

“*Fuisse in Forma Hominis*” belongs to Christ Alone’: John Calvin’s trinitarian hermeneutics in his *Lectures on Ezekiel*

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Abstract

The present article examines John Calvin’s trinitarian and christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies in his *Praelectiones* on Ezekiel 1. The first section of the article treats Calvin’s exegetical principles. It is noted that Calvin defends a strict set of rules for how to interpret Old Testament theophanies: in short, Calvin argues that if a passage presents the divine nature in the form of a human person, that given theophany must be interpreted as a representation of the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God (i.e. Jesus Christ). In defending this position, Calvin examines in great detail various rules for how to interpret Old Testament passages which indicate a plurality within the divine nature (i.e. the Trinity). He defends his exegetical approach to these texts with numerous passages from the New Testament.

This examination of Calvin’s exegesis is contextualised in two ways. First, it is noted that Calvin’s exegesis of these passages is uncharacteristically more ‘strict’ in its trinitarian and christological reading than one finds in earlier thinkers such as Augustine and Jerome. For example, Augustine argued that Old Testament theophanies which present God in the form of a human being could be understood as the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. Augustine, in short, does not think one can definitively determine which member of the Trinity is ‘present’ in a theophany. Second, it is noted that this surprising development in Calvin’s final work is the result of the rising threat of anti-trinitarianism in Transylvania. Thus, the article argues that the rise of Polish anti-trinitarianism not only contributed to Calvin’s renewed interest in trinitarian and christological interpretations of the Old Testament, but it also pushed him to develop a more strict set of exegetical rules which govern how such passages are interpreted.

Therefore, the article presents a reading of Calvin which strongly suggests that any complete analysis of Calvin’s alleged ‘Judaising’ must develop a historically nuanced methodology. While it is often argued that Calvin hesitates from interpreting Old Testament passages in a strictly trinitarian or christological way,

it must be acknowledged that towards the end of his career he radically began to alter his exegetical rules/method given the renewed threat of the anti-trinitarians.

Keywords: Anti-trinitarian, exegesis, Ezekiel, John Calvin, Old Testament, Trinity.

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, with the appearance of a sapphire stone; and above the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man above and upon it.

Et super firmamentum quae erat super caput eorum tanquam vision, vel aspectus lapidis saphiri similitudo solii; et super similitudinem solii similitudo tanquam aspectus hominis super ipsum desuper. (Ezekiel 1:26)

Christian exegetes of the Old Testament have long struggled with how to interpret scriptural passages which speak of God in the form or likeness (*similitudo*) of a human being.¹ A classic example is the image of God seated on a throne in Daniel 7:9–14 and Ezekiel 1:26: in the language of Daniel the ‘Ancient of Days’ (*antiquus dierum*) takes his seat on a fiery throne, while the book of Ezekiel is more obscure stating that an ‘appearance of a man’ (*quasi aspectus hominis*) was seated on a ‘likeness of a throne’ (*similitudinem throni*).² For Christian interpreters, the problem is articulating precisely who appeared to the Hebrew prophets in human form and was seated on the throne.

To understand the general outline of the problem it is best to begin with a passage from Augustine. The bishop of Hippo writes:

the first thing to be done in sorting out this tangled question is to ascertain, with God’s help, whether it was the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit who appeared under these created forms to the [prophets]; or whether it

¹ Because the focus of this article is John Calvin’s *Lectures on Ezekiel*, for purposes of clarity and ease of presentation I will adopt his language of Old and New Testament.

² For quotations of Ezekiel I have used the Latin text recorded in Calvin’s *Lectures on Ezekiel* in the *Corpus Reformatorum* and the translation of the Calvin Theological Society (see n. 10 below). For all other biblical references I have used the Latin Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims translation thereof. Thus, *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, ed. R. Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), and *The Catholic Bible: Douay-Rheims Version* (Charlotte, NC: St Benedict Press, 2009). Daniel 7:9: ‘aspiciebam donec throni positi sunt et antiquus dierum sedit vestimentum eius quasi nix candidum et capilli capitis eius quasi lana munda thronus eis flammae ignis rotae eius ignis accensus’. Ezekiel 1:26: ‘et super firmamentum quod erat inminens capiti eorum quasi aspectus lapidis saphyri similitudo throni et super similitudinem throni similitudo quasi aspectus hominis desuper’. I have often amended the translations of both the Calvin Theological Society and the Douay-Rheims edition of the Vulgate.

was sometimes the Father, sometimes the Son, sometimes the Holy Spirit; or whether it was simply the one and only God, that is the Trinity without any distinction of persons.³

In the second book of *De Trinitate*, Augustine articulates three possibilities. Old Testament references which contain a physical description of God could refer to: (1) one of the members of the Trinity (i.e. the Father, Son or Holy Spirit) individually in all such Old Testament references; (2) the Father, Son or Holy Spirit alternatively in all such references; or (3) the one God (i.e. the entire Trinity without any distinction of persons being indicated). Augustine concludes book 2 of *De Trinitate* by arguing that such images of God – whether presented to the observer as a dream or in a state of consciousness – cannot be of God's nature, substance or essence *per se*.⁴ Hence, such visible images must be either of the Father, Son or Holy Spirit, and Augustine cautions against being dogmatic in asserting which particular member of the Trinity is present in a given scriptural passage.⁵ After considering the available evidence, the bishop of Hippo argues that it is possible that any one of the divine persons could be visibly present to a writer of scripture, as is evidenced by Abraham's three visitors in Genesis 18; thus, one should analyse the context of the passage carefully and exercise humility in making such judgements.⁶

