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'Let us not be like those … who want to call God to account.'[1] John Calvin's reading of some difficult deaths

Michael Parsons

John Thompson's fascinating study, *Writing the Wrongs*,[2] examines pre-critical commentators on some very difficult narratives that concern abuse of women in a patriarchal society. After detailed consideration of the primary texts he concludes that pre-critical commentators are 'fully capable of applying their own kinds of reading strategies to the Bible in order to deal with offensive narratives in ways that bend even the awkward silences of Scripture toward the divine norm of fairness, justice and the like'. He continues, 'Silences are mined for coherence, not incoherence. If we cannot see the coherence, the problem does not lie with the text or its divine author, but with the limits of our finite minds or the limits of revelation, for God does not tell us everything.'[3]

As Thompson's work indicates, even on a cursory reading some biblical narratives are deeply disturbing and, consequently, the commentator or preacher has often felt constrained to address and to resolve the apparent dissonance. This is true, for example, of the stories that recount rape and sexual abuse, as many following Phyllis Trible's seminal work have shown.[4] However, it is not only commentary on the narratives of sexual abuse that por-

1 John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, translated by D. F. Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 245—henceforth, *Sermons*.

2 John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs. Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

3 Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 252.

4 See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). See also, for example, Michael Parsons, 'Luther and Calvin on rape: Is the crime lost in the agenda?' *EQ* 74 (2002), 123–142.

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trays this characteristic. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament and those of Uzzah and Uriah in the Old are also narratives that exemplify the problem, simply because (in the first two instances) the punishment seems to be somewhat excessive, and in the last example God appears to allow a righteous man to suffer without taking into account his innocence, or coming to his aid.

The principal interest of this essay, then, is to examine John Calvin's response to these stories, a response which reveals the need to make some moral sense of what is happening in the narrative, and therefore a response that appears to show that the reformer reads the disturbing texts strategically. That is to say, a careful and close reading of Calvin's comments shows that he employs reading strategies in a conscious attempt to come to terms with at least some of the problems in these texts, particularly problems related to the centrality of God's involvement.

I Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11)

The evangelist's account of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira still has the ability to shock its readers and that shock is often registered as a question. Accordingly, the contemporary commentator, F. Scott Spencer asks, 'How do we ever adequately make sense of the manner in which Ananias and Sapphira are taken away: suddenly struck dead by the hand of God? Even granting the severity of their breach of community trust, does it warrant divine capital punishment?'[5]

The shock of the incident is certainly apparent in Calvin's commentary on the short passage, and (as with Spencer) it appears as a series of questions on the severity of the punishment in relation to the crime. There is, however, an obvious difference between the responses. Whereas Spencer's interrogative response is inclusive of himself, Calvin's is not. Even as Calvin raises the concerns of others, it is evident that the reformer himself does not share the speculative questioning of these readers—a questioning he believes to be derived from a self-oriented, impious and prejudiced outlook.

In a long paragraph in his explication of verse 5[6] he says that 'some are of the opinion that the punishment was too cruel'—that they are 'displeased with the excessive severity of God', and that others simply do not believe the narrative as it stands because it does not accord with the experience of those who today are as hypocritical as Ananias and Sapphira but 'get off scot-free', not being punished for their sin. That is, they argue on the grounds of

5 F. Scott Spencer, *Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 57–58. He mentions the Vaccaei—a community that executed any member who hoarded a portion of community land and crops for themselves—and the Israelites' stoning of Achan and his family, for example. See also, Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles. A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

6 John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1–13.* Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, volume 6 (translated by J. W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 135—henceforth, *Comm. Acts*, CNTC 6.

an apparent discrepancy between the text and actual, lived or observed, experience. Calvin judges that the former critics conclude as they do because they contemptuously minimise Ananias' sin, evaluating it from their own perspective and weighing it in their own scales and not from the divine perspective or in God's scales, and in so doing they are 'arrogating far too much to themselves'.[7]

The latter critics, however, are not as conveniently answered and Calvin is forced to argue the point. He does this in a rather complex way. First, the reformer writes concerning the Lord's punitive intrusion during the initial stages of the nascent church—those recounted in New Testament history—suggesting the principle that in the early church the divine punishment was as open, external and obvious as were the divine gifts. That is no longer the case, however. Things have changed. Neither the spiritual gifts nor the divine discipline are manifest in the same way today.

Second, he indicates that the very visible punishment of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us that though as yet we do not necessarily see people punished in the same way there is a very real divine judgement to come. The past punishment acts as a kind of precursory warning to the contemporary church.[8] At some length he says,

> But as God poured out visible graces on His Church at the beginning, so that we may know with assurance that He will be present with us by the secret virtue of His Spirit, and furthermore, showed openly by external signs what we realize inwardly by the experience of faith, so He has demonstrated by the visible punishment of two persons, how horrible a judgment awaits all hypocrites, who have held Him and the Church in derision.[9]

There is clearly in Calvin's mind a parallel between the gifts of the Spirit and the punishment of sinners in the experience of the early church of Acts. The reason he can suggest this is that the reformer earlier explained the word of Peter to Ananias as proceeding from a direct revelation of the Spirit, adding that 'Luke … indicates that the apostles to some extent represented God (*sustinuisse Dei personam*), and acted in His stead'.[10] So, just as spiritual gifts were prominent ('visible', 'showed openly' and 'external') in the apostolic age, so too was punishment as pronounced and public as that described in the text—after all, it came with the gift of a divine revelation to the apostle.[11] 'This was an extraordinary affair' (says Calvin)—evidently not something that one would expect to find in

7 *Comm. Acts* 5:8, CNTC 6.137.

8 Calvin says, for example, 'When we hear this let the threats of the Gospel terrify us, and be quick to humble us, in case we ourselves also experience a similar fate'—*Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135. Earlier he had asked, 'Now if the Spirit of God uses the mouth of a mortal man to deal so summarily with a hypocrite … how will the spurious stand up to the voice of God Himself, accompanied by the shrill of the trumpet, when they will be brought before His judgment seat?'—*Comm. Acts* 5:3, CNTC 6.133.

