therefore, if God had been anxious not to dictate obligations greater than the former ones but to leave things eternally the same and never to release men from that inferior state, he completely contradicted himself. If at the beginning, in fact, when the human race was more childlike, God had prescribed this regimented sort of life, we would never have accepted it with moderation but would have totally jeopardized our salvation through immoderation.²⁸

In the Old Testament God spoke to the Israelites as if they were children. This explains the sacrifices and dietary laws of the Old Testament: ‘dietary laws, the acceptance of some foods while rejecting others, were a Jewish weakness’.²⁹ This fragment does not only show the use of accommodation as apologetic mechanism. It also includes a pedagogical element: through the accommodated statement God urges man to be moderate, and to accept the right meaning and comportment that lies in Scripture. In explaining Isaiah 6: 1-2, where Isaiah sees God in a vision surrounded by angels that are covering their faces with their wings, Chrysostom emphasizes that an apparent logical incoherence is in fact a pedagogical accommodation:

²⁷ Balserek in his *Divinity Compromised* states that Chrysostom is the theologian that uses the concept of accommodation most frequently, only surpassed by John Calvin.

²⁸ Quoted in: Benin, *The Footprints of God*, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

Why tell me, do they stretch forth their wings and cover their faces? For what other reason than that they cannot endure the sparkling flashes nor the lightning which shines from the throne? Yet they did not see the pure light itself nor the pure essence itself. What they saw was a condescension (*sygkatabasis*) accommodated to their nature. What is this condescension? It is when God appears and makes himself known not as he is, but in the way one incapable of beholding him is able to look upon him. In this way God reveals himself proportionally to the weakness of those who behold him.³⁰

Why would angels cover their faces whereas Isaiah could clearly see God on his throne? The *sygkatabasis*, the condescension of God towards man for mankind's benefit, is 'the way one incapable of beholding him is able to look upon him'. Whereas for Origen, the accommodated act signified the unfolding on multiple levels of secret meanings of Scripture, for Chrysostom, there is here a deep connection between the notion of accommodation and the very work of salvation inherent in Christian religion. It is for Chrysostom the condescension that makes it possible that mankind can look upon God so as to acquire knowledge of God. It becomes for Chrysostom an important cornerstone for the whole of theology, and it has been a major influential interpretative device ever since.

Since the early Church Fathers, the rhetorical notion of accommodation has given an impetus to apologetic interpretations of Scripture. It functions as both a way to 'open up' Scripture to different layers of analysis, but it gives these different layers a distinctive pedagogical twist: God not only accommodated himself in order to express information about himself, he also actively meant for these accommodated statements to have an ethical push for the reader to adhere to the correct way of living. The accommodation functions,

30 Ibid., 68.

then, predominantly as an impetus to inquire further and deeper into the text.

Calvin's use of the accommodated statement displays a lot of similarities with earlier uses. These similarities are to be found predominantly on the rhetorical level. The similarities both in life-style as well as in attitude towards Scripture between Augustine and Calvin are striking. The crude and simple style of Scripture was a stumbling block for the classically trained intellectual Augustine. For Calvin, his career of letters started as a lawyer who published a commentary on Seneca. Undoubtedly both authors had read about the rhetorical notion of accommodation before their conversions. In Calvin's thought the classical elements of earlier uses of accommodation mentioned above are all present. In *Institutes* I.viii.1 Calvin reiterates the problem that Augustine had wrestled with more than ten centuries before. Calvin describes the style of Scripture as characterized at times by 'simplicity, almost bordering on rudeness' that nonetheless 'makes a deeper impression than the loftiest flights of oratory':

Read Demostenes, or Cicero, read Plato, Aristotle, or any other of that class: you will, I admit, feel wonderfully allured, pleased, moved, enchanted; but turn from them to the reading of the sacred volume, and whether you will or not, it will so affect you, so pierce your heart, so work its way into your very marrow, that, in comparison of the impression so produced, that of orators and philosophers will almost disappear.³¹

This rudeness has nothing to do with a lack of eloquence: 'the Holy Spirit was pleased to show that it was not from want of eloquence he in other instances used a rude and

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I.viii.1), 75.

homely style'.³²

However, Calvin immediately adds that this adaptation to the human crudeness has nothing to do with a fictive aspect of Scripture. Nor does Calvin take this crudeness, as did Augustine, as a departing point for the discovery of hidden treasures. Calvin traces Scripture back to the covenant with Abraham and states that qua historical validity, there is no text that surpasses Scripture: 'Now if Moses (who is so much earlier than all other writers) traces the tradition of his doctrine from so remote a period, it is obvious how far the Holy Scriptures must, in point of antiquity, surpass all other writers'.³³ Furthermore, with regards to the miracles that Moses relates, Calvin speaks that these should be taken literally and not figuratively: 'Moses published all these things in the assembly of the people. How, then, could he possibly impose on the very eyewitness of what was done?'³⁴ We will see time and time again that Calvin considers the accommodated statement as a device that is akin to rhetoric, but he refuses to depart on a search for the deeper meaning; the fourfold interpretation is refused, often in favor of a defense of the literal interpretation.