In his *Lectures on Ezekiel*, John Calvin examines in detail this exegetical question.⁷ The Genevan Reformer is not known for developing extensive

³ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 2.13, in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, 50 and 50A, ed. W. J. Mountain (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), vol. 50, p. 97. 'In huius perplexitate questionis primum domino adiuuante quaerendum est utrum pater an filius an spiritus sanctus; an aliquando pater, aliquando filius, aliquando spiritus sanctus; an sine ulla distinctione personarum sicut dicitur deus unus et solus, id est ipsa trinitas, per illas creaturae formas patribus apparuerit'. I have cited the translation of Edmund Hill, *The Trinity* (New York: New City Press, 1991), p. 106.

⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 2.34–5 (Mountain, 50, pp. 124–6, here p. 126). 'Ipsa enim natura uel substantia uel essentia uel quolibet alio nomine appellandum est idipsum quod deus est, quidquid illud est, corporaliter uideri non potest'.

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 2.35 (Mountain, 50, p. 126).

⁶ Lewis Ayres is correct to note that the preceding Latin tradition tended to argue that it was the Son who was revealed in Old Testament theophanies. See Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 159, esp. n. 57. Augustine, in response to this tradition, insists in *De Trinitate* 2 that all three persons can, in theory, have been observed physically.

⁷ On the life of Calvin, see (alphabetically): Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, tr. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000); Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Alister E. McGrath, *The Life of John Calvin* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990); and Herman

trinitarian or christological interpretations of the Old Testament, thus it is somewhat surprising that in his *Lectures on Ezekiel* Calvin expounds at length precise rules for interpreting passages of the Old Testament which speak of a physical image of the divine. Given this context, the present article will proceed by first analysing Calvin's trinitarian hermeneutics in his lectures on Ezekiel 1, and second, considering the broader historical context which informs Calvin's interpretation in the early 1560s. It will be argued that Calvin's precision in establishing various exegetical rules in his *Lectures on Ezekiel* was fuelled by the anti-trinitarian exegetical strategies of Michael Servetus and George Biandrata.⁸

Calvin's rules for interpreting trinitarian statements

John Calvin's commentaries and lectures on the prophetic books were initially published between 1550 and 1565.⁹ The first of his prophetic commentaries was on Isaiah (1550, revised in 1559), a work which is distinct from the others in being composed as a written text and not a lecture. The remaining 'commentaries' – i.e. treating Hosea (1557), the Twelve Minor Prophets (1559), Daniel (1561), Jeremiah and Lamentations (1563), and Ezekiel 1–21 (1565)¹⁰ – were published as *Praelectiones* and as such transcribed by

J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, tr. Albert Gootjes (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). On Calvin's thought, see: Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); and François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, tr. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1997).

⁸ While the present article does not analyse Calvin's *Lectures on Ezekiel* within the broader context of the charge of 'Judaising', one implication of the following study is that any analysis of Calvin's 'Judaising' tendencies must attend to the historical development of his thought.

⁹ See Wulfert de Greef, *Calvijn en het Oude Testament* (Groningen: T. Bolland, 1984); T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 176–223; David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); and Pete Wilcox, 'Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Calvin and the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 107–30. See also Richard A. Muller, 'The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom', in David C. Steinmetz (ed.), *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 68–82.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, 59 vols, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), vol. 40. The work is translated in *Commentaries of John Calvin*, 46 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vols. 11 and 12.

various authors.¹¹ The focus here is on Calvin's *Lectures on Ezekiel* which was published posthumously in 1565. In particular, I will concentrate on Calvin's fifth lecture on Ezekiel (i.e. the lecture on Ezek 1:25–6).

As Richard Muller demonstrated in the *Unaccommodated Calvin*, because the *Lectures on Ezekiel* were dictated after the final edition of the *Institutes* they provide evidence of the development of his thought after 1559. In particular, Muller argues that Calvin's appropriation of medieval-Aristotelian cosmology demonstrated in his lectures on Ezekiel 1:4–24 provides evidence of his knowledge and engagement with theories of primary and secondary causation.¹² Similarly, in his commentary on the following verses (i.e. Ezekiel 1:26 and following), Calvin formulates a highly developed argument for how to interpret specific Old Testament theophanies. The present section will explicate Calvin's rules for how to interpret passages such as Ezekiel 1:26: rules which, like the previous lecture analysing Aristotelian causation, are not inconsistent with Calvin's earlier works, but certainly push the argument a bit deeper and examine the matter more closely.

