

# John Calvin's Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture: On Allegory

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In reading Calvin's New Testament Commentaries there is an apparent contradiction regarding allegorical interpretation. Calvin states that one should seek the literal meaning in Scripture, and he vehemently states his opposition to allegorical interpretation. Thus it can appear strange indeed that Calvin himself sometimes engaged in allegorical interpretation. I will argue that Calvin practiced allegorical interpretation in a way that both conformed to his own principles of interpretation and showed his living connection to Medieval interpretive practices.

## I. Explicit attitude toward allegorical interpretation

Calvin did state that he sought the "literal" sense, or a "literal" meaning. For instance on Galatians 4:22 he wrote as follows:

Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one, and let us embrace and hold it resolutely. Let us not merely neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the literal sense.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Galatians 4:22. Translations, adapted as necessary, are from *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), cited hereafter as CNTC followed by volume number and page. Here, CNTC 11:85. John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia: denuo recognita et adnotatione critica instructa notisque illustrata*, series 2, Edited by B. G. Armstrong, et al., (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992-), cited hereafter as OE followed by volume number and page. Here OE 16:107. "Sciamus ergo eum esse verum Scripturae sensum, qui germanus est ac simplex, eumque amplectamur et mordicus teneamus. Fictitias expositiones, quae a literalis sensu abducunt, non modo negligamus tanquam dubias, sed fortiter repudiemus tanquam exitiales corruptelas." Emphasis added.

Here Calvin is putting a great deal of methodological weight down on the literal. Departing from that sense is “deadly.” It is not merely an academic question or an intellectual matter. Saving faith depends upon it. Here also, though, we see that he equated the literal with what he commonly referred to as the “genuine sense”, here the “simple,” “true,” or “natural” meaning.<sup>2</sup> The reader should not seek hidden meanings, but the meaning inherent in the author’s words. As Calvin once pleaded, “. . .all I do is to urge my readers that they should pay attention to Paul’s words.”<sup>3</sup>

The reformer also frequently expressed a strong opposition to allegorical interpretation. Such statements came, predictably, in his comments on texts traditionally used to justify allegorical interpretation, or texts allegorized to support doctrines not found in the literal sense of any text. Thus on Paul’s statement that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life, Calvin complained that some used this text to teach “that Scripture is not only useless but is actually harmful unless it is allegorized.” Such an attitude would undercut the use of the literal sense of Scripture to determine true doctrine, and this was fatal. As he complained here, “. . .when it was an accepted practice for anybody to interpret any passage in any way one desired, any mad idea, however absurd or monstrous, could be introduced under the pretext of an allegory.” On the same passage Calvin hinted at another problem he saw with allegorical interpretation: “. . .many of the ancients without any restraint played all sorts of games with the sacred Word of God, as if they were tossing a ball to and fro.”<sup>4</sup> The imaginative

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<sup>2</sup>Calvin’s working definition of the “literal” was actually quite narrow. The literal meant the plain etymological denotation of a word or phrase shorn of any rhetorical devices, or a rigid legalistic application of an imperative statement. Typically Calvin referred to this sense as a reading “*ad verbum*” or “*ad literam*”: according to the word or the letter. Typically, Calvin was not looking for the literal sense, but the genuine sense, essentially the author’s intended meaning.

<sup>3</sup>1 Corinthians 9:13, CNTC 9:191. John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. by Guilielmus Baum, et al., (Brunswick and Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1863-1900; reprint 1964), cited hereafter as CO followed by volume and column. Here CO 49:444. “Ergo autem tantum lectores moneo ut verba Pauli expendant.”

<sup>4</sup>2 Cor. 3:6, CNTC 10:43, OE 15:55-56. “Nam litera occidit. Hic locus ab Origene primum, deinde ab aliis perperam detortus fuit in adulterinum sensum. Unde sequutus est valde perniciosus error, quod patarunt Scripturae lectionem non vanam modo, sed noxiam quoque fore, nisi ad allegorias traheretur. Hic error fons fuit multorum malorum. Neque enim modo permissa fuit licentia germanum Scripturae sensum adulterandi, sed quo quisque audacior fuit in eo genere, eo excellentior habitus fuit Scripturae interpres. Ita impune luserunt multi ex veteribus sacro Dei verbo non secus ac pila versatili. Hac occasione etiam haereticis fraena laxata ad turbendam Ecclesiam. Nam quum quidlibet ex quolibet facere usu receptum esset, nullum fuit tam absurdum vel prodigiosum delirium, quod non colore aliquo allegoriae induci posset. Boni etiam abrepti sunt, ut plurimum fingerent perversas opiniones, allegoriarum dulcedine decepti.” See the whole passage on this verse for the opposition of the grammatical, natural, “literal” sense to the allegorical or “spiritual” sense. See similar comments on Paul’s reference to the Spirit and the letter in Romans 2:29, CNTC 8:56-57. John Calvin, *Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, ed. T.H.L. Parker, in *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, vol. 22 (Leiden: E.J.