§3.5 *Turretini and Calvin on accommodation*

Whereas the pedigree of the notion of accommodation is predominantly geared towards either metaphorical or analogical interpretations of seemingly problematic parts of Scripture, in the age after the Reformation, it became aligned with reason in order to align Scripture with the rise of scientific thought. Accommodation came to serve as a tool to square seemingly unscientific claims in the Bible with the progress of science. As an example of this, we will discuss the work of Jean-Alphonse Turretini (1671-1737). In their

³² Ibid., (I,viii,2), 75/76.

³³ Ibid., (I, viii,3), 76.

³⁴ Ibid., (I,viii,5), 77.

article *Jean-Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?* Martin L. Klauber and Glenn S. Sunshine identify Turretini as one of the theologians who moved Geneva towards the Enlightenment, away from orthodoxy:

Turretini's attempt to provide a rational basis for orthodoxy eventually led the Reformed movement in Geneva away from orthodoxy and squarely into the tradition of the Enlightenment.³⁵

Turretini became professor of church history at the Geneva Academy in 1697, and rector in 1701, to conclude his career as professor of theology, a post that he accepted in 1705. Turretini wrote in a time when the Cartesian standard was accepted as a way of thinking about the world, and he tried to square its demands of scientific rational clarity with Scripture, by the use of the concept of accommodation. Much like Calvin, Turretini argued that the Old Testament authors did not reveal the accurate nature of creation, because if God had so chosen, the Hebrew people would not have been able to understand it.

In a similar vein, Calvin explains the fact that Moses discussed the moon as one of the two great lights that God created (Gen 1:16):

Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand (...).Had he spoken of things generally unknown, the uneducated might have

³⁵ Glenn S. Sunshine and Martin L. Klauber, "Jean Alphonse Turretini on Accommodation and Biblical Error: Calvinist or Socinian?" *Calvin Theological Journal*, no. 25 (1990): 27.

pleaded in excuse that such subjects were beyond their capacity. Lastly since the Spirit of God here opens a common school for all, it is not surprising that he should chiefly choose those subjects which would be intelligible to all. If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for to the sight it appears differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage.³⁶

For Calvin as for Turretini, the Biblical reference to the moon shining, and to the moon being part of the two lights that God created, are part of an accommodated statement that is meant to communicate, at a time when certain knowledge was not yet available, the splendor of God. However, for Calvin, it is important to stress that ‘Moses, accommodating himself to the rudeness of the common folk, mentions in the history of Creation no other works of God than those which show themselves to our own eyes’.³⁷ It is important to note here that for Calvin Moses very well knew what was really happening, but in order to be understood, he chose to speak in the language of the times. Yet, it remains important for Calvin to stress that, as far as perception is concerned, Moses did not speak falsely:

Nor, in truth was he ignorant of the fact, that the moon had not sufficient brightness to enlighten the earth, unless it borrowed from the sun; but he deemed it enough to declare what we all may plainly perceive, that the moon is a dispenser of light to us.³⁸

For Turretini as well, the visions on Creation that are offered in Genesis are part of an accommodation that God

36 John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 41.

37 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I. xiv,3), 143.

38 Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 1:41.

gave to an unknowing civilization. However, for Turretini accommodation becomes a part of justifying the Bible in an age of science: in ensuring that where the Bible contradicted reason, the literal account should be given up in favor of a moralistic account. As such, Turretini was able to square the increasing claims at the end of the seventeenth century that the Biblical account of creation ran counter to common sense. For Turretini it became a task to defend the spiritual value of religion over and against scientific progress. As Turretini emphasizes when he discusses the Old Testament, we are now ‘blessed’ with ‘more complete and solid principle of wisdom’:

we [now] know the cause and the mystery of the legal rites; we know that they were the rudiments of a puerile age; we know that they were shadows of good things to come, whose body is Christ, and we are blessed with more complete and solid principles of wisdom, with the wisdom of men, or of the perfect, which succeeded in the place of former rude dispensation.³⁹

In the age of Descartes, the underlying attitude towards the notion of accommodation changed inherently. From a form of explaining the mode of revelation that is explicitly geared towards confronting the reader with his own imperfections, the accommodated statement becomes a tool to square Scripture with current knowledge, that is deemed superior and ‘more complete’. Whereas Calvin used the notion of accommodation to reconcile seeming contradictions, in the work of Turretini, passages that create problems are disqualified. For instance, Turretini would focus on those pas-

39 Jean Alphonse Turretini, *Joh. Alphonsi Turretini Dilucidationes Philosophico-Theologico-Dogmatico-Moralis Quam Revelatae Demonstrantur ...: Acc I. Orationes ... II. commercium Epistolicum Inter Regem Borussiae Frideric I. Et Pastores Genevenses De Syncretismo Protestantium*, 1748, 2.5.20; cited in: Sunshine and Klauber, “Jean Alphonse Turretini on Accommodation and Biblical Error: Calvinist or Socinian?,” 23.

sages that offer external marks for the truth of Scripture, but he would relegate the passages where irrational or illogical information is offered to the realm of the pedagogical. This obtains especially for the Old Testament, and more specifically, for Genesis. Now, one option would be to try to square science and Scripture. Michael Heyd, in his article 'Un Role Nouveau pour la Science', states that it was Turretini's use of the notion of accommodation that enabled him to separate religion and science. In Turretini's view, Scripture is simply not a scientific textbook. Those statements that fly in the face of science, should be read as accommodations that should lead the reader to live a virtuous life. To put it simply, from a specific textual challenge to think literal truth and descriptive roughness together in the work of Calvin, accommodation became a tool to disqualify truth-claims of Scripture in favor of a new form of metaphorical interpretation. Where for Calvin the accommodated statement brought to light human iniquity, for Turretini it brought to light that inconsistencies in Scripture should not be taken at face value but should be seen as moralistic illustrations of a point.