9 *Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135–136.

10 *Comm. Acts* 5:3, CNTC 6.133.

11 '[T]his is one of the gifts of the Spirit, as is plain from 1 Cor 12:10'—*Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135.

contemporary Europe or in the city of Geneva in particular.[12]

In typical reformational manner, this line of argument has the result of pointing readers to the authoritative Word of God, of course. Indeed, by implication, Calvin underlines this direction himself by asserting that 'the death of Ananias truly confirms the force of the Word, which Paul magnificently brings out, in saying that "it is the savour of death unto death to those who are perishing" (2 Cor 2:16)'[13]—that is, the physical, observed experience of Ananias' death is indicative, not merely of the written text, but of the powerful and poignant work of God to which that inscribed text so vividly points. It is God, after all, who takes life away.[14]

Later, Calvin defends the divine decision to punish Ananias and Sapphira on the rather obvious theological grounds that it is up to God himself to determine when and how to punish. After all he (and not us) is 'the Judge of the world'. However, he continues,

> [I]n the bodily punishment of these two, there has been set before us, as in a mirror, the gravity of the spiritual judgment which is still hidden. For if we think over what it means to be cast into the eternal fire, we shall not consider it the worst of evils to fall dead before the eyes of men.[15]

Here we notice that, if anything, the result of the reformer's explanation appears to be a reduction in the significance of the physical death of Ananias and Sapphira—it is not 'the worst of evils' as some no doubt contend, particularly as it contrasts with the spiritual and eternal death that judgement may usher in. Indeed its significance is seen most clearly as symbolic of 'the punishment which escapes human eyes'.[16]

1. Calvin's strategy

We have seen how the reformer handles the critical sceptics, but how does he himself handle the text—or, rather, more pointedly, how does he handle the problem of the text? Calvin appears to have a reading strategy that he adopts to satisfy the questions prompted by the punishment meted out against Ananias and Sapphira. We discover this in his emphases on the enormity of the couple's crime, on Satan's involvement and on the nature of God and the divine positioning in the narrative.

a) The enormity of the couple's crime

It is clear that if Ananias and his wife are to receive divine judgement, if they are to be condemned to on-the-spot death, then the heinousness of their crime needs to be stressed to show that in certain respects, at least, the punishment was proportionate to the crime

12 *Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135.

13 *Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135. Calvin continues, 'He is speaking indeed of the spiritual death of the soul, but in the body of Ananias there was a visible symbol of that punishment which escapes human eyes.' Calvin cites other texts in a similar way throughout his exposition of Acts 5:1–11. For example, he cites Prov 15:8, Lk 21:2, Matt 6:3, Matt 18:20, 1 Cor 3:16, Isa 11:4.

14 Calvin comments that Ananias was 'not struck down by a sword, by force, or by a hand, but he was deprived of life merely by hearing a voice'—*Comm. Acts* 5:7, CNTC 6.135.

15 *Comm. Acts* 5:8, CNTC 6.137.

16 *Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135.

or, in other words, that the sin somehow deserved the severe punishment it accrued. We discover that the reformer is at pains to demonstrate this.

On the face of it the biblical text singles out the pair's sin as deceit (5:2) and lying (5:3–4,8). However, in his initial summary Calvin states that Ananias is condemned for only one crime, 'his wishing to deceive God and the Church with a false offering'.[17] It is significant, of course, that Calvin judges that the crime is against both God and the church, underlining the fact that the couple sin against God *in the context of* the church.[18]

However, the reformer does not leave his summary-statement as if it said all that needs to be said. In fact, he considerably expands upon this by listing no fewer than six 'evils lying behind this deceit': (1) a contempt for the living God; (2) 'sacrilegious fraudulence', that is, a refusal to give to God what rightfully belongs to him; (3) perverse ambition and vanity, wanting to be seen in a good light before the community; (4) faithlessness; (5) ruining the church's communal strategy; (6) hypocrisy. Then, having listed the six evils to which he alludes, he adds, 'deliberate and audacious lying'. Later, he appears to define the sum total simply as 'impiety'.[19]

Unlike many scholars contemporary to us[20] Calvin appears to be as certain about the eternal fate of the couple, as he is about the crimes for which they were put to death before the onlooking community of faith. As for the fate of Ananias, for example, that appears to be summed up in Calvin's conclusion that, 'The sign of *a reprobate man* is this: he is so given over to Satan, that no room is left for the Spirit of God.'[21] Ananias was a member of the community, but he was not a true believer, not a spiritual man, not a man of faith.

It is important to note that Sapphira is treated as fully complicit with her husband and therefore as culpable and as deserving of the divine punishment. Though he makes nothing of the first verse that states that the wife had 'full knowledge' of her husband's duplicity, the reformer is adamant that Peter's interrogation (5:7–9) and the wife's punishment (5:10) demonstrate that she was 'no better than her husband'. Indeed, it is noticeable that Calvin emphasises this point.

He does so by phrases that reiterate the idea, both coupling them in their sin and also singling Sapphira out in her own right: 'the Church saw, sepa-

17 *Comm. Acts* 5:1, CNTC 6.132.

18 Barbara Green, 'This Old Text: An Analogy for Biblical Interpretation', *BTB* 36 (2006), 72–83, speaks of the precritical period being 'filled with insight about the experience of being Christian in relation to God and in solidarity with others' (74). It is to this emphasis that Calvin draws our attention.

19 *Comm. Acts* 5:1, CNTC 6.132–133; *Comm. Acts* 5:8, CNTC 6.137, respectively.

20 See, for example, Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 38; Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts. A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 65. Lüdemann claims that the exact crime is no longer clear (66).