practice of allegorization seemed to make light of a deeply holy task. Such frivolity about the holy was error; and led the Church into error.<sup>5</sup> One further quotation will illustrate the polemical panache with which Calvin expressed his distaste for allegorical interpretation. Against one proposed interpretation he declared,

... this is not only a stinking allegory but an impudent mockery that attacks God's Word. Antichrist's slaves were bound to sink into this depth of madness so that they should publicly trample on God's oracles with sacrilegious contempt.<sup>6</sup>

Still, Calvin could admire allegories he found in the literary character of the text itself, as in certain detailed parables. And when the Apostle Paul had the audacity to allegorize the story of Sarah and Hagar, Calvin was all but forced into appreciation, gushing that the Apostle "adorns his argument with a beautiful allegory."<sup>7</sup>

## II. Definition of Allegory

But what did Calvin himself mean by allegory? He drew his definition from classical rhetoric. We find it most clearly stated in his commentary on Daniel: "There is no doubt then that the whole discourse is metaphorical; in reality, properly speaking, it is an allegory; because an allegory is nothing else than a continuous metaphor."<sup>8</sup> He used the same equation of allegory with continuous metaphor in the New Testament commentaries when interpreting the parable of the sower.<sup>9</sup>

Brill, 1981), 54, hereafter cited as "*ad Romanos*" followed by page number. Calvin again made reference to Origen as the root of the problem, and opposed the genuine, the natural, the simple, the literal, and solid doctrine, to allegories, deeper mysteries, and speculation in commenting on Gal. 4:22, CNTC 11:84-85, OE 16:105-107.

<sup>5</sup>On allegory as a game, see also 1 Cor. 9:8-9, CNTC 9:187-188, CO 49:441; Mark 7:32, CNTC 2:173, CO 45:462. Also the dedicatory epistle to Romans, CNTC 8:4, *ad Romanos* 3.

<sup>6</sup>Luke 22:38, CNTC 145, CO 45:717, "... non solum putida est allegoria, sed protervum ludibrium, quo Dei verbo insultant. Atque huc dementiae prolabi oportuit Antichristi mancipia, ut palam sacrilego contemptu sacra Dei oracula calcarent."

<sup>7</sup>"Argumentum" to Galatians, CNTC 11:7, OE 16:9. "Circa finem capitis pulchra allegoria suam disputationem exornat."

<sup>8</sup>Dan. 4:10-16. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols., (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1855), cited hereafter as CC followed by volume and page. Here CC 12:257. CO 40:657. "Non dubium igitur est quin totus sermo sit metaphoricus: imo proprie loquendo est hic allegoria: quoniam allegoria nihil aliud est, quam continua metaphora."

<sup>9</sup>Matthew 13:10; CNTC 2:63, CO 45:357, "... queruntur ergo, Christum verba fecisse, ex quibus nulla utilitas ad auditores veniret. Porro quamvis similitudines plerumque rem de qua agitur illustrent, quae tamen perpetuam metaphoram continent, aenigmatae sunt. Christus ergo similitudinem hanc proponens sub allegoria involvere voluit, quod sine figura clarius et plenius dicere poterat. Nunc vero ubi addita est expositio, plus et energiae et efficaciae habet figuratus sermo quam simplex: hoc est, non solum efficacior est ad movendos animos, sed magis est perspicuus."

Calvin draws this definition of allegory as continuous metaphor, not from the Christian practitioners in the patristic and medieval periods,<sup>10</sup> but from the tradition of classical rhetoric. In the words of Cicero, “When there is a continuous stream of metaphors, a wholly different style of speech is produced; consequently the Greeks call it *αλληγορία*.”<sup>11</sup> Quintilian echoed Cicero and expanded on the subject when he wrote, “Allegory, which is translated ‘inversio’, either presents one thing in words and another in meaning, or else something contrary. The first type is generally produced by continuous metaphors . . . .”<sup>12</sup> Calvin was not alone among Reformed interpreters in this. As T.H.L. Parker has observed, Bullinger defined allegory very succinctly as “a perpetual and uninterrupted metaphor, in which we advance another meaning than we signify in words.”<sup>13</sup>

### III. The Practice of Allegory: The Burning Bush:

#### A. Text and Meanings

Our example of Calvin’s allegorical practice comes from his comments on Acts chapter seven, the sermon of the Deacon Stephen prior to his martyrdom. In the middle of recounting the Old Testament narrative, in verses 30 through 34, Stephen told of God’s calling of Moses at the bush that burned but was not consumed.