This implies a much greater faith in reason than Calvin could ever warrant. Whereas for Calvin the accommodated statement undermines faith in reason, for Turretini it is exactly the challenge to establish a rational defense of religion against rational arguments. Turretini predominantly focuses on offering proofs for the non-believer, whereas Calvin focuses on the movement the text inspires. While Turretini's attitude leads to rationalist discussions about whether what is happening in Scripture is rationally admissible, for Calvin *ratio* should predominantly undermine itself. Whereas Turretini's attitude opened the way to such discussions of the rational reality of God's role in nature and in science, for Calvin this was never a doubt nor a discussion; the reflection on nature and science functioned as a theater of his wisdom, whereas for Turretini reason needed to vouch for the

coherence of this theater. Whereas for Turretini, more importantly, the reader, whether he be Calvinist, deist or atheist, the access to the rational validity of Scripture remains the same, for Calvin the accommodated statement separates those who can understand from those who cannot understand. Rational explanation has little to do with this emotive access to the text.

As we have seen, the notion of accommodation in Calvin does not function as a rebuttal of scientific claims of Scripture. Moses' description of the moon that, contrary to the laws of nature, refused to shine does not function for Calvin as an incorrect statement, but it should instead be seen as an act of accommodation; true, but aimed at moving the audience and the reader. As such, Calvin is not modern, like Turretini, but he does not belong to the earlier tradition, that used accommodation as an explanation of allegorical, accessible though elitist truth, either. Instead what we have is a peculiar calvinian notion of accommodation: we cannot know what God's hidden counsels exactly are, but we are led to the realization that we should doubt ourselves. Let us focus a little bit more on this peculiar use of accommodation that characterizes Calvin as a writer standing on the fluid brink of two ages.

§3.6 Scripture & logical inconsistencies

Calvin's theological appraisal of Scripture does not offer an easy system of access to this knowledge of God. Compared to the systematic commentaries of, for instance, Melancthon, Calvin's exegetical work often restrained itself from providing a running commentary, trying to stay as close to the text as he could, without forcing the rhythm of Scripture into a dogmatic pattern that smoothed out the creases through an appeal to 'human inventions'. As a result, theologians have unsuccessfully sought for, and demanded to find,

the systematic principle behind Calvin's theology. As Wendel puts it:

It would be better, we think, to confess that Calvin's is not a closed system elaborated around a central idea, but that it draws together, one after another, a whole series of Biblical ideas, some of which can only with difficulty be logically reconciled. As he developed them in turn, the author of the *Institutes* was doubtless striving to bring them into harmony by some sort of application of the formal method taught in the schools; that is, by expounding the opposed conceptions one after the other and showing that they are joined together in a higher principle. At other times the breach of logic, to which he himself takes good care to call attention to by an 'as though', is passed off as merely apparent, as an effect of the contrast between the human and divine points of view. (...) What have been called the 'paradoxes' of Calvin remain.⁴⁰

Wendel draws out a number of these paradoxes: man's greatness and his misery, the value attached to earthly goods and the contempt for them, the presence of Christ at the right hand of God as well as his presence in the sacrament. In Calvin's theology, fidelity to Scripture did not mean creating a logical system out of the logical paradoxes rising up out of Scripture: 'One could even say that his fidelity is proved by the fact that he allowed them to remain' (359). It is the fidelity to Scripture that leads to theology that allows paradoxes to subsist. Wendel furthermore draws attention to a remarkable aspect of Calvin's relation to Scripture: the breaches of logic are often explicitly called into attention by Calvin through use of an 'as though'. God speaks as though he lisps, as we have seen in the quote opening this chapter.

40 Wendel, *Calvin*, 358.

Calvin frequently points to apparent contradictions in the text, and, as Wendel states, without solving them, without folding them in a logical coherent systematic theology. Calvin will frequently point to incongruities in the text, suggesting a degree of coherence but refusing to bring this coherence down into his commentary. As a typical example of this ‘as though’, let us take the problematic of change in God’s behavior towards men:

We therefore see that God is described to us in two ways (dupliciter), namely, in his word, and in his hidden counsel. With regard to his secret counsel, I have already said that God is always like himself and is not subject to any of our feelings. But with regard to the teaching of his word, which is accommodated to our capacities, God is now angry with us, and then, as though he were pacified, he offers pardon and is propitious to us. Such is the repentance of God.⁴¹

In order to reconcile the change of God’s behavior from a state of satisfaction to a state of anger, Calvin reminds the reader that God is portrayed *as though* he changed his feelings, in order to bring about a change in us. Or, as Calvin describes it in the *Institutes*:

Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us. Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he testifies that he is angry towards sinners. Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience.⁴²

41 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen, vol. III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 75.