21 *Comm. Acts* 5:3, CNTC 6.133–134, emphasis added. This conclusion is seen also by implication in Calvin's comment that, 'Since the proper nature of His Word was to save, it must indeed bring death to *those who reject* the salvation it offers'—*Comm. Acts* 5:5, CNTC 6.135, emphasis added.

rately, the treacherous intention and the stubborn wickedness of each of them', 'they were equally responsible', 'they were on a level in wickedly lying'; and also, 'she shows she is incurable', 'she has no terror of God'. Calvin concludes that 'they became mutual accomplices in their crime'.[22]

The reformer's application to his audience is both diverse and clear: negatively and personally, that they must neither make pretence to holiness that is non-existent, nor to be striving for the approval of 'onlookers (*theatri plausum*)';[23] positively and corporately, that God greatly approves of honesty in his people, and of a pure and holy government in the church.[24]

So we have discovered that a significant part of Calvin's strategy in dealing with the difficult situation that confronts him in this text is to emphasise the sinfulness of the recipients of divine judgement. Ananias and Sapphira demonstrate in their covert planning and in their actions that they are guilty before God and before the community of faith. Within this context, they deserve their fate. This is particularly highlighted by the implied contrast of Calvin's rather naïve insistence that the generous church in which these people sinned 'were more like angels than men'.[25]

The contrast could hardly be drawn more sharply. However, as noted above, there are two other important components to Calvin's reading strategy that are prominent in his short exposition: first, he stresses the role of Satan; second, he underlines the nature of God and his relationship to the church.

b) Satan's involvement

The narrative itself gives Calvin the cue on Satan's involvement, of course. Peter's accusation that Satan has filled Ananias' heart causing him to lie to the Holy Spirit allows the reformer to speak of the devil's tactics. He comments, for example, that Satan had devised 'a trick to penetrate that holy community', insinuating that he does so invidiously through the hypocrisy of two of its members. Calvin states this as a general rule: '[T]hat is the way Satan attacks the Church of God, when he can get nowhere with open war.'[26] Later in his exposition, commenting on Peter's explicit words ('Satan has filled your heart'), Calvin is adamant that Satan tempts everyone; it is a universal experience. However, he warns, 'when Satan takes possession of the heart he holds sway over the whole man, as if God were driven out'.

This indicates that both Ananias and his wife (by implication) were given over to Satan, that they had 'no room left' for the Spirit of God.[27] Proof of this derives from the fact (as Calvin sees it) that no one would dare to be so abusive of God unless they were 'devoid of all sense and reason'. It is noticeable, though, that Calvin allows no diminishing of responsibility on Ananias' part—no necessity drove

22 *Comm. Acts* 5:8, CNTC 6.137; *Comm. Acts* 5:7, CNTC 6.136; *Comm. Acts* 5:9, CNTC 6.137, respectively.

23 *Comm. Acts* 5:1, CNTC 6.132; *Comm. Acts* 5:2, CNTC 6.133, respectively.

24 *Comm. Acts* 5:1, CNTC 6.132.

25 *Comm. Acts* 5:1, CNTC 6.132.

26 *Comm. Acts* 5:1, CNTC 6.132.

27 *Comm. Acts* 5:3, CNTC 6.133, 134, respectively.

him to sin , no outside influence forced him. Neither he nor his wife was excusable in this. Despite Satan's treachery both were responsible for calling the wrath of God down on their heads.[28] This adds ammunition to his argument (noted above) that the crime deserved the punishment.

c) The nature of God and the divine positioning in the narrative

The third component that allows Calvin to handle this difficult text as he does is his view of God in the context of the narrated events. Interestingly, as Calvin expounds the passage, it is the person of God who almost imperceptibly but profoundly dominates the whole episode. And, typically, it is to the Triune God that Calvin points his audience—specifically to the two important theological doctrines of providence and *coram Deo*.

Calvin realises that it might have been otherwise, but considers it to be 'the certain providence of God' that caused the church community to see 'separately, the treacherous intention and the stubborn wickedness' of both spouses.[29] In another (but related) context John Thompson states that especially where Scripture seems obscure and offensive precritical commentators seek a 'rule' that will help to explain the event. He continues, '[T]hey frequently resort to providence: whatever happened in Scripture, surely God was in charge.'[30] It is in this spirit that Calvin hints at the over-arching divine providential determination of events and, as is always the case, that determination has purpose: 'it was … appropriate and beneficial for the edification of the Church'.[31]

The reformer also has a great deal to say about the fact that the events took place before God (*coram Deo*). For example, he says this following on Ananias' sin:

> At the same time it does not enter his head that he is lying and cheating *in the sight of God*, and that God will punish him for his falsehood. In effect he honours the feet of the apostles more than the eyes of God.[32]

Later, on reflection (almost by way of application), he says that Ananias should have behaved in the community 'as if he were seeing God with his eyes'. In other words, the reformer is anxious that his audience should realise that God is a present, personal and a living God in the context of the assembly. He rules the *ecclesia* through his Word, preached by the apostles—they were not acting on their own (*privati*).[33] He also makes the Trinitarian observations that it is actually Christ who 'presides in the assembly of those to whom they belong'[34] and that Ananias and Sapphira tempted the Spirit 'because they heedlessly devised their fraud as

28 *Comm. Acts* 5:3, CNTC 6.134.

29 *Comm. Acts* 5:7, CNTC 6.136.

30 Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 251.

31 *Comm. Acts* 5:7, CNTC 6.136.

32 *Comm. Acts* 5:2, CNTC 6.133, emphasis added.

33 *Comm. Acts* 5:4, CNTC 6.135.