Calvin allegorized this brief mention of the burning bush. It was, in fact, the longest and most enthusiastic allegorical interpretation in his New Testament

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<sup>10</sup>For the roots of allegorical interpretation of sacred texts in Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian practice, see Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Karlfried Froehlich, trans. and ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church. Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 5-8. Hanson roots the Catholic Christian allegorization of the New Testament in the same practice among the Gnostics. R.P.C. Hanson, “Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970; reprint, 1992), 416-419.

<sup>11</sup>Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Orator*, in Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes, translated by H. M. Hubbell, reprint, 1939. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988), 27:94. “Iam cum fluxerunt continuæ plures translationes, alia plane fit oratio; itaque genus hoc Graeci appellant *·ἰἱἘἌጸጸ·*.” Translation based on that in this volume.

<sup>12</sup>Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, translated by H.E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1921, reprint 1976), VIII.vi.44. “Allegoria, quam inversionem interpretantur, aut aliud verbis aliud sensu ostendit aut etiam interim contrarium. Prius fit genus plerumque continuatis translationibus, . . .” Translation based on that in this volume.

<sup>13</sup>Heinrich Bullinger, *Studiorum Ratio—Studienanleitung. 1. Teilband: Text und Übersetzung*, in Heinrich Bullinger Werke: Sonderband, edited by Peter Stotz (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1987), 90. “Allegoriam autem vocamus perpetuam et non interruptam metaphoram, qua aliud sensu prætendimus quam verbis significaverimus, . . .” Translation from Parker, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 75.

commentaries, a bit more than half of a column in the *Corpus Reformatorum*. We will look at two ways that Calvin drew meaning from the scene of the burning bush, one less allegorical and one more allegorical. We will glance at possible sources for, or at least the precedents of, Calvin's allegorical interpretation. And we will look for his reasons for making these interpretive moves that he himself seems to forbid.

The theophany at the burning bush raised two questions in Calvin's mind: First, who was the one who spoke in the bush? And second, what meaning should be drawn from the burning bush itself? Both of these issues were prominent in the history of the interpretation of the passage.

The first question, the identity of the speaker in the bush, is stated briefly but firmly: It was Christ. He wrote that the burning bush serves as a "shining testimony to the eternal divinity of Christ, and teaches that he is of the same essence with the Father."<sup>14</sup> At first glance it looks like allegorical interpretation to take a voice in a bush as the divine nature in the human Christ. Indeed, the fourteenth-century exegete Nicholas of Lyra had this interpretation in his allegorical commentary on the book of Exodus.<sup>15</sup> Calvin got there, not by extended metaphor, but by a chain of references in the letter of the text: Luke here called the speaker an angel; Luke later wrote that the same angel was with the Israelites in the wilderness; Paul elsewhere wrote that the one with the Israelites in the wilderness was Christ. Thus Calvin took the speaker in the bush as Christ by connecting literal text to literal text.<sup>16</sup>

On the second question, Calvin found the fact of the burning bush laden with meaning, and he discerned that meaning by allegorizing it. The heart of the allegory runs as follows:

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<sup>14</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:190, CO 48:144. "Ita hic locus aeternae Christi divinitati luculentum testimonium reddit, et eiusdem cum patre essentiae eum esset docet."