42 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I, xvii,13), 195/196.

Calvin makes the clear distinction between God as he is (*quid sit Deus*), and how he is for us (*qualis sit Deus*), between God as he is in his Word and as he is in his ‘secret counsel’. God appears wily insofar as he chose to present himself in such a manner in Scripture, but this does not point to a wily God who changes his secret counsel. Now this distinction is reminiscent of the debate about whether the power of God be ordained, or absolute. The absolute power of God, *potentia absoluta*, points to a God who is capable of changing his will as he pleases, whereas the *potentia ordinata* refers to a more stable God who is forced by his own decrees to be trustworthy and more stable, albeit, of course, still omnipotent. The position that emphasizes the things that God could have done, has led to such speculations whether God could have incarnated in a cucumber or a donkey. Whereas the position that emphasizes the ordained power of God focuses on the covenant that God made with creation. Both positions lead to speculation on God’s nature, and they are aimed at solving, in a logically sound way, the problem of God’s omnipotence with his activity in creation. Yet Calvin makes it clear that his use of the ‘as though’ and of the accommodated statement has little truck with making systematic claims about the nature of God:

As if Paul did not lay a curb on perverse curiosity when after speaking of the redemption obtained by Christ, he bids us “avoid foolish questions,” (Tit. 3:9). To such insanity have some proceeded in their preposterous eagerness to seem acute, that they have made it a question whether the Son of God might not have assumed the nature of an ass.⁴³

Continuously in his work, Calvin refuses to refer his own work on the omnipotence of God to the *potentia ordinata* or *absoluta* distinction. Although Calvin regularly hints at the

43 Ibid., (II, xii, 5), 405.

fact that, of course, God does not change but that his counsel is for ever fixed at the beginning of time, yet at the same time speculation what God could have done, or whether God is forced to do what he does by the laws of logic, or of non-contradiction, is for Calvin unwarranted. Time and again, Calvin refers the reader back to what is simply there, in order to remind the reader that Scripture is there not to promote speculation but to ‘reflect upon our own iniquity’. What remains the most important factor for Calvin is that God’s behavior towards mankind is effectuated for our benefit. For Calvin the remark that God speaks in terminology of change and emotion, does not invite systematic speculation about the nature of God nor does it invite speculation of a systematic nature into what the accommodated statement really means. The accommodated statement as a means to account for changes in God’s behavior should in no way be used for speculation about the hidden counsel of God.

Jon Balsarak, taking a stand in the debate whether Calvin was in fact part of the *potentia ordinata* / *potentia absoluta* debate, states that the distinction in Calvin’s work is subsumed by the accommodated statement. In a discussion of Calvin’s interpretation of Genesis:

Here, then, Calvin again describes God as one who had options at his disposal which he did not choose to bring into effect—he could have made the earth so that it possessed its own strength without requiring rain to replenish it; he could have caused the heavens to yield rain without it rising from the earth, and so forth. Here, interestingly, Calvin asserts an ‘operational’ understanding of the *potentia absoluta*, noting that God could work outside of the normal means he ordained if he saw fit to do so. And here, Calvin again describes God as one who chose *de potentia ordinata* to accommodate in his establishing of these aspects of the created order. Hence accommodation and the ordained power of God are, again, linked in such a way that God’s decision to ordain

was, for him, a decision to accommodate.⁴⁴

Calvin now and then affirms that God could do anything he pleases, yet at other times he states that God is unchangeable and trustworthy. But, as Balsarak as well as Wendel note, what lies underneath is not a logical coherence but an attempt to take Scripture at face value, yet combining human language with divine truth. What Calvin emphasizes in the accommodated statement is that it is spoken thus for the benefit of our lowly condition. At times Calvin refers to this language as ‘rough’, ‘crude’ (*rustis*), or he describes God as taking on ‘a character not his own.’⁴⁵ This, then, is the primal tension in the accommodated statement for Calvin: in the accommodated statement one is not to take the word at face value, yet it should not lead to vain speculation about the author’s intentions, since the counsel of God remains hidden for the sinful reader. At the same time, all the figures of roughness notwithstanding, the accommodated statement is nonetheless true:

Such modes of expression are accommodated to our capacity, that we may the better understand how miserable and calamitous our condition is without Christ. For

⁴⁴ Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 154.

⁴⁵ Commenting on Micah 6:3 ‘O my people, what have I done unto thee?’, Calvin states: ‘Here God, in the first place, offers to give a reason, if he was accused of any thing. It seems indeed unbecoming the character of God, that he should be thus ready as one guilty to clear himself: but this is said by way of concession; for the Prophet could not otherwise express, that nothing that deserved blame could be found in God. It is a personification, by which a character; not his own, is ascribed to God. It ought not therefore to appear inconsistent, that the Lord stands forth here, and is prepared to hear any accusation the people might have, that he might give an answer, *My people! what have I done?* By using this kind expression, my people, he renders double their wickedness; for God here descends from his own elevation, and not only addresses his people, in a paternal manner, but stands as it were on the opposite side, and is prepared, if the people had anything to say, to give answer to it, so that they might mutually discuss the question, as it is usually done by friends’. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, III: 224.