Calvin's interpretation of Ezekiel 1:26 is focused on the statement that 'above the likeness (*similitudinem*) of the throne was a likeness (*similitudo*) with the appearance (*aspectus*) of a man above and upon it'. He begins his analysis by arguing that the language of *similitudo* and *aspectus* indicates that there was neither a material throne present nor a natural human body (i.e. a physical body) visible to the Prophet.¹³ Hence, the language of similarity is used to communicate that there is no bodily or material substance: further, in the case of the divine the stakes are higher, such that Ezekiel uses both the terms *similitudo* and *aspectus* with respect to the human image of God.¹⁴ Having argued clearly that the language of the Prophet excludes the possibility of a physical image of God, Calvin turns to the central question of this lecture.

The exegetical focus of the fifth lecture on Ezekiel treats the question: 'Why God put on the form of a man in this vision as in other similar ones?'¹⁵

¹¹ For a useful description of this process, see Wilcox, 'Calvin as Commentator', pp. 108–15.

¹² Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, pp. 155–7, esp. 156.

¹³ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 52). 'Hinc enim colligimus neque verum fuisse coelum quod adspexit, nec fuisse solum ex aliqua materia conflatum, neque etiam fuisse verum et naturale hominis corpus' (CTS, 11, pp. 95–6).

¹⁴ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 54). 'Poterat quidem nomen unum sufficere, sed quia adeo propensi sumus ad vagas et erraticas opiniones, ideo *similitudinem* adiunxit *adspexit*' (CTS, 11, pp. 96–7).

¹⁵ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 53). 'Nunc quaeritur cur Deus induerit formam hominis tam hoc loco, hoc est, in hac visione, quam in aliis similibus' (CTS, 11, p. 97).

Calvin states that he embraces the opinion of the fathers (i.e. the patristic and early medieval theologians) who said that ‘this is a prelude to the mystery’ which is later revealed by Paul the apostle in 1 Titus – ‘Great is this mystery, God is manifest in the flesh’.¹⁶ Thus, Calvin argues that in Ezekiel 1:26 – but, more broadly throughout all Old Testament theophanies which indicate that God put on the *formam hominis* – the representation of God in human form is a prelude to Christ being God manifest in human flesh. The manifestation of God in human form is best understood, therefore, as the second person of the Trinity, Christ, the Son of God. However, Calvin is aware that this passage does not necessitate a christological interpretation.

There are, from a Christian perspective, four possible interpretations of God in human form. Such images could be images of: (1) the undivided Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (i.e. the divine essence); (2) the Father alone; (3) the Son alone; or (4) the Holy Spirit alone. Calvin recognises the interpretative possibilities and considers the implications. First, he argues that it would be possible to interpret the ‘appearance of a man’ in Ezekiel as referring to the Father. Such an interpretation, Calvin argues, should ultimately be rejected because ‘we know that the Father was never clad in human flesh’.¹⁷ Second, Calvin considers the more probable interpretation such that the passage refers to God (i.e. option 1, the undivided Trinity/divine essence) with all discussions of person removed.¹⁸ This interpretation is clearly an option: all Christian exegetes – for any passage of the Old Testament in which it is unclear which divine person, in particular, is being indicated – could argue that the reference is to God as the undivided essence. Further, if there is any ambiguity in the matter, it is perhaps the most prudent interpretation. As was discussed in the introduction, Augustine cautioned restraint and humility when making such judgements. Given the argument of Augustine, what is Calvin’s justification for developing rigid exegetical rules for such passages?

Calvin’s interpretation of Ezekiel 1:26 and similar passages is informed by a close reading of John 12:41. John 12 is a complicated chapter in which

¹⁶ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 53). ‘Libenter amplector partum sententiam, qui dicunt hoc fuisse praeludium eius mysterii, quod tandem exhibitum fuit: quod Paulus magnifice extollit quum exclamat hoc magnum esse mysterium, quod Deus sit tandem manifestatus in carne’ (CTS, 11, p. 97).

¹⁷ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 53). ‘Asperum est quod dicit Hieronymus, verba fieri de patre ipso. Nam scimus patrem nunquam indutum fuisse carne humana’ (CTS, 11, p. 97).

¹⁸ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 53). ‘Si simpliciter diceret Deum hic fuisse repraesentatum, nihil esset absurdi: tollatur duntaxat omnis personarum mentio, hoc erit verissimum, hominem illum qui in soli sedebat Deum fuisse’ (CTS, 11, p. 97).

the question of Jesus' identity is raised. The text states that Jesus had 'done so many miracles' that the crowds did not believe in him, thus fulfilling, the reader is told, the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa 6) such that 'he had blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, that they would not see with their eyes'.¹⁹ Following this quotation from Isaiah 6:10, the writer of John continues: 'Isaiah said these things, when he saw his [Jesus Christ's] glory, and spoke of him [idem]'.²⁰ Hence, the apostle understood these passages of Isaiah to be referring to Jesus Christ; and, what is more, Calvin recognises, the beginning of the sixth chapter of Isaiah speaks of 'the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated'.²¹ Therefore, Calvin concludes, the apostle John explicitly argues that Isaiah 6 refers to Jesus Christ, and in particular the first verse speaks of Christ being seated on a throne in human form. Calvin summarises:

What John says in his chapter 12 must be added, that when Isaiah saw God sitting on his throne, he saw the glory of Christ, and spoke concerning him. Hence what I have already cited from the ancients completely agrees with this, that as often as God appeared under the form of man, an obscure glimpse was afforded of the mystery which was at length manifested in the person of Christ.²²

Calvin concludes, therefore, that all such passages which discuss God in the 'form of a human being' refer to Christ. His exegetical method, at this point, is taken from John 12:41 – in his interpretation of such passages, Calvin will rely explicitly on this New Testament model. However, the problem with stating this as a firm exegetical rule is that Daniel 7:9 presents a unique problem.