<sup>15</sup>Nicholas of Lyra, *Biblia sacra cum glossis, interlineari & ordinaria, Nicolai Lyrani Postilla & moralitatibus, Burgensis, Additionibus, & Thoringi replicis*, 7 vols. (Lugduni [Lyon], 1545). Citations to Nicholas' works and the *Glossa Ordinaria* will be to *Glossa* with volume, leaf, capital letter indicating the quadrant of the page as notated in this edition (A-D on the recto, E-H on the verso), and the lower-case letter linking the note to the biblical text. Modern verse citations are added as an aid to the reader. Translations are my own. Here Nicholas, *Glossa* 1:127D, a-f, and 127H, obelisk-b Exodus 3:1-3 and 3:5. The allegorical associations can be summarized as follows: Moses pastures the flock, meaning John the Baptist preached to the faithful to bring them to knowledge of Christ. Moses took the sheep to the desert, as John led the people to the austerity of repentance. Moses brought the flock to the mountain, as John brought the faithful to Christ. Moses saw the vision of the burning bush as John apprehended the mystery of the incarnation. The flame was like the fullness of the Holy Spirit in Christ, while the thorns were like the sinful human flesh which Christ took up. The bush was not consumed by the flame, meaning Christ's mortal flesh was not swallowed up by his divinity. Moses could not come near until he put off his shoes, meaning that knowledge of this mystery of the incarnation is too much for human beings until one puts off mortal flesh. The allegorical sense here is both typological foreshadowing and a metaphorical presentation of Christian doctrine.

<sup>16</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:190.

For even although their numbers were enormous, yet they were not unlike a bush. For the denser a bush is, and the thicker it is with masses of branches, the more liable it is to catch fire, with the flames raging all over it. Similarly, the Israelite nation was a weak company, exposed to injuries of all kinds; and the multitude, unfit for war though it was, and crippled by its own bulk as it were, had inflamed the ferocity of Pharaoh merely by the success and prosperity of increasing. Therefore the people who are oppressed by a fearful tyranny are like so much firewood that is completely smothered in flames, with nothing to prevent it being reduced to ashes, unless the Lord is established in the midst of it.<sup>17</sup>

It will be remembered that Calvin's definition of allegory is an extended metaphor on the elements of a text, and this is exactly what he has created. He makes continuous metaphorical associations to all parts of the scene: The bush represents the people of Israel. The flames are Pharaoh's wrath and the trials they endured. The fact that the bush was not consumed by the fire represents God's people's endurance through all trials by the sustaining presence of God. Calvin kept his allegorical associations within the Old Testament narrative,<sup>18</sup> while other interpreters related these images directly to the story of the New Testament or to the spiritual and theological quest of the individual. However, none of Calvin's associations can be found in the letter of the text at hand. In the Exodus commentary on the burning bush Calvin draws out the same allegorical meaning, and explicitly refers to this as the "genuine sense."<sup>19</sup>

## B. The Precedents

Calvin was aware of a tradition of allegorical interpretation of the bush. In his commentary on this scene in Exodus Calvin ruled out two allegorical meanings at the very beginning. Both are interpretations he has found in the commentators, and of course he does not state the source of either.

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<sup>17</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:191, CO 48:145. "Tametsi ingens esset hominum numerus, erat tamen rubo non absimilis. Nam ut rubus quo densior est et compactis arbustis magis abundat, eo ad flammam excipiendam magis est obnoxius, ut incendium per omnes partes grassetur: ita infirma erat populi Israelitici manus ad omnes iniurias exposita: et sua quasi mole gravata imbellis multitudo Pharaonis saevitiam tantum prospero crescendi successu accenderat. Ergo populus dira tyrannide oppressus, veluti quaedam ligni congeries est incendio ubique correpta: nec quidquam obstat quominus in cinerem mox redigatur, nisi quia Dominus in medio eius sedet."

<sup>18</sup>This is not the kind of situation described by Hans Frei either as typology which has something of a predictive connection to a later period of time or as allegory which is said to have no connection to the historical context. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 28-29.

<sup>19</sup>Exodus 3:2, CC 2:62, CO 24:36. "Verum ubi germanus sensus in medium prolatus fuerit, alienos refellere non erit necessarium. Conveniunt autem optime haec visio et altera prior quae oblata fuerat Abrahae (Gen. 15, 17). Vidit ille lampadem fulgentem in medio fornacis caliginosae. Ratio exprimitur, quod Deus populum suum in tenebris exstingui non sinet. Eadem analogia respondet rubo suam integritatem retinenti in medio flamma."