were it not said in clear terms, that Divine wrath, and vengeance, and eternal death, lay upon us, we should be less sensible of our wretchedness without the mercy of God, and less disposed to value the blessing of deliverance. (...) In short, since our mind cannot lay hold of life through the mercy of God with sufficient eagerness, or receive it with becoming gratitude, unless previously impressed with fear of the Divine anger, and dismayed at the thought of eternal death, we are so instructed by divine truth, as to perceive that without Christ God is in a manner hostile to us, and has his arm raised for our destruction. Thus taught, we look to Christ alone for divine favor and paternal love. Though this is said in accommodation to the weakness of our capacity, it is not said falsely.⁴⁶

Or, as Paul Helm formulates it: ‘The language of the divine attributes is not nominal, but real; it gives us real knowledge of God, but it is folly to attempt to go behind or beyond these attributes to know God as he is in himself. For only God can know himself’.⁴⁷ As we shall see, this stance goes beyond the call to see Scriptural language about God as metaphorical. The accommodated statement unrolls itself as instances of divine truth under the auspices of temporality, in order to move the believer towards the right reflection. The emphasis on movement underlies Calvin’s resistance to the interpretation of the accommodated statement as allegorical or metaphorical, or metaphysical.

We will see that Calvin frequently walks a tightrope between literal faith in Scripture and the undermining of faith in the human capacity to truly receive the secrets of Scripture. This delicate balance pushes Calvin at times to depart from logical coherence, and, furthermore, it engenders an attitude towards Scripture that pervades his whole work: the reader is not to deduce logical meaning, nor systematic reflections

46 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (II, xvi,2/3), 435.

47 Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 196.

from these passages. Instead he should focus on the emotive aspect: God spoke in that manner in order to bring about a change in us.

The calvinian approach to the literal truth of Scripture is therefore not merely a logical approach: the accommodated statement is partly such an interesting topic precisely because Calvin points to the fact that it is supposed to bring about a reflection about our iniquity. The cure to this is not a metaphorical explanation, nor is it a translation of the accommodated statement into a truth that is not accommodated. The accommodated statement is said ‘in accommodation to our weakness of our capacity, [but] it is not said falsely’. This refusal to step out of the accommodated statement towards a more formal language that would explain what the accommodated statement ‘really means’, whilst at the same time ascribing it a certain descriptive roughness, makes it such a fascinating interpretative mechanism. For, if indeed the accommodated statement is non-descriptive truth, what are the modalities of this truth, what change is it supposed to bring about, and who is to warrant the content of the statement? Or as Helm states:

For Calvin neither the philosophers nor the theologians occupy a privileged position with regard to thought and language about God. God ‘lisps’ or ‘accommodates’ himself not only to children in the nursery, or to those who have no particular intellectual aptitude for metaphorical reflection. He speaks in this way to us all, condescending from his loftiness to make himself known to us in familiar terms.⁴⁸

There is perhaps, Chrysostom excepted, not a single theologian that used the notion of accommodation so extensively as Calvin did. Although he undoubtedly found inspiration

48 *Ibid.*, 208.

for the use of this notion through both his knowledge of rhetoric as well as his knowledge of the Church Fathers, and especially Origen and Augustine, Calvin nonetheless employed it to tackle problems specific to his times, and to his own intra-theological predicaments. Calvin's approach to Scripture is to a large extent characterized by what can be called a sensitivity to the rhetorical capacity of Scripture. At the same time his emphasis on human iniquity stopped him from applying this notion of rhetorical accommodation to an interpretation of Scripture that leads to an analysis of the fourfold senses. This approach distinguishes Calvin from much of the traditional use of accommodation. At the same time, at the other end of the Reformation, Calvin's attitude towards Scripture cannot be subsumed under a modern notion of accommodation in which accommodation is used to solve logical incongruities in Scripture. Calvin was too much a staunch believer in the literal truth of Scripture to allow for any diminishment of its truth. We will see that Calvin refuses to depart from the literal truth of Scripture and venture into allegorical or metaphorical interpretation. Calvin's notion of accommodation falls between scholastic assessments of allegorical, tropological pluriformity of meaning and modern attempts to align religion with (scientific) reason. One could say that Calvin pushed fidelity to Scripture to the maximum, attempting to refrain from infesting Scripture with human inventions while at the same time not renouncing the truth-claim of Scripture. In this way, a typical calvinian tension lies at the very heart of his interaction with Scripture.