Daniel 7:9–13 challenges Calvin's rule because it speaks first about the Ancient of Days being seated on the throne (v. 9) and subsequently about the

¹⁹ John 12:37–40. 'cum autem tanta signa fecisset coram eis non credebant in eum / ut sermo Esaiæ prophetae impleretur quem dixit Domine quis credidit auditui nostro et brachium Domini cui revelatum est / propterea non poterant credere quia iterum dixit Esaias / excaecavit oculos eorum et induravit eorum cor ut non videant oculis et intellegant corde et convertantur et sanem eos'.

²⁰ John 12:41. 'haec dixit Esaias quando vidit gloriam eius et locutus est de eo'.

²¹ Isa 6:1. 'in anno quo mortuus est rex Ozias vidi Dominum sedentem super solium excelsum et elevatum et ea quae sub eo erant implebant templum'.

²² Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 54). 'sed addendum est simul quod dicitur Ioannis 12. Cap. (v. 41) nempe quum Isaias vidit Deum sedentem in solio, vidisse gloriam Christi, et de ipso fuisse loquutum. Itaque quod iam citavi ex veteribus, aptissime convenit, quoties apparuit Deus sub hominis specie, ita specimen aliquod obscurum dedisse mysterii, quod tandem manifestatum fuit in Christi persona' (CTS, 11, p. 97).

Son of Man arriving on the clouds of heaven before the Ancient of Days (v. 13).²³ Calvin notes in his gloss on the passage that here ‘God is placed on the highest summit’ and ‘Christ the mediator is joined to Him’.²⁴ However, Calvin does not say that the Father is placed on the throne and that Christ the mediator is subsequently joined with him, but that God (*Deus*) is present on the throne. Calvin insists – following the rule established above – that Daniel only saw God in the person of Christ because ‘the likeness of a man cannot be transferred to either the Father or the Spirit: for neither the Father nor the Spirit was ever manifest in the flesh’.²⁵ Thus, despite the fact that the text itself invites interpreting the Ancient of Days as the Father and the Son of Man as Christ, Calvin rejects such an interpretation.

Calvin expands his interpretation of Daniel 7:9–13 by placing it in dialogue with Philippians 2:7: ‘but [Christ] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man’.²⁶ Calvin makes a distinction between Daniel 7 and Philippians 2 by noting that in the former Daniel states that Christ only took on the form of a human being, whereas in the latter Paul indicates that Christ was made man.²⁷ As a result, Calvin addresses the question of how the second person of the Trinity was able to appear in the ‘form of a man’ if, indeed, he did not yet have a human body. Calvin responds to this question by noting that in the Old Testament angels often appeared to human beings in the form of men – appearances in the form of men, he notes, who subsequently vanished.²⁸ Thus, it is possible for Christ to appear in the form of a man prior to the

²³ Dan 7: 9 and 12. ‘aspiciebam donec throni positi sunt et antiquus dierum sedit vestimentum eius quasi nix candidum et capilli capitis eius quasi lana munda thronus eis flammae ignis rotae eius ignis accensus / aspiciebam ergo in visione noctis et ecce cum nubibus caeli quasi filius hominis veniebat et usque ad antiquum dierum pervenit et in conspectu eius obtulerunt eum’.

²⁴ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, cols 54–5). ‘Illic ergo statuitur Deus in summo gradu, deinde adiungitur Christus mediator’ (CTS, 11, p. 98).

²⁵ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 55). ‘Sed quod ad praesentem locum spectat nobis sufficere debet, prophetam vidisse Deum duntaxat in persona Christi: quia non potest transferri ad patris personam, neque spiritus, quod dicitur de hominis similitudine’ (CTS, 11, pp. 98–9).

²⁶ Phil 2:7. ‘sed semet ipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo’.

²⁷ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 55). ‘Iam ergo tenemus Pauli consilium, ubi dicit Christum habitu fuisse repertum tanquam hominem, quia scilicet fuit abiectus et contemptibilis in carne nostra. Sed hoc loco spiritus sanctus aliud docet, nempe apparuisse iam tunc Christum in forma hominis, quamvis nondum esset homo’ (CTS, 11, p. 99).

²⁸ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 55). ‘Deus enim, ut satis notum est, aliquando corpora dedit suis angelis, quae postea evanuerunt’ (CTS, 11, p. 99).

incarnation: in such instances, one should not understand that Christ had a real human body, but only that he appeared in the likeness or form of a man (*fuisse in forma hominis*).