34 *Comm. Acts* 5:8, CNTC 6.137. Earlier, Calvin had stated that Ananias had deceived the church and that 'where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, He is present, presiding (Matt 18:20)', *Comm. Acts* 5:4, CNTC 6.134.

if the Spirit of God was not the Searcher (*cognitor*) of hearts'.[35]

2. Reflections

We can see, then, that to his own satisfaction Calvin is able to answer the difficult question that naturally surfaces on a reading of Acts 5:1–11, Why is God so severe with Ananias and Sapphira? We need to acknowledge, first of all, that Calvin sees the difficulty, but he accepts it as such largely through the eyes of others who complain. Second, we have recognised a reading strategy in Calvin's response to the events recounted in the text. To allow the punishment meted out by God to be judged as deserved he does three specific things: he paints the couple in very bleak colours, portraying their sin as an enormous crime against both God and the church to which they belong.

With the help of the text he is also able to draw into the picture the malice of Satan himself. Finally, he positions the Triune God in the narrative in such a way as to underline the divine centrality in terms of his providential determination and his omniscient presence within the Christian community.

However, I think it would be quite inappropriate to say that the reformer answers the question objectively, or even comfortably. Arguably, his continual and urgent pastoral application suggests that he finds no comfort in the destruction of this couple, however sinful and culpable he maintains they are. Indeed, his heaping of fault against them points to a similar conclusion, necessitating as it does (according to Calvin) their demise and permanent removal from the pristine Christian community. Ultimately, though, they serve a broader purpose—then and now.

Calvin expresses this purpose in his comment on verse 11 ('Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events'). In delineating a twofold fear at this point the reformer suggests that by punishing some God calls believers back from temptation and forces unbelievers to give glory to him—'the punishment of one person was a warning for all'.[36]

On the surface this chapter appears to recount a fairly perspicuous event, after all Ananias and Sapphira *had* clearly sinned against the Holy Spirit and, by implication, against the community of faith. They had been punished for what they had clearly done. But what of a text in which, though someone *is* punished, the crime is far from certain. We turn to examine how Calvin reads and explains the passage in which Uzzah reaches out a hand to steady the ark of the Covenant and is slain in the effort.

II Uzzah and the Ark (2 Samuel 6)

There is no doubt at all that Calvin struggles more with the narrative of Uzzah's undoing than he did with that of Ananias and his wife, and for obvious reason. His introduction to the 17th sermon on 2 Samuel[37] indicates

35 *Comm. Acts* 5:9, CNTC 6.137. He states that Ananias and Sapphira had made their plans 'as if God had been shut out'.

36 *Comm. Acts* 5:11, CNTC 6.138.

37 The significance of Calvin's preaching is well documented. See, for example, T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992); Bernard Cottret, *Calvin. A Biog-*

as much: 'We have here a very strange story, that *a man attempting to honour God*, burning with a good and holy devotion, was punished like a criminal.' The reformer continues explicitly in the same vein:

> Now this certainly offends our feelings. We know that the main cause of offending God is our wicked will. … But … *when our desire is to glorify him*, and *we have no ill will in us*, even if we have erred and made a mistake, still it seems that God ought not to hold it against us. … It seems that this ought to be acceptable to God.[38]

Then, the inevitable question, 'Was being zealous that the ark of God should not be shamed a crime worthy of punishment?'[39] In reading this text the reformer clearly cannot use the reading strategy that worked in the case of Acts 5 where (as we observed) he was able to emphasis the enormity of the crime. Indeed, the way the question here is framed puts a stop to that approach. In many ways Uzzah is considered to be innocent (even 'zealous')—at least from the human perspective.

Calvin preached two sermons directly related to the terrible incident under discussion[40] and makes further indirect comment in the other two sermons he preached on 2 Samuel 6.[41] The question is how the reformer tackles the problem posed by God's seemingly excessive punishment of Uzzah's hasty action.[42]

1. Calvin's strategy

As we examine Calvin's approach to the problem we see that his reading strategy at this juncture appears to have three elements. The first (sequentially, though not necessarily in priority) is to stress the significance of the ark. The second is to point out the enormous difference between God's wisdom and humanity's, thereby seeking to silence any complaint. As we saw in our analysis of the previous example, this again

raphy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 288–308; Hughes O. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 90–134; Lee P. Wandel, 'Switzerland' in Larissa Taylor (ed.), *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 240–245; Dawn DeVries, 'Calvin's Preaching' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 106–124; Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 10–39; Michael Parsons, *Calvin's Preaching on the Prophet Micah* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2006).

38 *Sermons*, 244, emphasis added.

39 *Sermons*, 244–245. This is apparent later in the same sermon where Calvin says that some might argue, 'Why did God exercise such excessive severity on Uzzah? Would it not have been sufficient merely to admonish him?'—*Sermons*, 249.

40 That is, sermons 16–17 (Friday July 3rd and Saturday July 4th, 1562), *Sermons*, 229–261.

41 That is, sermons 18–19 (Monday July 13th and Tuesday July 14th, 1562), *Sermons*, 262–294.

42 Early on Calvin speaks of the hastiness of Uzzah and adds that 'God smote him … *because* of his hastiness'—*Sermons*, 242 (emphasis added). This comes at the close of his first sermon on the subject and is revisited only once, briefly, in the following sermons. Calvin speaks in this context of Uzzah's 'recklessness' and comments, 'Now you might consider this hastiness to be commendable zeal, but in the eyes of God it was inconsiderate zeal, and merited punishment'—*Sermons*, 249.

has the effect of positioning God-in-relation-to-humanity with reference to the narrative. This is where the answer is ultimately to be found.