And, what is more important, the interaction with Scripture tends, as we have seen in the analyses by Battles, Balserak, and Wendel, to spill over into Calvin's theology and the textuality in which he presents his theology. For the cornerstone of dogma, Scripture, is characterized by Calvin as 'accommodated'. This means a number of things: first of all, one is to realize that God's actions are not inherently true, but

accommodated to our capacity; furthermore, this, according to Calvin, should not lead us to chase after the ‘hidden counsel’ of God, but it should make us reflect upon our own shortcomings. The results of this for the *Institutes* are possibly tremendous. Let us recall the description Calvin gave of the *Institutes*:

a summary (*summa*) of religion in all its parts, and digested in an order which will make it easy for any one, who rightly comprehends it, to ascertain both what he ought chiefly to look for in Scripture, and also to what head he ought to refer whatever is contained in it.⁴⁹

Whereas traditional summaries are able to provide textual security, and a description of what to look for in Scripture (see the comparison with Thomas and Melancthon above), in the case of the accommodated statement, the meaning of it is hidden from sight. What is more, the fluid boundaries of accommodation risk exploding the potential of textuality itself to reach the same level of accommodation of Scripture. What is left, in short, is a text that, through its claims to the literal, yet accommodated, meaning of Scripture, creates the ‘fathomless unnerving and ubiquitous textual complexity’ that we saw James Simpson pointing to above. For what Calvin hints at time and again is that the experience, and not the descriptive content of the accommodated statement, counts. As such the accommodation stands for a hinted-at interaction with Scripture, and not, as we have seen with Augustine and Origen, as a tool with which deeper layers of meaning can be uncovered.

49 “Epistle to the Reader”, Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 25.

§3.7 Calvin & accommodation: expanding accommodation

Accommodation in Calvin is not used to escape from a literal account of Scripture. Yet at the same time, retaining this sense of Scripture and of accommodation while refusing to yield Scripture to reason, creates a form of accommodation that is hard to keep under control. Just as Turretini's use of accommodation pointed towards a central role of reason as the decisive common factor, for Calvin the common denominator was the impregnable mystery of God in all elements of creation. Calvin used the notion of accommodation in a great variety of places throughout his work. One could even say that the ever deeper use of accommodation functions as a number of concentric circles in Calvin's work: moving outwards, ever more outwards until Calvin's text itself (as well) is also taken up in this accommodation.

Let us chart the different uses of accommodation in Calvin's theology. As we have seen in our discussion of scholarly appraisal, the sheer number and variety in form of the examples of accommodation have given rise to the discussion of what the borders of the concept exactly are. From the outset of the discussion of accommodation, in Doney's first chapter of his *Calvin and the Knowledge of God*, it was asserted that accommodation was the most basic element in Calvin's theology. This standpoint was further developed by Wright when he stated that 'the motif, or cluster of motifs, of divine accommodation takes us to the heart of Calvin's theology.'⁵⁰ At the same time, Jon Balsarak, in his monograph on Calvin's use of the notion of accommodation, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin*, challenges the idea that there exists such a thing as a coherent heart of Calvin's theology, and he uses much of his book to complicate any simple references to rhetoric, or classical

⁵⁰ David F. Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis*, ed. W.H. Neuser and B.G. Armstrong (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 18.

influences. What Balsarak concludes with is a pluriform but widespread usage of accommodation in Calvin's theology, whose boundaries are hard to define. Balsarak suggests a number of vistas that might resolve this, but in general the monograph ends with an open ending. The exact definition and limits of accommodation remain a mystery in Calvin.

Although Balsarak offers strong arguments, and above all, an extensive enumeration of accommodated instances in Calvin's thought, he does not quite escape the search for boundaries in Calvin's thought. By suggesting that the influence might have come from other sources than found until now, the idea of coherence is still strong in Balsarak's *Divinity Compromised*. Since, in this study, I am not interested in finding out the logical key to Calvin's writings, but instead in tracing a calvinian form of textuality, this logical disparity might not necessarily pose a problem.

In short, we started out with a notion of accommodation that was meant to smooth the creases of logical incoherence (How can God be angry at one point in time and benevolent at another?), but we have seen that the notion of accommodation is in fact hard to circumscribe or contain. From the accommodated statement, we see that Calvin extends its use to knowledge about God in general.

Before we continue, let us take a look at the various instances of Calvin's use of the notion accommodation:

In his study Dowey states that there are two types of accommodation at work in Calvin's thought: those that are structurally, ontologically, necessary, and the historical accommodation to human sinfulness. Balsarak suggests refining the model by including two more categories: not only human beings as creatures (roughly the same as Dowey's accommodation generated towards the finiteness of human nature);

human beings as sinners; as well as accommodation specifically aimed at Israel as a primitive nation (a distinction derived from Willis), and a fourth; human beings as either the wicked or the godly. I will discuss these categories:

- Human sinfulness:

This category is more historical. It pertains to specific accommodations geared towards overcoming such emotional weaknesses as sluggishness, lethargy, fear, grief, doubt, willfulness and hypocrisy. For instance, Calvin discusses the apparition of angels in Scripture, and warns against the attribution of any agency to angelic messengers:

This danger we will happily avoid, if we consider why it is that God, instead of acting directly without their agency, is wont to employ it in manifesting his power, providing for the safety of his people, and imparting the gifts of his beneficence. This he certainly does not from necessity, as if he were unable to dispense with them. (...)Therefore, when he employs them, it is as a help to our weakness, that nothing may be wanted to elevate our hopes or strengthen our confidence. It ought indeed, to be sufficient for us that the Lord declares himself to be our protector. But when we see ourselves beset by so many perils, so many injuries, so many kinds of enemies, such is our frailty and effeminacy, that we might at times be filled with alarm, or driven to despair, did not the Lord proclaim his gracious presence by some means in accordance with our feeble capacities.⁵¹

The overarching element in this notion is the idea that humans are incidentally interpellated by God in order to bring about a specific event or change. It is used to describe for instance the changing behavior of God with relation to humans, whether they are Old Testament-Israelites or New

51 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I, xiv,11), 149.

Testament apostles. The events and miracles of the Bible fall under this category, and it should be kept in mind that these events existed in time, and for that specific time's sake.

- Human creatureliness:

God transfers to himself what properly does not belong to him, for he does not delight himself after the manner of men when he takes vengeance on wickedness; but we know that God's judgment cannot be comprehended, unless he puts on the character of man, and in some manner transforms himself.⁵²

Because of the inherent gap between man and God, the only knowledge of God that we can form is under the guise of divine accommodation to a human, creaturely form. This broad category of accommodation includes according to Dowey not only the act of creation itself, but also the incarnation, the sacraments as well as the whole of Scripture. This category of accommodation is focused predominantly on the whole aim of creation being the praising of God. Now Balsarak suggests a criticism of Dowey's twofold distinction:

The inclusion of knowledge in this group as well as in the first group bears witness to the difficulty inherent in any attempt to distinguish between different kinds of *captus*. It was this which moved us to criticize, albeit mildly, Professor Dowey for distinguishing in too tidy a manner between different expressions of human capacity.⁵³

⁵² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Meyers (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 138.

⁵³ Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 55.

According to Balsarak, the myriad of examples of accommodation in Calvin's work defy easy applications to a two-fold framework because the categories are both geared towards knowledge. The two categories, - God stooping in specific Scriptural passages because of our iniquity, and God stooping in general because of our iniquity - are linked; what unifies all these forms of accommodation is the perceived effect they have on the human mind. The accommodated statement, whether it be creation in general, or instances of divine action, are both a 'stooping', a 'lispings' from the side of God, to move the human subject. Therefore, although there might be no unifying aspect to the accommodated statements, in the sense that a logical coherent factor might be hard to find, one can point to a certain circular aspect in the accommodated statement: the accommodation might not point to a logical point outside of Scripture, in the sense that it imposes a dogmatic structure on the text, but it aims to retain the educatory, pedagogic element of Scripture without interfering with it from a human perspective. Balsarak points to the blatant fact that, seen in this light, accommodation extends, spreads out, from a historical event to the entire creation itself. Let us take a look at Calvin's commentary on Genesis 1:5:

God himself took the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of human-kind. We slightly pass over the infinite glory of God, which shines forth here; from whence does this arise but from our excessive dullness in considering his greatness? In the meantime, the vanity of our minds carries us away elsewhere. For the correction of this, God applied the most suitable remedy when he distributed the creation of the world into successive portions, that he might fix our attention, and compel us, as if he laid his hand upon us, to pause and to reflect.⁵⁴

54 Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 1:36.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin emphasizes this point even more clearly:

God himself has shown by the order of creation that he created all things for humankind's sake. For it is not without significance that he divided the making of the universe into six days, even though it would have been no more difficult for him to have completed in one moment the whole work together in all its details than to arrive at its completion gradually by a procession of this sort.⁵⁵

Not only does Calvin defend the literal meaning of the creation of the earth in six days. More importantly, Calvin also states that the whole of creation was explicitly created for the 'benefit of mankind'. Now Scripture, or better put, the spiritual movement that Scripture engenders in the reader, spills over into the natural world to such an extent that it is not reason that is the access to God's wisdom, but the marvel of his accommodating gesture that ordained the world to be.

Balserak underlines that this implies a break with the *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* distinction. He even claims that the notion of the accommodation engulfs the distinction in one act of accommodation:

Grappling with the details of God's ordaining of the structures of creation and redemption, he often comments on or alludes to the distinction between the absolute and ordered power of God- normally along with a range of related ideas such as God's freedom, the contingent character of these orders, God's commitment to them, his use of means and the like – and links God's decision to ordain to his decision to accommodate.⁵⁶

55 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I.xiv,22), 157.

56 Balserak, *Divinity Compromised*, 150.

As a result, according to Balsarak, Calvin does not discuss the difference between ordained and absolute power often. Indeed he refutes it as a ‘perverse ingenuity’.⁵⁷ Instead Calvin prefers to refer to the act of accommodation that underlies the created order. In the example of the span of six days in which God created the earth, Calvin states that God ordained the creation of the universe in six days ‘for human-kind’s sake’, even though ‘it would have been no more difficult for him to have completed in one moment the whole work altogether’. However, this realization should not lead to speculation on what God could or could not have done:

Let us rather conclude that God himself took the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men. We slightly pass over the infinite glory of God, which here shines forth; whence arises this but from our excessive dulness in considering his greatness? In the meantime, the vanity of our minds carries us away elsewhere.⁵⁸

What is important for Calvin is not the distinction of what God could or could not have done, but the accommodated nature of what he has done. Speculations that attempt to go beyond this realization, according to Calvin, lead us away from the glory of God.

§3.8 Conclusion

To conclude, Balsarak states that ‘accommodation penetrates Calvin’s theology to an indiscernible degree’.⁵⁹ This idea has quite far-reaching consequences: for it is no longer possible to take one’s distance vis-à-vis accommodation, either through reason or through metaphor or allegory. Instead, accommodation becomes indeed, as Dowey stated, a central

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (I,xv,iii), 162.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 1:36.