Calvin concludes his discussion of Daniel 7:9–13 by arguing that Old Testament prophecies which refer to God indicate either: (1) the undivided essence which is common to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; or (2) individual persons (i.e. the Father, Son or Holy Spirit) by indicating a peculiar personal property (e.g. 'in the form of man' belongs to Christ as his individual property). He writes:

The likeness of the body was only in appearance... but not in essence. Hence we collect, that when mention is made of God the whole essence is understood, which is common to the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father: for under the name Jehovah it is absurd to understand Christ only... At the same time, when the persons are mutually compared, the phrase, 'in the form of man', belongs to Christ alone. The whole Deity, then, but yet neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit appeared, because the persons begin to be considered when the peculiar property of Christ is shown forth.²⁹

Following these two rules, a given reference to God in the Old Testament could refer to either the undivided essence or to one of the divine persons. Within this context Calvin insists that if the reference is to one of the divine persons – e.g. Christ, as indicated by the property of being clothed in human form – the entire essence of God is simultaneously indicated. That is because, following trinitarian doctrine, each member of the divine Trinity is the full essence of God: i.e. in Calvin's language, the 'essence of God is not to be torn, as if one part could be with Christ, and another with the Father'.³⁰

Having concluded his discussion of Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7, Calvin briefly treats several passages from the New Testament which guide his interpretation

²⁹ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 55). 'Summa igitur est, similitudinem corporis fuisse in solo adpectu, quemadmodum propheta dicit, non autem in essentia. Hinc autem colligimus ubi simplex fit Dei mentio, intelligi totam essentiam, quae communis est filio et spiritui sancto cum patre. Nam sub nomine Iehovah, absurdum esset intelligere solum Christum. Sequitur ergo totam Dei essentiam hic comprehendi. Interea quum inter se comparantur personae, soli Christo convenit, quod dicitur fuisse in forma hominis. Deus ergo totus apparuit prophetae suo, et apparuit in hominis forma: sed neque pater neque spiritus sanctus apparuit, quia in rationem venire incipiunt personae, ubi ostenditur quid peculiare sit vel proprium Christo' (CTS, 11, pp. 99–100).

³⁰ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 56). 'hinc colligimus non debere essentiam Dei lacerari ac si pars una esset penes Christum, altera vero penes eius patrem' (CTS, 11, p. 101).

of the prophetic books. He indicates that he will not give a ‘universal testimony’ of scripture (*omnia scripturae testimonia*), but consider a few important passages from: 1 Timothy 3:16, John 14:10–11, 1 John 5:20 and Acts 20:28. These passages warrant a few comments.

- (1) 1 Timothy 3:16: ‘And evidently great is the mystery of godliness, which was manifested in the flesh, was justified in the spirit, appeared unto angels, has been preached to the Gentiles, is believed in the world, is taken up in glory.’³¹ Calvin states that in this passage Paul the apostle uses the phrase ‘manifest in the flesh’ (*manifestatum in carne*) to indicate that the complete essence of God was manifest in Christ. This follows, according to trinitarian doctrine, because the fullness of the divine essence is present equally and without division in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, the ‘whole deity was manifest in the flesh’ in the person of Christ.³² A similar argument, Calvin notes, is made in John 14:10–11 where Christ states that ‘I am in the Father and the Father in me’.³³ These two passages demonstrate that the divine essence is not to be torn asunder and divided among the individual divine persons.³⁴
- (2) 1 John 5:20: ‘And we know that the Son of God is come. And he has given us understanding that we may know the true God and may be in his true Son. This is the true God and life eternal.’³⁵ Calvin argues that in this passage from scripture the ‘true God’ referred to in the second sentence must indicate the Father. Further, in the third sentence the Son is called the ‘true God’. Therefore, unless the divinity of the Father is transferred from the Father to the Son, it follows that the phrase ‘true God’ is spoken of both the Father and Son. Hence, the Father and Son

³¹ 1 Tim 3:16. ‘et manifeste magnum est pietatis sacramentum quod manifestatum est in carne iustificatum est in spiritu apparuit angelis praedicatum est gentibus creditum est in mundo adsumptum est in gloria’.

³² Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 56). ‘Quum Paulus dicit Deum fuisse manifestatum in carne, certe illic non loquitur de secunda quadam essentia vel adventitia. Una est enim essentia Dei. Ergo tota deitas manifestata fuit in carne: sed ideo dicit Deum fuisse manifestatum in carne, sicuti dicit etiam Christus, Ego in patre, et patre in me est’ (CTS, 11, p. 101).

³³ See n. 32, and: John 14:10–11. ‘non credis quia ego in Patre et Pater in me est verba quae ego loquor vobis a me ipso non loquor Pater autem in me manens ipse facit opera / non creditis quia ego in Patre et Pater in me est’.

³⁴ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 56). ‘Et alibi quum docet totam plenitudinem deitatis residere in Christo, hinc colligimus non debere essentiam Dei lacerari ac si pars una esset penes Christum, altera vero penes eius patrem’ (CTS, 11, p. 101).

³⁵ 1 John 5:20. ‘et scimus quoniam Filius Dei venit et dedit nobis sensum ut cognoscamus verum Deum et simus in vero Filio eius hic est verus Deus et vita aeterna’.

must share a single divine essence unless one is willing to admit that there are two divine essences/gods.³⁶

- (3) Acts 20:28: 'Listen carefully to yourselves and to the whole flock, wherein the Holy Spirit has placed you bishops, to rule the Church of God which he has purchased with his own blood.'³⁷ In his gloss on this passage Calvin interprets the phrase 'the Church was purchased with the blood of God' to refer explicitly to the 'blood of Christ'. Following this reading the person of Christ is again understood to be God, given that it is Christ who suffered and died for human sin.³⁸ Calvin uses this passage as an argument in support of the claim that the person of Jesus Christ shares in the full divinity of God.