First he says, "It is too forced an allegory to make, as some do, the body of Christ of the bush, because his heavenly majesty consumed it not when he chose to inhabit it."<sup>20</sup> This forbidden allegorical interpretation seems awfully close to the Christological meaning Calvin has been seen to affirm. For Calvin, the burning bush does testify to Christ's eternal nature because Paul and Luke can be linked up to show literally that it was Christ speaking in the bush. Calvin is unwilling to affirm, however, that the fact that the bush wasn't consumed can be allegorized to teach of Christ's continuing divine nature. In the famous rhyme of the four senses of Scripture, which Nicholas of Lyra quoted in his prefaces, the "allegorical" is the specifically doctrinal sense, teaching us what we are to believe, and this is just such an interpretation. Such an interpretation can be found in Nicholas' Allegorical commentary on the Exodus text.<sup>21</sup> Fifteenth-century exegete and mystic Denis the Carthusian also recorded this interpretation in his commentary on the literal sense of Exodus.<sup>22</sup> It is not, however, found in the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

Calvin identified and rejected a second allegory on the burning bush: "It is also improperly wrested by those who refer it to the stubborn spirit of the nation, because the Israelites were like thorns, which yield not to the flames."<sup>23</sup> This interpretation is attested by Augustine in two sermons on the Exodus text, numbers 6 and 7.<sup>24</sup> It is also among the interpretations recorded by the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the Exodus text.<sup>25</sup> And it is also found in Denis the Carthusian's

<sup>20</sup>CC 2:62, Exodus 3:3.

<sup>21</sup>Nicholas, *Glossa* 1:127D, a-f, and 127H, obelisk-b Exodus 3:1-3 and 3:5.

<sup>22</sup>Denis the Carthusian, *Doctoris Ecstatici Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia*, (Monstrolii [Montreuil-sur-Mer]: Typis Cartusiae Sanctae Mariae de Pratis, 1901). Denis' works hereafter cited as "Denis," followed by the volume number and page of "*Ennaratio*" and then biblical citation. Translations from Denis are my own. Here Denis, 1:494B-D, *Ennaratio* Exodus 3:2.

<sup>23</sup>CC 2:62, Exodus 3:3.

<sup>24</sup>Saint Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Sermones de Vetere Testamento: Id Est Sermones I-L, Secundum Ordinem Vulgatum Insertis Etiam Novem Sermonibus Post Maurinos Repertis*, vol. 41 of *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, edited by Cyrillus Lambot (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontifici, 1961), 62-76. Hereafter cited as "Augustine *Sermo*" followed by sermon number and paragraph within the sermon. Here see Augustine *Sermo* 6:3, 7:2 and, briefly, 7:6. In *Sermo* 6:7-8 Augustine went on to reflect allegorically on the miraculous signs given to Moses which he took in various ways as symbolic of the coming of Christ.

<sup>25</sup>*Glossa* 1:127A-B, a. "Moyses autem etc. Apparuit que ei. Isi. Alleg. Erat flama in rubo et non cremabatur. Rubus spinæ peccatorum Iudæorum. flamma in rubo verbum dei id est lex data illi populo. Sed et flamma rubum non comburit, quia lex data peccata eorum non consumit. Alii in rubo flammante ecclesiam intelligunt, quae persecutionibus inflammatur quae loquente se domino non crematur. Quod dominus Moysi in rubo apparuit, ostendit, quia in ecclesia apparet fidelibus, nec alibi. Aiunt Hebræi ideo in rubo deum apparuisse Moysi, ne possent sibi inde idolum sculperere Iudæi. Semper enim deus idolatriæ occasionem recidit. . ." Cf. Exodus 3:2, CC 2:62, CO 24:36.

commentary on the literal sense of the Exodus text.<sup>26</sup> It is not, however, found in Nicholas of Lyra, either in his Literal or Moral commentaries on Acts, nor in his Literal, Allegorical, or Moral commentaries on Exodus.

As for the allegorical interpretation approved by Calvin, this too is well attested in the tradition. It is among those briefly recorded by the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the Exodus text.<sup>27</sup> Nicholas of Lyra interpreted the burning bush allegorically, and found much the same meaning as Calvin found, both in his commentary on Acts and his Literal commentary on Exodus. On the Acts text Nicholas wrote:

... the angel appeared in the likeness of a fire, burning but not consuming, as a sign that the people of Israel would not be consumed in the Egyptian tribulations but would be purified, and having been cleansed would be liberated.<sup>28</sup>

For both Calvin and Nicholas the fire is tribulation and the bush is Israel which survives the fire and is liberated. For Nicholas the fire was also an agent of purification, an interpretation based on the meaning of fire elsewhere in Scripture. In his literal commentary on the Exodus text Nicholas took this same approach. There he emphasized that the meaning of the apparition is to be found in the way it symbolically reflects the larger narrative of the Exodus.<sup>29</sup> Denis the Carthusian also affirmed this interpretation: the fire indicated afflictions and the fact that the bush was not consumed indicated the survival of the Israelites.<sup>30</sup> Lest we think Calvin was an unusual Reformed exegete, Heinrich

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<sup>26</sup>Denis, 1:494B-D, *Enarratio* Exodus 3:2.