⁵⁹ Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 150.

question in Calvin's theology. For, if the whole of creation, as well as Scripture can be seen as an accommodation geared towards engendering a movement in man's mind, a movement that furthermore cannot be explained by a metadiscourse, such as the *ordinata / absoluta* distinction, what is the vantage point from which to make this realization? What can Calvin's text expound, explain, communicate, other than the limits of human understanding in comprehending God's accommodation?

Now, in this way, the accommodated statement refers back to itself. However, the surface of Scripture is hereby, all too riskily, closed off. Does Calvin succeed, to put it provocatively, to ward off any intrusion into the accommodation? Is there, to paraphrase Muller, such a thing as the unaccommodated Calvin in Calvin's theology itself?

For the idea underlying the search for a systematic coherence of Calvin's can only result in an accommodation of itself. It is this point that Muller refers to when he criticizes the search for systematic coherency in Calvin's theology as a series of accommodations. Instead, Muller states, one should see Calvin's texts as not necessarily implying coherence, or even usefulness. Calvin's text is predominantly a sixteenth-century historical text, and should be read as such. But, as we have seen with the *ordo recte docendi*, this does not necessarily imply the impossibility of the existence of a certain calvinian voice that interacts with his context and with his surroundings. In the case of the accommodation, there could well be an intra-textual tension that is recurrent in these instances of accommodation. There could very well be, for instance, an intra-textual mechanism in Calvin's text that could be characterized not by logical consistency, but by concentric reasoning, that blocks the faculty of reason from offering an escape to the conundrum of accommodation.

Regardless of the question whether Wendel is right by stating that the logical incoherences of Calvin's theology are a direct result from his fidelity to Scripture, we will now try to determine: does Calvin's theology consistently keep the indiscernable content of accommodation open, or is this tension filled in with Calvin's personal voice? For the question becomes, if the various forms of accommodation are, at least logically, unconnected to each other, whether Calvin can avoid filling in the gaps with his own theological presuppositions. For if the iron logic of accommodation is to be filled in with the personal, then a dangerous vista for forms of fundamentalist interpretations is opened up. There does seem to be a strong demand on the reader to agree with the text's conclusions, yet, agreeing with the text's conclusions as prescriptive content runs the risk of amounting to an idolatrous belief in man-made interpretation. These two forces are constantly present in Calvin's theology. In Calvin's use of the notion of accommodation we can clearly see these apparently contradictory dimensions:

- Calvin's use of the term accommodation is not prone to using it as a tool to facilitate multi-layered interpretations, such as the fourfold meaning of Scripture. The accommodated statement lacks intellectual depth. Instead, it is geared towards retaining an *imminent* truth, that is nonetheless expressed in temporal form. The challenge does not become to uncover what the puzzle means, but instead to marvel upon the wisdom and benevolence of God to stoop to our level and to use our foolish language in order to communicate something.

- And yet it is not geared towards excusing logically unsound Scriptural citations from scientific validity. Nor does it do the inverse, claiming literal truth of Scripture in the face of empirical evidence. The split between the realm of science and the realm of religion, as Turretini helped to define it,

does not exist for Calvin. There's a notion of truth in Calvin that lies in between these dimensions. The notion of accommodation is not to be used to take away validity from the direct literal sense of Scripture, but it is not to be used as a scientific handbook either.

As such, the notion of accommodation functions in Calvin as a demand placed on the reader to see in God's word both the presence of divine truth as well as the admonition that this truth is not to be taken at face value. In short, what Scripture really means is beyond our reach, what it *should* mean to us, is up for debate. This conclusion can be folded back into the claim that the *Institutes* themselves function as a guide, as a *summa* of what is needed to read Scripture. For the meaning and the effect of Scripture, if seen through the prism of accommodation, lies not so much in defining a clear content of the text, but in realizing the temporality of meaning, and that notions such as eternity and truth are connected to our own temporal limitations.

What is at stake for Calvin in discussing the accommodated statement is, unlike for Augustine or Chrysostom, not a question of gaining superior descriptive knowledge, nor a matter of discerning more and deeper levels of meaning. For Calvin, the truth of the accommodated element lies at the surface, not hidden away like a puzzle waiting for a scholar to solve it. The fact that Christ came down to earth, that God chose to put down his words in Scripture, even the fact that the earth was created, can all be seen as accommodated statements to whose demand believers should respond with the correct mix of self-reflexivity and veneration without falling in the intellectualist trap of believing that this mix can ever be brought to an end.

The text redirects the reader time and again to an indescribable experience of the text, and not to the (hidden, stable)

meaning of it. As a result, the roads 'into' this text, the prerequisites for reading the text in the right way, and, subsequently, the possibility for the reader to draw comforting conclusions from it, become highly problematic. How is the reader to compare, describe or conceptualize this experience? Reading Calvin then comes close to the Gershwin classic in which the mystery of love is succinctly summarized in the phrase 'Nice work if you can get it, and if you get it, won't you tell me how?' It is with this phrase in mind that we move on to the next chapter in which the psychology of the reader is scrutinized, especially the anxiety that impending death and condemnation can create in the reader.