The third element in Calvin's reading is an attempt to concretise the answer to the problem in human experience and fault. Here, we find that he blames Uzzah by introducing the important reformational topic of vocation (*vocatio*) and (though rather half-heartedly) even adds the qualification that Uzzah may have been ambitious in what he did.

a) The significance of the ark

Given that Uzzah touched the ark and died, it is important for Calvin to show the dreadful significance of the ark and he does this in two ways. In a secondary manner, it is significant in the overall narrative, of course. According to the reformer, chapter 6 indicates that David has turned his attention 'to restoring the integrity of the worship of God'; indeed, God has called and established him as king for that particular purpose.[43] During the previous reign the people had given up seeking God, they had no zeal or affection for him: 'Although there was an outward appearance of religion, it was coldly and grudgingly performed.'[44]

Apparently, then, David wanted the ark to be 'lodged in the centre of the country' where people could worship more easily.[45] So the ark is significant because of its centrality both to Israel's worship and to David's major task at this point. Nevertheless, the primary significance of the ark goes well beyond that.

Calvin understandably stresses the idea that the ark is representative of divine presence.[46] Here, preaching on 2 Samuel 6, he states that 'undoubtedly the Holy Spirit wanted … to emphasise that this ark was a definite sign and seal of the presence of God'. Indeed, in a daring application of Psalm 27:8 ('I have ever sought your face'), the reformer likens the ark to the face of God of which David speaks.[47] This notion presents the reformer with the opportunity to promote the magnificence and incomprehensibility of God—an opportunity he never misses.

At this point Calvin is attempting to square the obvious discrepancies between what he later calls 'a box', 'a casket of wood' and the 'greatness, majesty and power of God' whose dwelling place it represents.[48] He adopts the familiar idea of accommodation to explain it and in so doing emphasises the enormous difference between humanity and the Divine. We are 'too crude and weak', even applying all our senses to know God; he remains totally inaccessible; 'we can only crawl upon the earth, while "the heaven of heavens cannot contain him"'.

Therefore, he must come down to

43 *Sermons*, 229.

44 *Sermons*, 230. His application is inevitable, 'We must realise that it takes far more than making a formal profession and merely declaring that we are God's people and want to serve him. … [I]t should encourage us to seek him voluntarily, and not in such a cold manner.'

45 *Sermons*, 231.

46 He also speaks of it as 'a mirror in which he might be seen'—*Comm. Ps* 78:61, CTS 5.271.

47 *Sermons*, 232.

48 *Sermons*, 268, 271, 255, respectively.

> us when we cannot reach up to him. And how does he come down? It is not that he changes his place as far as his essence is concerned, but he must make himself known in a familiar manner. So when he conforms himself *to our smallness*, he does it only insofar as he abases himself. Not that there is change in him, but *his coming down refers to our capacity*.[49]

The italicised words indicate clearly that Calvin has in mind that the ark is the dwelling place of God in respect to our very limited understanding[50]—that is, it is (as Calvin puts it), 'a standing witness that God wanted to dwell in the midst of the people'. The reformer speaks in God's voice, 'Here am I, and when you come through these means, it is the same as if I were manifest to you and you were seeing me with the naked eye.'[51]

That is what the ark means to Calvin. It represents the immediate, personal presence of the living God amongst his people. Indeed, later, he briefly likens the ark to a sacrament—at least in principle. 'The people,' he says, 'had to be moved to seek God in a very tangible manner.'[52] Elsewhere, he speaks of it as 'a pledge of his presence'.[53]

What Calvin has done in relation to the problematic situation is clear. If Uzzah is killed for touching the ark, then the significance of the ark had better be determined. The wooden box represents the very real presence of God among his people. When Israel looks at it they see his 'face'.[54] It is *that* ark that Uzzah handled.

b) God's unfathomable wisdom

Ultimately, as I previously mentioned, according to Calvin, it is in the wisdom of God that we find the answer to the narrative's inherent problem. We saw this in the case of Ananias and Sapphira's deaths as well. Again, Calvin emphatically draws his audience's attention to the fact that the divine judgement is beyond our understanding—though, noticeably, the reformer continues to acknowledge the difficulty.

49 *Sermons*, 233. Later, Calvin says, 'We need God to make himself small, so that we can have access to him, otherwise we would be completely shut out. … [h]e indeed deigns to transfigure himself, so to speak, that we might approach him'—*Sermons*, 235. Notice the soteriological motivation: 'He wishes to display his virtue there for the salvation of his people'—*Sermons*, 236. Elsewhere, Calvin says that 'the mode of accommodation is for (God) to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us'—*Inst*. I.xvii.13.

50 David Willis, 'Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology' in A. J. McKelway / E. D. Willis (eds), *The Context of Contemporary Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974) 58, makes the point well, 'God begins with our incapacity, makes himself small to adjust to it, and by his gracious action of strategic self-limitation, transforms us so that we are increasingly united to God himself.'

51 *Sermons*, 233.

52 *Sermons*, 234. The similarity between a sacrament and the ark is put thus: 'God, therefore, must come down to seek us. But when he has come down, it is not to make us dull-witted; it is not to make us imagine that he is like us. Rather, it is so that we might go up little by little, by degrees, as we climb up a ladder one rung at a time. The sacraments are like this.' See also, *Sermons*, 236, 251.

53 *Sermons*, 237. See also, *Sermons*, 279, 499.

54 The ark was named, 'The Living God'; '[I]t says that God truly dwells between the cherubim'—*Sermons*, 232, 236, respectively.

> Scripture so often warns us … that the judgements of God are a profound abyss. This should make us utterly astonished, so that we fear God and his judgements, and find good in all he does—*even when we are confused over it.* … If many of his works still do not agree with our appetites or our reason, let us remain his captive, and realise that it is quite necessary that God should surpass all our senses.[55]

Calvin then suggests that if *we* were the judge of Uzzah he would have been absolved of any guilt because his motives were good and his zeal virtuous. Indeed, he would have been rewarded! Nevertheless, it is God's responsibility to discern between good and evil, not ours. The reformer's rule or principle is clear: 'God's will is the sole standard of all perfection.'[56] If the angels themselves are confused, continues Calvin, then our attitude should be one of quiet humility before the glory of God.[57]

This seems enough to settle the matter, but interestingly there is in Calvin's exposition a hint that the cause of Uzzah's death is still a niggling concern. Apparently, the reformer needs to find fault.