<sup>27</sup>*Glossa* 1:127A-B, a. “**Moyse autem etc. Apparuit que ei. Isi. Alleg.** Erat flama in rubo et non cremabatur. Rubus spinæ peccatorum Iudæorum. flamma in rubo verbum dei id est lex data illi populo. Sed et flamma rubum non comburit, quia lex data peccata eorum non consumit. Alii in rubo flammante ecclesiam intelligunt, quae persecutionibus inflammatur quae loquente se domino non crematur. Quòd dominus Moysi in rubo apparuit, ostendit, quia in ecclesia apparet fidelibus, nec alibi. Aiunt Hebræi ideo in rubo deum apparuisse Moysi, ne possent sibi inde idolum sculperè Iudæi. Semper enim deus idolatriæ occasionem recidit . . .” Cf. Exodus 3:2, CC 2:62, CO 24:36.

<sup>28</sup>Nicholas, *Glossa* 6:177C, i, Acts 7:30. “Propter quod angelus apparuit in specie ignis ardentis, sed non comburentis ad figurandum quod populus Israel in tribulatione Aegypti non consumeretur, sed purgaretur, et purgatus liberaretur.”

<sup>29</sup>Nicholas, *Glossa* 1:127D, f, continued on 127F at bottom; Exodus 3:2. “Et videbat quod et cetera, quia flamma occupans rubum rubi viriditatem non minuebat, licet esset materia combustibilis, per hoc autem designabatur, quod labor affligens qui per ignem designatur filios Israël in quibus erat humana infirmitas non consumeret nec deleret: sed magis mirificè liberarentur: ad quod exequendum per moysen dominus apparebat moysi: et ideo talis apparitio facta est secundum convenientiam negotii sicut et aliæ apparitiones huiusmodi communiter fiunt.”

<sup>30</sup>Denis, 1:494B-D, *Enarratio* Exodus 3:2.



Bullinger, commenting on the Acts text, briefly affirmed this same metaphorical meaning for the burning bush: "The people of God is also signified, which does not perish in the midst of the flames of affliction."<sup>31</sup>

Among those exegetes examined, only Denis the Carthusian attests all three of the allegorical interpretations mentioned by Calvin. It is unclear whether Calvin knew these interpretations as a group through Denis or a commentary like his, or whether he knew them individually through texts by Augustine, the *Glossa*, and Nicholas, or others. If Calvin knew Nicholas or Denis, he felt no need to repeat all the allegories they cited.<sup>32</sup>

### C. The Justification

If Calvin here practices allegorical interpretation, how does he justify it? Calvin's allegorical interpretation does make sense when examined in light of his own definitions, priorities, and rules.

First of all Calvin defined allegory as metaphor, and he drew his associations in a manner true to the device of metaphor. This made his allegory more elegant than any of the others examined. While Nicholas and Denis were more imaginative in their allegories, stylistically they were clumsier. They listed one-to-one correspondences, saying that this denotes that, or that by one thing another is figured, understood, represented, signified, or designated. Calvin instead eased his associations in as metaphors and similes. Thus he wrote that Israel "had inflamed the ferocity of Pharaoh", or that under oppression they were "like so much firewood that is completely smothered in flames."<sup>33</sup> It is so smooth one can miss the fact that he is constructing an allegory.

Second, the meaning of the events is useful, and usefulness is a crucial priority of Calvin's exegesis. Of the bush he wrote, "Moreover nothing more suitable could have been shown to Moses for strengthening his faith in the present undertaking."<sup>34</sup> The allegory allowed the theophany to fulfill God's eternal intention to strengthen faith and faithfulness, though he seems absurdly to assume that Moses would find an allegorical meaning in the burning bush as he

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<sup>31</sup>Heinrich Bullinger, *In Acta Apostolorum Heinrichi Bullingeri Commentariorum Libri VI. Ab Aulhore Recogniti Ac Denuo Iam Recusi*, (Tiguri: Christoph. Froschouerus, 1584), 24v, Acts 7:30-34. "Significatur et Dei populus, qui in medio afflictionum flammis non perit."

<sup>32</sup>For instance see Nicholas' Moral Commentary on Exodus. The bush indicated human weakness, and the fire illuminated understanding and inflamed feeling. Nicholas, *Glossa* 1:127D, [a] through obelisk, and 127H, \*obelisk and n; Exodus 3:1-3 and 3:10.