In conclusion, Calvin supports the methodological approach he adopted in his exegesis of Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7 with a barrage of arguments taken from the New Testament. Calvin argues that the hermeneutical strategies he adopted in his exegesis of Ezekiel 1 are supported by a close reading of Philippians 2:7, 1 Timothy 3:16, John 14:10–11, 1 John 5:20 and Acts 20:28. The New Testament, in this sense, provides concrete examples of how Christian theologians should interpret statements about the triune God.

Servetus, Biandrata and the context of the *Lectures on Ezekiel*

In the sixteenth century John Calvin was charged with 'Judaizing': the practice, according to his contemporaries, of defending a 'Jewish' (i.e. non-Christian) interpretation of Old Testament passages by means of an a-christological or a-trinitarian interpretation.³⁹ Calvin, according to the

³⁶ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 56). 'Ita quum Ioannes dicit in sua canonica Christum esse verum Deum, Hic est verus Deus et vita aeterna, inquit: certe blasphemia erit non tolerabilis, si dicamus verum Deum alium esse a patre. De quo enim hoc poterit praedicari, nisi de unico Deo? Iam si transfertur hoc a patre, desinet esse Deus. Si ergo Christus est verus Deus, sequitur non aliam esse eius essentiam, quam patris' (CTS, 11, p. 101).

³⁷ Acts 20:28. 'adtentate vobis et universo gregi in quo vos Spiritus Sanctus posuit episcopos regere ecclesiam Dei quam adquisivit sanguine suo'.

³⁸ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, cols 56–7). 'Ita quum Paulus dicit ecclesiam esse redemptam Dei sanguine, certe illic nomen Dei simpliciter et sine adiectione ponitur. Dum ille nebulo restringit nomen Dei ad patrem, quomodo hoc conveniet cum Pauli sententia? Deus, inquit, redemit ecclesiam suo sanguine: si Deus redemit suo sanguine, ergo intelligi debet Deus ille gloriae, qui ab aeterno fuit, et quem celebrant Moses et prophetae' (CTS, 11, p. 101).

³⁹ G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: OUP, 2009). See also Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007). See the work of Aegidius Hunnius, *The Judaizing Calvin*, tr. Paul A. Rydecki (Bynum, TX: Repristination Press, 2012), a translation of

Lutheran theologian Aegidius Hunnius, did not interpret specific passages of the Old Testament in a sufficiently Christian way. For example, Hunnius begins his work *Calvinus Iudaizans* with an analysis of how Calvin failed to interpret the Hebrew term *Elohim* (i.e. the plural name for God אֱלֹהִים) in Genesis 1:1 as evidence of the divine Trinity. Interestingly, Calvin's sixteenth-century critics were correct at least in this – Calvin, to a remarkable degree, did not defend a christological or trinitarian interpretation of numerous Old Testament passages which in the previous Christian tradition had been interpreted as such. Returning to the example of Genesis 1:1, one can observe that Calvin did not think the plural *Elohim* was sufficient evidence of the Trinity to warrant discussing the matter in his commentary on Genesis.⁴⁰ Given this context, it is somewhat surprising that in his *Lectures on Ezekiel* John Calvin provides a lengthy discussion of how to read particular Old Testament theophanies in a christological or trinitarian way. The reader is left to wonder why Calvin discussed this matter at length in his final work, the *Lectures on Ezekiel*.

It was noted in the introduction that Augustine of Hippo was ambivalent about how to interpret individual Old Testament theophanies. In book 2 of his *De Trinitate* Augustine argues that the 'Ancient of Days' seated on the throne in Daniel 7:9 could refer to God the Father as 'it is not improper to believe that God the Father was also accustomed to appear in that sort of way to mortal men'.⁴¹ Augustine, therefore, did not think that it was necessary to interpret Old Testament theophanies which present God in 'human form' as Christ. Further, one can also consider Jerome, who interprets the 'appearance of man' in Ezekiel as referring to 'the Father himself'. Calvin is aware of the arguments of Augustine and Jerome, and retorts that 'we know that the Father was never clothed in human flesh'.⁴² But, it is somewhat surprising for Calvin to be insistent on how to interpret a given theophany, particularly

Calvinus *Iudaizans* (Wittenberg, 1593). See also, Puckett, *Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, pp. 4–7.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentarius in Genesin*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Baum et al., vol. 23, p. 15. 'Habetur apud Mosen אֱלֹהִים, nomen pluralis numeri. Unde colligere solent, hic in Deo notari tres personas: sed quia parum solida mihi videtur tantae rei probatio, ego in voce non insistam'. The work is translated in *Commentaries of John Calvin*, vol. 1.

⁴¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 2.34 (Mountain, 50, p. 124). 'Non ergo inconuenienter creditur etiam deus pater eo modo solere apparere mortalibus'. Tr. Hill, *The Trinity*, p. 121.