Uzzah's fault. Calvin has to move from his own perception that Uzzah was basically good—'holy devotion'; 'desire to glorify' God; zealous, though making a mistake[58]—to the divine perception that he had offended God. As we have observed, it should be enough for Calvin to believe that God knows what he's about, but the reformer clearly wants to satisfy himself from a very different perspective. He needs to know that Uzzah is in some way to blame; that God justly punished him. Pastorally, this is reassuring for those who listen—they can trust God to do the right thing in relation to his people, and it is a great deal easier if we can see the problem concretely.

At this point in the reformer's argument he brings in the important reformational subject of vocation in an attempt to prize open Uzzah's culpability. Calvin suggests that Uzzah went beyond the limits of the vocation to which God had called him. He defines vocation as 'the duty to which God binds us' and its use 'to prove the obedience that we render him'. In vocation (or calling) God defines the limits, our task is to walk within them: 'we should not go further than is legitimate for us'. In the example of Uzzah touching the ark, says Calvin, '[W]e are instructed not to attempt to go beyond the demands of our office'.[59]

It is at this juncture that Calvin begins to use words like 'presumption' and 'recklessness' and to imply pride

55 *Sermons*, 245, emphasis added. He continues, 'For what is his wisdom? It comprehends both heaven and earth, and yet cannot be perceived, because it is infinite. And what is our reason and intelligence? It is nothing but a little drop.'

56 *Sermons*, 245. God's 'justice is fair'—*Sermons*, 250.

57 *Sermons*, 246. Later, he says, 'When we come to God, let us fear, let us be stunned by his majesty, above all let us realise what we are, that we are full of nothing but rottenness and infection.' Though, he adds, 'However, let us not fail to taste the goodness of God'—*Sermons*, 255.

58 *Sermons*, 244. Later, Calvin speaks of the very real devotion of Uzzah within the situation—*Sermons*, 263.

59 *Sermons*, 246.

and ambition in reference to Uzzah, and, of course, these are displeasing to God.[60] Now Calvin feels more confident to assert God's just judgement.

> [I]f someone argues, 'Why did God exercise such excessive severity on Uzzah? Would it not have been sufficient merely to admonish him?' … God knows exactly how to silence our babbling and our rash judgements. … Let us learn, therefore, to avoid such arrogance, and to adore the judgements of God—and to realise that since Uzzah did not stay in his place, God had just cause to chastise him for his recklessness. … God was justly angry.[61]

Calvin argues further that in touching the ark Uzzah was a private person seeking to do what only consecrated people should.

In our examination of the deaths of Ananias and his wife we observed that Calvin was confident, because of their crime, that they were not people of faith, not authentic members of the Christian community, and that their fate was one of eternal judgement prefigured by their physical death. Here, in relation to Uzzah, Calvin is just as confident of Uzzah's fate—that he is a man of God and that his fate is a positive one, despite his death. God was not eternally angry with Uzzah.

> [D]eath could have been profitable to Uzzah, in that being thus punished, he did not fail to obtain pardon from God, and that it was even a mercy which God bestowed upon him when he took him out of the world. … God, seeing his zeal, had pity on him.[62]

God was angry with Uzzah, but because he saw his zeal 'he punished only his body in order that his spirit might be saved'.[63] Again, the victim becomes an example to instruct, not only his own generation, but also future generations, including sixteenth century Geneva.

2. Reflections

We see that Calvin himself has difficulties with the death of Uzzah, that he acknowledges them and that he struggles to come to some sort of conclusion on the matter. In so doing he struggles particularly with the thought that Uzzah appears to be spiritually zealous for the things of God yet that he is killed as punishment for an undisclosed wrongdoing. The reformer attempts to resolve the issue with the simple, dogmatic assertion that God's wisdom is incomprehensible to us. However, we notice, too, that this seems somewhat less than entirely convincing (even for Calvin) and, against the text, he pursues the problematic line that Uzzah overstepped the boundaries of vocation.

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60 *Sermons*, 247. Calvin's application implies a great deal about his thinking on Uzzah. He says, 'Let everyone openly devote himself to it, so that we will not go beyond our boundaries *like wild horses*', emphasis added. See also, *Sermons*, 250.

61 *Sermons*, 249, 250, respectively.

62 *Sermons*, 250. Calvin argues that God will punish the body of anyone who has done wrong, 'yet it will be for their profit'. Further, Uzzah died there, 'but it is a very small and light thing to pass out of this world. When God takes us from here, it is not a judgement so grievous as we think, in that we do not understand the life eternal to which he calls us'.

63 *Sermons*, 250.

It is worth pointing out what appears to be a glaring inconsistency in Calvin's argument as he proceeds through the sermons on 2 Samuel 6. It has to do with his reasoning on Uzzah's situation in relation to his conclusions on David. We have noticed that the reformer argues that Uzzah—though he was generally motivated by holy zeal and devotion—was guilty of overstepping the boundaries of vocation. He was smitten of the Lord because of this. However, as Calvin portrays the king we see that he stands in the same difficulty but is *not* killed by God. This seems to be contradictory.

That is to say David is continually represented by Calvin as failing before God in the same area as Uzzah. For example, Calvin suggests that David *presumed* to remove the ark, 'without being specifically commanded to do so'.[64] More relevantly, he is said to be without excuse for placing the ark of God on the new cart, 'because this duty was assigned to the Kohathites. … God ordained it this way, it should have been done in obedience to him'.[65] This speaks directly to the subject of vocation. David himself failed to recognise vocational boundaries, though he acts as he does—like Uzzah—with good intentions.[66] But according to Calvin's argument God should have smitten David.[67]

Perhaps the answer for this inconsistency is to be found in the centrality of David to the narrative, and particularly to the soteriological significance of the king—a significance that Uzzah could not possess, of course. Indeed, Calvin sees Uzzah's example as primarily having instruction to David, and only then to others. The centrality of the king also plays a huge part in the last example, that of Uriah, Bathsheba's ill fated husband.