<sup>33</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:191, CO 48:145. "... et sua quasi mole gravata imbellis multitudo Pharaonis saevitiam tantum prospero crescendi successu accenderat. Ergo populus dira tyrannide oppressus, veluti quaedam ligni congeries est incendio ubique correpta: ..."

<sup>34</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:191, CO 48:145. "Porro nihil magis appositum ostendi Mosi potuit ad confirmandam eius fidem in praesenti negotio."

did. Calvin applied the allegory usefully as well. He moved seamlessly from ancient Israel, to “the Church of God” in their “perennial condition,” and then to Calvin’s persecuted readers: “For what else are we but fuel for the flames?”<sup>35</sup> The ancient event became useful as a testimony to the Church’s ability to persevere under trials:

It is true that innumerable firebrands of Satan are constantly hovering about, to set fire to our souls as well as our bodies, but with wonderful and extraordinary kindness the Lord delivers and protects us from being consumed.<sup>36</sup>

Third, Calvin began his allegory by citing a rule of interpretation: “It is a commonplace that God accommodates signs to things by some sort of analogy; and this is quite a common procedure with the sacraments.”<sup>37</sup> This is indeed familiar as one of Calvin’s themes on the sacraments, whose legitimate meanings are implied by their physical elements and are authoritatively interpreted by the Word annexed to them. It is less familiar in Calvin as a guide to interpretation of narratives. Calvin applied this rule, which we might call the rule of similitude, as he sought to derive meaning from the sign of the burning bush. The similitude of signs to things should be between the bush and the historical and spiritual situation of the Israelites, Moses’ mission of liberation. The bush, the flame, and the fact that the bush was not consumed all point to the larger narrative of Exodus in which Israel will survive its trials.

In the commentary on the Exodus text, Calvin does not state this rule of signification. However, he does refer the reader to his commentary on Genesis fifteen, Abraham’s theophany at the ratification of the covenant, with smoking firepot and flaming torch. There, on Genesis fifteen, Calvin did state his rule of signification: “An analogy is always to be sought for between signs and things, that they may mutually correspond.” On the Acts passage Calvin referred to the sacraments for this rule. On Genesis fifteen he again echoes his sacramental theology by insisting on the priority of the Word over visionary symbols: “Then since the symbol, in itself, is but a lifeless carcass, reference ought always to be made to the word which is annexed to it.”<sup>38</sup> God’s words to Abraham predicted the deliverance of Israel, and so Calvin looked for ways the signs of the vision

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<sup>35</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:191, CO 48:145. “*Quanquam autem insolitus persecutionum ignis tum flagrabat, quia tamen ecclesia Dei nunquam ab afflictionibus prorsus immunis et libera est in mundo, hic perpetua eius conditio quodammodo depicta est. Quid enim aliud sumus quam flammae pabulum?*”

<sup>36</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:191, CO 48:145. “*Innumerae vero Satanae faces assidue volitant, quae ignem subiciant et corporibus et animis: sed Dominus mira et singulari gratia nos a consumptione vindicat ac tuetur.*”

<sup>37</sup>Acts 7:31, CNTC 6:190-191, CO 48:145. “*Tritum est illud, Deum similitudine quadam rebus signa aprare. Atque haec fere communis est sacramentorum ratio.*”

<sup>38</sup>Genesis 15:17, CC 1:420, CO 23:221. “*Quaerenda semper analogia est signorum cum rebus, ut mutuo respondeant. Deinde quia symbolum per se exanime est cadaver, ad verbum quod annexum est semper debet referri.*”

symbolically enacted the promise. This was, to Calvin, a clear instance of a divine principle, linking the sign, the thing signified, and the word.

It is significant that Nicholas of Lyra, in his "literal" commentaries on the burning bush, not only had a similar allegory to that of Calvin, but also based this interpretation on a rule of signification similar to Calvin's. In the Acts commentary he wrote, "And because such apparitions are for signifying something, therefore it is fashioned according to a symmetry to that which is signified."<sup>39</sup> According to Nicholas, the nature of the apparition should point to its meaning. He explored the nature of fire in Scripture, then interpreted the event much as Calvin did. In his literal comments on Exodus, Nicholas again invoked a rule of signification:

To accomplish this through Moses, the Lord appeared to Moses: and therefore such an apparition was made according to a symmetry of the matter just as also other apparitions of this sort generally are made.<sup>40</sup>

Here the symmetry is not to the purifying quality of fire but to the liberating events God was about to accomplish through Moses. Much like Calvin, Nicholas found that the elements of the theophany expressed the larger story of the book metaphorically. As a result, here the metaphorical meanings are even closer to Calvin's than on the Acts texts. Calvin echoes Nicholas' meaning and his rule.