⁴² See Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Hiezechielem Prophetam Libro Quatuordecim*, in CCL, 75, p. 23. 'Hominem autem Deum Patrem debere intellegi multa docent testimonia'. Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, col. 53). 'Asperum est quod dicit Hieronymus, verba fieri de patre ipso. Nam scimus patrem nunquam indutum fuisse carne humana' (CTS, 11, p. 97).

given that here he is insisting on a christological reading of a verse which contradicts both Augustine and Jerome. What is striking is that in general Calvin is somewhat more cautious about making definitive proclamations about how to interpret Old Testament theophanies. Thus, one is left to question why Calvin, in his final work, diverged from his normal approach.

Thankfully, in his *Lectures on Ezekiel*, Calvin provides an explanation for why he decided to articulate precise rules for interpreting Old Testament theophanies. Having concluded his analysis of Ezekiel 1:26, Calvin continues his lecture by stating that he is 'compelled to remark [in this way], because fanatics now spread a new error' – an error which persists because of 'a certain imposter, named George Biandrata of Piedmont'.⁴³ The error, Calvin notes, is a particular teaching that Christ and the Holy Spirit were distinct deities from the Father.⁴⁴ Therefore, to understand Calvin's renewed interest in interpreting Old Testament theophanies – and, particularly in defending a christological and trinitarian reading of these passages – it is necessary to recall Calvin's history with the anti-trinitarian theologians Michael Servetus and George Biandrata.

John Calvin and Michael Servetus share a long and unfortunate history.⁴⁵ The central moment or point of contact between Calvin and Servetus involved the Spaniard's exegesis of scripture and his critique of orthodox trinitarian theology. In the early 1530s Servetus published several anti-trinitarian works; further, his *magnum opus*, the *Christianismi restitutio*, was published in the year of his execution, 1553.⁴⁶ For present purposes it is not necessary to recount

⁴³ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, cols 55–6). 'Hoc etiam notandum est, quia fanatici etiam homines nunc novum errorem spargunt, quasi Christus esset alius Deus a patre, spiritus etiam sanctus sit alius deus. Fuit hic nebulo quidam Georgius Blandrata Pedemontanus, qui apud nos versatus est sub persona medici, et occultavit hic suam impietatem quoad potuit: ubi autem vidit se detectum, transfugit in Poloniam, et infecit totam illam regionem sua veneno. Est indignus qui nominetur, sed quia voluit acquirere nomen suis blasphemis, sit sane famosus et appetit. Quoniam hic error latius nunc vagatur, et tota Polonia infecta est, ut iam dixi, hoc diabolico delirio: ideo qui minus exercitati sunt in scriptura, munire se debent, ne incidant in illos laqueos' (CTS, 11, pp. 99–100).

⁴⁴ See n. 43.

⁴⁵ Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus (1511–1553)* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1953); Jerome Friedman, *Michael Servetus: A Case Study in Total Heresy* (Geneva: Droz, 1978); Gordon A. Kinder, *Michael Servetus* (Strasbourg: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 1989).

⁴⁶ Michael Servetus, *De Trinitatis erroribus libri septem* (Hagenau, 1531); idem, *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri duo* (Hagenau, 1532); idem, *Christianismi restitutio* (Vienna, 1553). For recent editions of the first two works, see Miguel Servet, *Obras Completas II-2: Primeros Escritos Teológicos*, ed. Ángel Alcalá (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2004).

the long and unfortunate history between Calvin and Servetus, but simply to recall Servetus' understanding of the relationship between God the Father and Christ. For Servetus, Christ was not the second person of the Trinity – the eternal Son of God – but, instead, the form taken by God when on earth.⁴⁷ This theology of Jesus was subsequently adopted by the Italian thinker Giorgio Biandrata. And it was the resurgence of Servetus' theology in Transylvania (i.e. Poland) through Biandrata, Calvin tells us, which formed the impetus for his re-examination of christological and trinitarian hermeneutics.

Giorgio Biandrata settled in Geneva in 1557. As a leading member of the Italian community in Geneva, Biandrata entered into debates with John Calvin over the divinity of Christ. The initial tension between Calvin and Biandrata was abated in May 1558 when the latter was forced to adopt the orthodox Calvinist position. But the peace did not last. After various peregrinations, Biandrata moved to Transylvania in 1563 and reaffirmed his previous anti-trinitarian views. Eventually, Biandrata joined forces with the former Calvinist pastor Francis Dávid: the two jointly published a lengthy work, *De vera et falsa unius Dei, Filii et Spiritus Sancti cognitione*, which developed a comprehensive anti-trinitarian theology.⁴⁸ This work is a complex collection of previously published works, often following the texts of Servetus and paraphrasing them throughout.

The anti-trinitarian theology of Biandrata follows that of Servetus, and George Williams presents a helpful summary:

following Servetus, Biandrata makes it very clear that he does not object to an eternal and indeed consubstantial Word thought of as God's Will, or as God's arm in creation, or as God's idea of Christ, or perhaps even as the soul of the future Christ as a Mediator; but he does reject the existence of a Son before the Incarnation.⁴⁹

The argument of both Servetus and Biandrata is that, prior to the incarnation of the Son, it makes no sense to speak of a pre-existent Christ. Biandrata argues that before the incarnation there was the eternal Word of God and the Spirit of God, but there was no Son of God *per se*. According to this logic, there could be no bodily presentation of Christ to the prophets of the Old

⁴⁷ See Michael Servetus, *Declarationis Iesu Christi filii Dei libri quinque*, in *Obras Completas II-1*, pp. 537–625.

⁴⁸ Giorgio Biandrata and Francis Dávid, *De vera et falsa unius Dei, Filii et Spiritus Sancti cognitione* (Alba Iulia, 1568); reprinted in *Bibliotheca unitariorum*, vol. 2, ed. R. Dán (Utrecht: Bibliotheca Unitariorum, 1988).

⁴⁹ George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd edn (Kirkville, MI: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), p. 1084.

Testament; Daniel and Ezekiel, it is argued, could not see the second person of the Trinity in human form, simply because at that point in history there was no Son of God.

John Calvin's *Lectures on Ezekiel* demonstrate a particular interest in the anti-trinitarian heresy which emerged in Transylvania in the 1560s. Calvin recalls that Biandrata initially moved to Geneva under the pretence of being a physician. While in Geneva, Calvin notes that he began to infect the Swiss canton with his impious ideas about Christ; subsequently, he recalls, Biandrata fled to Poland and 'infected the whole of that region with his poison'. Again, later in the text, Calvin repeats this point, arguing that the 'error is widely circulated, and the whole of Poland is infected with this diabolical delirium' such that 'those who are less exercised in Scripture ought to fortify themselves lest they fall into those snares'.⁵⁰

The timing of the resurgence of anti-trinitarianism in Poland corresponds precisely with the dates of Calvin's *Lectures*. In the introductory letter printed in the 1565 Latin edition of the *Lectures on Ezekiel*, the editor Charles de Jonviller notes that Calvin began the *Lectures* on 20 January 1563 and concluded them in February 1564 due to ill-health.⁵¹ Calvin died a few months later, on 27 May 1564. While he was giving his *Lectures on Ezekiel*, Calvin evidently received news that Biandrata was now in Transylvania and was actively preaching and spreading his anti-trinitarian theology. Within this context, the Genevan reformer returned to the question of how Christians should interpret Old Testament theophanies such as those found in Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7. Hence, in his final work Calvin presented a clear set of rules for interpreting such passages which diverges somewhat from his previous method of interpretation.

Conclusion

In his commentaries on the Old Testament, John Calvin often resisted the temptation to interpret all references to God in an explicitly trinitarian or christological way. Herman Selderhuis concludes his work on Calvin's commentary on the Psalms by noting the omission of numerous theological topoi: he writes, 'hence, discussions of such things as... the Trinity do

⁵⁰ See n. 43 above.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* (CO, 40, p. 2*). 'Satis enim fuerit pauca tantum attingere, quae ad has praelectiones magis pertinent. Quum 13. Calend. Februar. anni 1563 Ezechielem interpretari in Schola publica coepisset, quamvis assidue variis gravioribusque morbis affligeretur . . . tandem circiter Calend. Febr. anni sequentis, ubi ad finem cap. 20 (exceptis quatuor tantum versibus) pervenisset, tum domi manere et fere semper in lecto decumbere coactus est' (CTS, 11, p. xlviij).

not occur at all'.⁵² This judgement is well established; Calvin avoids such interpretations not only in his Psalms commentary, but also in his commentary on Genesis. Calvin is known for arguing that Christian exegetes should not prematurely attempt to defend a trinitarian or christological interpretation of the Old Testament.⁵³ This exegetical restraint, it was noted above, led to Calvin being charged with Judaising by Hunnius and others.

What is striking is that, given the resurgence of anti-trinitarianism in the 1560s, John Calvin developed a lengthy discussion of trinitarian and christological hermeneutics in his final work, the *Lectures on Ezekiel*. Having summarised Calvin's exegetical approach and the context which produced it, it is instructive by way of conclusion to note that a truly comprehensive treatment of Calvin's 'Judaising' would have to adopt a historically sensitive methodology.⁵⁴ Interestingly, this is something that the translators of the *Praelectiones in Ezechielem* noted in dissertation 2 following their translation. They write: 'All who have perused [Calvin's *Lectures on Ezekiel*] must vindicate him from the charge of favouring Judaism.'⁵⁵ As the editors noted a century and a half ago, these lectures provide a powerful counter-argument to the charge of 'Judaising'. It is clear that in response to the new threat of anti-trinitarianism and its dispersion throughout Transylvania, Calvin's *Lectures on Ezekiel* examine in depth a rigorous trinitarian and christological hermeneutic which remains underdeveloped in his earlier writings.

⁵² Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 284. Earlier in the work (p. 60), Selderhuis notes that 'in his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin is vitally interested in the first person of the Trinity. Consequently Christology and Pneumatology lie on the periphery'.

⁵³ See Muller, 'Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment', p. 77.

⁵⁴ Unfortunately, there is to date no study of Calvin's 'Judaising' which accounts for the breadth of his corpus. The majority of studies (e.g. Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*) focus narrowly on a given set of texts. Pak's focus is eight of the traditionally 'messianic Psalms' – and, while such studies are valuable in their own right, a definitive study on the subject would need to attend to the historical development of Calvin's thought.

⁵⁵ Dissertation 2 (CTS, 12, p. 417).