III Uriah, an Innocent Man (2 Samuel 11–12)

In reading of the terrible death of Uriah[68] Calvin is clearly in a quandary. Uriah is obviously innocent of any crime, and, though he does not punish Uriah as he had Ananias and his wife and Uzzah, God is still plainly centrally involved in the whole situation. We might gauge the reformer's response by a paragraph that emerges some way through his sermons on the narrative in which he lists no fewer than six promises that God seems to have broken in regard to Uriah's death.

Where were the promises by which

64 *Sermons*, 231.

65 *Sermons*, 237. Significantly, later, Calvin singles out as the reason for Uzzah's death the fact that the ark should have been touched only by the Kohathites. The reformer repeatedly speaks of David's failure in this and of his contempt—see *Sermons*, 238.

66 *Sermons*, 239.

67 Later, Calvin says that David was displeased and angry because he had been involved 'in the scandal of seeing Uzzah die'—*Sermons*, 253. Apart from this, if as Calvin states in Sermon 19 (2 Samuel 6:20–23) that God 'is not interested in what is external' the difficulty over Uzzah's death not only remains, but is also sharpened—*Sermons*, 290 (he cites Jer 5:3).

68 Calvin speaks of Uriah as 'an innocent man' in his second sermon on the incident—*Sermons*, 505. Also, *Sermons*, 507. The reformer preached two sermons on David which touch directly on Uriah's fate: sermons 33–34 (Thursday August 13th and Friday August 14th, 1562), *Sermons*, 490–518.

> God testified that he would never forsake his own (Ps 37:28); that their blood would be precious to him (Ps 72:14; Heb 12:24); that even a hair of their head would not fall, and that they were numbered by him (Matt 10:30); that he would guide their steps, and that he would cause them to be guided by his angels (Ps 91:11); and that they would be fortified with a double rampart; that he would be their strength and their shield (Ps 28:7); that he would hold them dear as the apple of his eye (Deut 32:10; Ps 17:8)?[69]

Calvin adds, 'and everything else that it is possible to say', signifying a depth of concern here. The inevitable question, 'Why, then, did God not help him in time of need?' follows the assertion of Uriah's innocence and his reverence for God and precedes the poignant comment, '[I]t seems that he was frustrated *for having carefully served God*.'[70]

1. Calvin's strategy

The reformer's use of Uriah defines his strategy. He naturally presents him in stark contrast to the king. In contrast to David's shameless abuse of Uriah (both in taking his wife and in having him killed) Uriah himself is said to be faithful to David. In fact, he is a friend.[71] It is Uriah, not David who acted and spoke in a manner worthy of his vocation or calling.[72] 'Above all,' Calvin says, 'he put God first'.[73] In this way Calvin is able to show something of David's fall by revealing Uriah in such a contrasting and positive light.

However, there is more to Uriah in Calvin's reading of the text. He presents him as in a sense a prophet of God and this is where the doctrine of providence comes to the fore in his handling of the narrative. At the point of Uriah adamantly refusing to sleep with Bathsheba Calvin makes the point that it was God who controlled his feelings. Indeed, more formally, Uriah had been prevented from sleeping with Bathsheba 'by the secret counsel of God'.[74] The reformer concludes that 'it is certain that when Uriah refused to go into his house, it was a just judgement of God on David, *to lead him to recognise his sin*'.[75]

The italicised words show that Calvin (understandably) expounds the narrative with David as the central and determining character. All other characters (including Uriah) are significant only as they serve his situation of downfall and gracious restoration.[76] When Uriah speaks to David, Calvin is convinced that he has been instructed by God: '[I]t is certain that God placed these words in the mouth of Uriah *in or-*

69 *Sermons*, 507.

70 *Sermons*, 507, emphasis added.

71 *Sermons*, 477, 484, 507. Calvin asserts that Uriah honoured David in his position of leadership, *Sermons*, 496.

72 *Sermons*, 496–7. See also, *Sermons*, 498.

73 *Sermons*, 497. Calvin continues, 'Uriah was a man who feared God, and had his heart in religion.'

74 *Sermons*, 493.

75 *Sermons*, 493, emphasis added. See also, *Sermons*, 496. 'God … did not permit Uriah to go and sleep with his wife' –*Sermons*, 491. Calvin repeatedly makes this important point: see *Sermons*, 492, 493, 496.

76 See Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Old Testament Narratives. Reformation Thought and Narrative Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004), 205–224.

der to keep David more than convicted.'[77]

As we have seen, this whole construct that Calvin pursues appears to corner him, and naturally throws up what appears to be an insurmountable question on the nature of God's love for his own people. We have already seen that Calvin realises this. He recognises that if Uriah was doing nothing less than faithfully carrying out that which the Lord had given him to do, then why does he die so ignominiously?

Having asked the hard question, we find that Calvin teaches the opposite of the conclusion to which he appears to be coming. He says that far from teaching us that it is pointless to serve God, Uriah's death shows that this world is not our rest and that there is such a thing as eternal life. 'Indeed, there must be a better life than this one, for otherwise we would have to say that God was asleep in the heavens when Uriah was put to death.'[78] Again, notice the implicit reference to providence in this statement.

The logic seems to be: If God is not actively involved in human affairs ('asleep in the heavens') the conclusion would be that there is nothing beyond; however, God is implicitly involved in Uriah's life (and death) and because God is loving (implied) then Uriah's death must usher in something far better than that which he leaves in this world.[79] Indeed, Calvin concludes that, 'Death comes when the right moment arrives; that is to say, when God wills it.'[80]

As we have observed above on Ananias and Sapphira, and Uzzah's deaths, this particular death serves as an example. In this context 'we see that this death, instead of horrifying us, is useful to us, because it is like a mirror which represents eternal life before our eyes'.[81] The wages of the faithful are not received in this life, but in the next. The reformer cites Romans 8:28 and suggests on the basis of it that 'even death will be our entrance into a better life'. So he turns a very negative problem to a positive theological conclusion in focusing on the individual eschatology involved. Enjoying God's mercy here in this life ought to make us aspire to eternal rest in which we will fully know that goodness. Notice his conclusion:

> This is how we should judge the death of Uriah, and recognise that we most certainly have not been forsaken by God when he takes us to himself, for we must always go home that way. So let us not be surprised or think that God has mocked us in his promises that he wants to be our Saviour.

It is clear from this quote that Calvin has finally resolved the problem of Uriah's death. We would have to say, though, that he does this partly by ignoring the details and by normalising the death ('we must always go home that way') and also by asserting that it

77 *Sermons*, 499. Later, Calvin concludes: 'To sum up, we see how the tongue of Uriah was governed by the secret counsel of God, so that he taught David in such a way that he received greater condemnation'—*Sermons*, 500.

78 *Sermons*, 508.

79 Calvin makes a similar point earlier. He concludes that if this world is a final goal 'one would have to conclude that God is an idol or a phantom'—*Sermons*, 507.

80 *Sermons*, 508.

81 *Sermons*, 508.

is in that way that God shows himself to be our Saviour (*not* our Enemy).

2. Reflections

It is apparent that Calvin is deeply concerned with the tragedy of Uriah. The narrative problem is highlighted by the fact that Uriah is seen to be in stark contrast to David the king, even to being the mouthpiece of God himself. But it is more crucial than that. It seems to go right to the heart of a pastoral problem, perhaps *the* central pastoral question: Is God for his people? Can the righteous trust a God who allows Uriah's death?

The reformer himself questions the God of the promises against the God of Uriah's death. But ultimately, of course, Calvin wants to give an open access to the Scriptures to the unlearned, ordinary believers and to confirm their faith in the doctrine they are taught, not to shake that faith.[82] God is to be vindicated.

Pulling the rug from beneath the counter-argument, Calvin asserts that if God were *not* involved in Uriah's death there would be a greater difficulty. It is because God is intimately implicated in the death that we know Uriah's experience worked for his good, not ill. In other words, it is the divine involvement that assures us that Uriah was not forsaken of God (as it appears on the surface) but was taken to his eternal rest by divine mercy. Uriah's death was not punishment or abandonment, but rather blessing.

IV Conclusion

A few closing remarks might be made by way of conclusion. First, it is clear that in reading the narratives discussed Calvin refuses to take the easy way out by simply ignoring the difficulties. Indeed, in each case we have discovered his acceptance of the inherent difficulty, though in the situation concerning Ananias and Sapphira he targeted the problem from the perspective of others. The reformer struggles to handle the problem in the Uzzah and Uriah narratives—in the latter backing himself into a corner of his own making as he considers the apparent discrepancy between the divine promises and God's providential dealing with his servant.

Second, we have noted that there is in the reformer's approach a casuistic analysis in which Calvin assesses and assigns blame.[83] It appears that these narratives are dealt with more easily if blame and culpability can be apportioned. Within the context and scope of his own work Thompson comments that, 'Considerations are almost always tinged with an explicit concern for questions of praise and blame, with worries over right and wrong'.[84]

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira become less of a problem for Calvin by the reformer's insistence on the enormity of their crime, for example. Uzzah's death is 'legitimised' by drawing on the reformational idea of vocation and suggesting that Uzzah went beyond its boundaries in his touching the ark. Uriah's death, of course, proves

82 See Randall C. Zachman, 'Gathering Meaning from the Context' in idem *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 103–130 (105).

83 The phrase, 'casuistic analysis', comes from Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 246.

84 Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 8.

more problematic, but (naturally) the reformer still refuses to blame God.

Third, we have pointed out that Calvin's reading strategy includes introducing theological ideas that might help him to resolve the difficulties within the narrative. Interestingly, the reformer himself alludes to this in his treatment of Uzzah's death.

> Our glasses are doctrine. Through these glasses of true doctrine, we fear God and interpret his works. … Thus, when we have the Word of God to regulate our sense towards a proper appreciation of his works, then our judgement is right. When God exercises his judgement, we will say that it is just and equitable, and we will bow our necks beneath his yoke; we will make no complaint. … Yet our fear will make us humble and our faith will always remain constant and firm.[85]

The doctrine of providence is explicit in Calvin's comments on Acts 5 and Uriah's story, but it is clearly beneath the surface of his remarks on the other passage. This may appear to point to divine culpability, but the reformer's understanding is more complex than that and allows for a 'diversity of purpose' that leaves Ananias, Sapphira and Uzzah all guilty before God and without excuse.[86] At other times Calvin draws upon the ideas of *coram Dei*, vocation, personal eschatology, God's wisdom and so on in an attempt to make sense of the narratives, in an attempt to resolve the moral question implied in each.

Finally, it is worth noting that each death narrative forms an example for those who follow. Calvin's pastoral intention is to go beyond the text as such and to apply even the disturbing tales to his own people in Geneva. As Thompson underlines, Calvin was committed 'to an exposition of Scripture that would be *useful* in serving the cause of gospel and church'.[87] In that setting it is worth getting the reading strategy sufficiently watertight in order to move on to the purpose for which the passage is related, the up-building of believers in every subsequent age.

85 *Sermons*, 260.

86 'It is the linchpin of Calvin's account of the relation of providence and evil that there is "diversity of purpose" in providence; in the one event, a human agent, Satan and the Lord may each have different purposes'—Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 100. See, generally, 93–128. Also, Peter Wyatt, *Jesus Christ and Creation* (Allison Park, Penn: Pickwick, 1996), 69–72.

87 John Thompson, 'Calvin as Biblical Interpreter' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 62, emphasis added.