The final justification for Calvin's allegory on the burning bush, here and in the commentary on Exodus, is in the familiar practice of using Scripture to interpret Scripture. As described, Calvin used Genesis fifteen to interpret the Exodus text. Both in the Acts and the Exodus commentaries Calvin also used Psalm 46:5, a text which bore in its literal sense the message of his allegory. It reads, "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns." In the Acts commentary Calvin found the promise in the burning bush in the words of the Psalm. After making it clear that burning trials are a matter for the Church in every age, Calvin wrote

It is therefore necessary for the fire to blaze, that it may burn us in this life. But because the Lord dwells in our midst he will see to it that no afflictions will cause us harm, as it is put in Psalm 46:6.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Nicholas, *Glossa* 6:177C, i, Acts 7:30. "et quia tales apparitiones sunt ad aliquid significandum, ideo formantur secundum conuenientiam ad id quod est significandum."

<sup>40</sup>Nicholas, *Glossa* 1:127D, f, continued on 127F at bottom; Exodus 3:2. "Et videbat quod et cetera, quia flamma occupans rubum rubi viriditatem non minuebat, licet esset materia combustibilis, per hoc autem designabatur, quod labor affligens qui per ignem designatur filios Israël in quibus erat humana infirmitas non consumeret nec deleret: sed magis mirificè liberarentur: ad quod exequendum per moysen dominus apparebat moysi: et ideo talis apparitio facta est secundum conuenientiam negotii sicut et aliæ apparitiones huiusmodi communiter fiunt."

<sup>41</sup>Acts 7:30, CNTC 6:191, CO 48:145. "Ardere ergo incendium necesse est quod in hac vita nos urat. Sed quia Dominus in medio nostri habitat, efficiet ne quid afflictiones nobis noceant: quemadmodum etiam Psalmo quadragésimo sexto dicitur (v. 6)." By modern enumeration, the reference is to Psalm 46:5.

The Psalm promises that the presence of God will preserve the people of God in their trials. For Calvin this is a literal expression that he can draw on when interpreting symbolic events like theophanies. This practice is more plain in the Exodus commentary.

Thus by the presence of God, the bush escaped safely from the fire; as it is said in Psalm 46:4, that though the waves of trouble beat against the Church and threaten her destruction, yet, "shall she not be moved," for "God is in the midst of her."<sup>42</sup>

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture, Calvin filled out his allegorical meanings.

#### IV. Conclusion

Calvin clearly knew the variety of past allegorical interpretations of the burning bush. Knowing that the interpretations he rejected were attested in earlier commentators, he must have known that the one he accepted was quite common. Nicholas of Lyra approved the same interpretation as Calvin, and only Nicholas explained it with the same rule of signification that Calvin used. This points to a probable dependence of the Reformer on the medieval commentator.

Beyond his links to medieval interpretation Calvin's exegesis shows the guiding influence of his own priorities of interpretation. His definition and practice of allegory as metaphor had more in common with Bullinger and classical rhetoric than with medieval or patristic allegory. He finds a useful interpretation. He follows his rule of similitude between the sign and the thing signified, defined by the word. He interprets Scripture with Scripture.

Calvin's practice of allegorical interpretation is not a grand exception to his stated priority on the literal sense. Rather, when he allowed himself to allegorize he did so within the bounds of his larger interpretive principles and in a search for the "genuine" intended meaning. In the end, this interpretation is both a bit unusual and a rather ordinary example of Calvin's interpretation. It is unusual, though not unique, for him to play out metaphorical associations so that his exegesis is allegorical by his own definition. Nevertheless, the themes and emphases in the interpretation, and his individual steps of interpretation, are so familiar to the reader of Calvin that one can easily say it is true to the man.

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<sup>42</sup>Exodus 3:2, CC 2:62, CO 24:36. "Itaque Dei praesentia rubetum ab incendio incolume evasit, sicuti in Psalmo 46, 4 dicitur, quamvis ecclesiam impetant turbulentum fluctus, qui naufragium minantur, ipsam tamen non moveri: quia Deus in medio eius habitat." By modern enumeration the reference is Psalm 46:3, "... though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult."