Mark Twain once wryly noted, "It is not the parts of Scripture that I don't understand that bother me. Rather, it's the parts of Scripture that I do understand." And there are few portions of Scripture that are more difficult for the Christian exegete and preacher than the book of Genesis—with all of its obscurity and clarity. Here the Christian interpreter confronts a whole battery of baffling questions. First, there are the obscurities. The scientist asks, "What has Genesis 1 to do with science?" The Christian historian inquires, "Should the account of the patriarchs be taken as history or (mere) kerygma?" The man or woman in the pew wonders, "When did God create the heavens and the earth? Where precisely was Eden located? Whom did Cain marry? How did Noah get all those animals on his ark?" So many obscurities, and the interpreter is barely six chapters in.

But the clarities of Genesis may be even more problematic. The patriarchs of old—these men depicted as heroes of faith—sometimes behaved rather badly: Noah weathered the flood, only to sink, naked, into a drunken stupor in his tent. Abraham—the great exemplar of faith—is a polygamist who has a nasty habit of endangering his beautiful wife Sarah by not acknowledging that they are married. And what is to be said about Lot, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, whose sins include polygamy, incest, drunkenness, offering daughters to sexual predators, selling a brother to slave traders, and slaughtering an entire city to avenge a sister's rape? What is the faithful Christian expositor to do with all of this obscurity . . . and embarrassing clarity in the book of Genesis? The brave interpreter exploring this dangerous landscape would seem well-advised to heed the sign on the rim of the Grand Canyon: Warning! Dangerous trail ahead. Proceed at your own risk!

John Calvin (1509–64) traveled the treacherous terrain of the book of Genesis repeatedly during twenty-five years of pastoral ministry in Geneva. The grand themes of Genesis (creation, fall, providence, justification by faith) as well as details of the patriarchs' lives are woven tightly into the argument and theology of each successive edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. In the 1559 edition of the Institutes, for example, Calvin quotes from or alludes to the
The reformer also lectured on the book of Genesis nearly 250 times. The reformer also preached extensively from the book of Genesis. Employing the *lectio continua* method of exposition practiced in Zurich, Calvin preached successively through Genesis from 1542–43. Seventeen years later the reformer returned to the history of the patriarchs: over a period of nine months he delivered 123 sermons on Genesis from the pulpit of St. Pierre's during weekday preaching services. In all these ways, then—behind desk, lectern, and pulpit—John Calvin interpreted the text of Genesis and communicated its message to his congregation in Geneva. Whatever its obscurities and difficulties, Calvin insisted that Moses' ancient account of creation, paradise, and the patriarchs was of central importance to sixteenth-century Christians. As Calvin once observed, "We are companions of the Patriarchs." 4

This article will explore the manner in which John Calvin interpreted and preached difficult passages from the early chapters of Genesis. In recent decades, historians and theologians have treated in detail Calvin's hermeneutics as well as his homiletic ministry in Geneva. Specialized studies are now available that examine the reformer's exposition of several problem texts in Genesis against the backdrop of the history of Christian interpretation. The first objective of this article is to take a wider (and somewhat bolder) tack, examining how Calvin the commentator treats more than a dozen passages from the first twelve chapters of Genesis so as to clarify the general coordinates of his method of interpreting difficult texts. Some of these passages are difficult because their meaning is unclear or their natural sense appears to violate common experience or reason; others are controversial because they highlight the moral failures of biblical heroes. All of these texts, however, are ones that Calvin himself acknowledged to be problematic or subject to variant readings. Calvin's work as interpreter did not end with exegetical study and the writing of commentaries; he also interpreted the biblical message each time he climbed into the pulpit. Accordingly, the second objective of this article is to consider the reformer's strategy as he preached these difficult texts to the people in his congregation. By comparing Calvin's interpretive approaches in these two didactic genres—exegetical commentary and sermon—this article will discover clues as to how he understood and differentiated his roles as biblical commentator and Christian preacher. This approach is admittedly broad, but it is hoped that reading Calvin intra-textually will provide insight and historical perspective as we seek to be faithful interpreters of the biblical text in the present day.

I. The Division of Labor in Calvin's Theology

Before examining John Calvin's method of interpreting difficult passages, it is important first to understand how he conceptualized his theological program. Calvin's "exile" years in Strasbourg from 1538–41 were decisive in the development of his theological method. During these years, Calvin served as the pastor of the French refugee church in Strasbourg and gave lectures in the city's academy. The reformer's pen was also prolific: he published a substantial revision of the *Institutes* in Latin (1539) and translated this version into French (1541). In addition, he completed his first commentary—on the book of Romans—in 1540, translated the sermons of Chrysostom (c. 1538–40), and defended the Genevan reformation in a treatise against Cardinal Jacob Sadolet (1539). In the midst of this intense pastoral activity and literary productivity Calvin formulated for the first time the division of labor that he intended between his theological exposition in the *Institutes* and the exegetical work in his commentaries.


3. See the evidence presented by Max Engemann in his introduction to Calvin's *Sermônes sur la Genèse*, *Chapitres 1.1–11.4* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), ix.
A. Calvin as Commentator

Calvin's most detailed discussion of the role of the biblical commentator appears in the preface to his Commentary on Romans (1540), where he distinguishes his own method of commentary writing from that of his contemporaries. After dismissing the allegorical or semi-allegorical approaches of Erasmus and Luther, Calvin turns his attention to the highly regarded commentaries of Luther's lieutenant, Philip Melanchthon. Instead of providing a verse-by-verse exposition of the sacred text, Melanchthon's biblical commentaries focused upon selected theological topics—or common places (loci communes)—through which the primary teachings of the Bible were summarized. While paying due respect to the German humanist, Calvin judges Melanchthon's approach arbitrary and unbalanced in that it entirely ignored many passages that did not fit the a priori questions and categories of the theologians. Calvin deems the exegetical writings of his friend, the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer, to be equally flawed. In his massive commentaries, Bucer provided the reader both a running commentary on the biblical text and a lengthy treatment of selected theological topics (loci communes). From Calvin's perspective, Bucer's work was too clumsy and cumbersome—both in size and intellectual substance—to be of much use to the average pastor. As Calvin notes: "Bucer is too verbose for busy men to read quickly, and too profound to be easily understood by the less intelligent and those not very perceptive. For in whatever subject that he addresses, so many things are suggested to him through the incredible brilliance of his mind . . . that he does not know when to stop writing."

In the preface to his commentary on Romans, Calvin proposes an alternative method of exegetical writing. In contrast to Melanchthon's use of theological topics, Calvin states his intention to follow a verse-by-verse exposition of the biblical text. In contrast to Bucer's prolixity and subtility, Calvin champions a method of interpreting Scripture that values concise notations on the text while refraining from unnecessary debates and digressions. As Calvin succinctly puts it, "the chief virtue of an interpreter lies in lucid brevity [perspicua brevitatis]." The Latin phrase perspicua brevitatis is crucial for our understanding of the reformer's method of exegetical writing as well as his hermeneutics. For Calvin, human communication—in oral and written form—reflects the "stamp of the mind [character mentis]" of the communicator. Accordingly, he believes that the Christian interpreter encounters and is able to understand the intention of the prophets and apostles in the text of Scripture. The task of the expositor, then, is to make clear the author's intention (perspicua) by exposing briefly what is pertinent and relevant (brevitas). Here we see the structure of Calvin's hermeneutic: the commentator must lay bare the intended (true) meaning of the biblical author by providing a clear and concise analysis of the biblical text, verse by verse, with the goal of edifying the people of God. This style of exegetical writing, Calvin believes, most closely accords with the style witnessed in the Scriptures themselves. Just as the prophets and apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote with power, simplicity, and clarity—avoiding the frivolous rhetoric and expansive subtility of classical rhetoricians—so the faithful expositor should unfold clearly the meaning of the biblical text in a manner that will assure the understanding and edification of the people of God.

B. Calvin as Theologian

Calvin did not intend his commentaries to stand alone, however. Rather he anticipated a functional symbiosis between the concise exegetical notations in his commentaries and the more discursive Institutes. The first edition of the Institutes, published in 1536, was conceived of chiefly as a brief summary of Christian teaching to be used in catechetical instruction. By 1539, however, Calvin had expanded and restructured the Institutes so that it is now a much longer work, intended as a theological primer for students of theology and as a supplement to his exegetical writings. In this revised form, the Institutes functions as a kind of collection of common places in which the reformer develops in a systematic fashion those theological topics omitted from his commentaries. Calvin explains his theological method in a striking passage found in the preface to the 1539 edition of the Institutes:

For I think that I have so understood the sum of religion in all its parts and arranged them in order that if anyone grasps it aright, he will have no difficulty in determining...
Calvin’s Interpretation of Passages in Genesis

must be judged by the moral standards of Scripture. The reformer explicates this principle elsewhere in his commentaries:

For, as in estimating the conduct of saints we should be skilful and humane interpreters, so also superstitious zeal must be avoided in covering their failures, since this would often infringe on the direct authority of Scripture. And, indeed, when the faithful fall into sin, they desire not to be lifted out of it by a false defense, for their justification consists in a simple and free demand of pardon for their sins.

From Calvin’s perspective, then, interpreters must not allow sympathy or superstition to blur their evaluation of the behavior of the patriarchs. Even the heroes of the faith are subject to the authority of Scripture and its ethical standards. Calvin is thus unwilling to appeal to extenuating circumstances or divine permission in order to excuse Abram’s action. His dissimulation was a lie, and thus culpable.

But if Calvin condemns Abram’s lie, he nonetheless assigns the highest of motives to the patriarch’s actions overall. Particularly in his sermon, Calvin showers explicit and effusive praise upon the righteous man Abram. The fact that Abram seeks refuge in Egypt, rather than return to his native country of Haran, is proof, Calvin believes, that the patriarch is living by faith in God’s promises. In old age, Abram has renounced all the pleasures and riches and comforts of this world; he aspires only for heaven. Hence, the reformer emphatically rejects the accusation of certain “scoffers” that Abram’s dissimulation was motivated by fear for his own safety or lack of concern for his wife. No indeed, Abram’s efforts at self-preservation were motivated solely by the desire to see the fulfillment of the promised offspring through whom God would bless the world. Abram’s willingness to give up his beloved wife Sarah—even to expose her to danger—for the sake of this divine promise was thus “an act worthy of great praise.”

Abram may have stumbled momentarily, but he never lost sight of God’s promise. Calvin observes:

And thus, it is certain that Abram’s desire to preserve his life proceeded from his passion and zeal to obtain the fulfillment of the promises of God. We therefore see in his error and shortcomings . . . the admirable strength of his faith. It is as if he renounced everything that was most dear and delightful to him in this world, in order to obtain that hope of God which he awaited.

What then happened to Sarai? Did she become the victim of Pharaoh’s lust? In the absence of explicit textual evidence, Calvin points his audience to a parallel passage in Gen 20 (v. 1) as support for his conclusion that God protected

appetites. However, in a surprising twist, Calvin also extols the outstanding virtues of the fruit of the vine: wine is an excellent gift that God gives to human beings to sustain them and bring joy to their hearts. Wine serves as a prime example of the lavish liberality of God and should spur us on to praise and bless him. Yet again, a difficult passage renders a powerful lesson.

B. Genesis 12:10-20—The Endangerment of Sarai

The pattern evident in Calvin’s treatment of Noah is repeated in his interpretation of the life of the patriarch Abram. While Calvin censures Abram’s sins, he nonetheless praises the overall righteousness and faithfulness of this man, holding him up as an example for all Christians to emulate. “For we must always remember,” Calvin notes, “that Abram is not to be regarded simply as one person among the faithful, but as the common father of all believers. Consequently, all should seek to imitate his example.” One of the places where the example of Abram would seem most problematic for Christian interpreters is the so-called endangerment of Sarai in Gen 12. In this passage, famine has forced Abram and his wife Sarai to leave Canaan and seek refuge in Egypt. Before entering Egypt, Abram instructs Sarai to conceal her identity as his wife so that he will not be killed. The trick works: Abram’s life is spared, but at the cost of Sarai being taken to the palace as one of Pharaoh’s wives. How, then, did Calvin interpret this shocking account? The Genevan reformer acknowledges from the outset that Abram’s dissimulation was a lie that endangered the chastity of his wife.

The pretense that Abram persuades his wife to adopt seems to have been tainted by a lie. And although afterwards he makes the excuse that he had not lied or feigned anything that was untrue, nevertheless he was guilty of a great wrong because it was not owing to his care that his wife was not prostituted. For when he lies about the fact that she was his wife, he deprives her chastity of its legitimate protection.

In the history of the exegesis of this difficult passage, Calvin’s judgment of Abram’s sin is uniquely severe. Whereas other commentators had justified Abram’s deception by appealing to his prophetic knowledge (Augustine), to divine permission (Ulrich Zwingli), to his good intentions (Johannes Oecolampadius), or to his unique mission to sire the messianic race (Martin Luther), Calvin by contrast allows no special dispensation to excuse the patriarch’s behavior. From Calvin’s perspective Abram—indeed all of the patriarchs—

69 Comment on Gen 12:11, in CO, 23:183; COTC 1:358.
70 Comment on Gen 12:11, in CO, 23:184; COTC 1:359.
71 See Thompson, “Immorality of the Patriarchs,” 16: “In addressing the patriarchs’ mendacity, polygamy, and similar crimes, none of the commentators surveyed is more reluctant than Calvin to invoke special dispensation. Not only is he consistently more severe in faulting the patriarchs for these infractions, he is exceptional in refusing to appeal to divine intervention of this sort to bail the patriarchs out.”
Sarai’s chastity during her sojourn in Egypt. Calvin turns his attention one more time to the sin of Abram in order to make a final application. Abram sinned because he employed illegitimate means to achieve a praiseworthy end. He did not entrust everything to the providence of God. Christians must emulate his faith, avoid his failures, and rest completely in God’s providence. And when it seems that God has given no means of escape, the Christian should repeat the words of an Abram better instructed: “The Lord will provide.”

In a recent study of Calvin’s exegesis, John Thompson argues that the Genevan reformer is consistently more severe than other medieval or Reformation era commentators in faulting the patriarchs for moral infractions. Calvin is more disciplined in following the biblical text, less willing to read into the silence of Scripture details that exonerate or excuse. My findings here substantially corroborate Thompson at this point. However, Calvin’s sermons provide a slightly different picture. In preaching the sins of the patriarchs, we have seen that the reformer regularly portrays Moses and the patriarchs in a more positive light than is seen in his commentaries. From the pulpit, Calvin is more inclined to interpret the silence of the biblical text. Hence, he defends Moses from the charge of ignorance by ascribing to him detailed astronomical knowledge. So too, he argues that Noah’s drunkenness was accidental (though still culpable) due to his incapacity for strong drink caused by long abstinence during the Flood. Indeed, Calvin the preacher is confident that Noah never again committed the sin of drunkenness. Finally, from the pulpit the reformer is more insistent in his defense of Abram’s character in the case of Sarai’s endangerment. In his sermons, therefore, we find Calvin holding in tension several competing concerns: he seeks to create sympathy for the patriarchs without rationalizing their misbehavior; he wishes to warn the faithful without providing justification to sinners;79 he attempts to defend the New Testament’s assessment of these men as exemplars of faith, even as he takes seriously the biblical passages that expose their sin. Calvin himself judges as misguided those who would defend the saints of old at any cost. Accordingly, in both commentary and sermon, the ethical standards of Scripture are the measuring stick by which the reformer judges the culpability of the misdeeds of the patriarchs. But as a Christian preacher, Calvin is interested in doing more than ascribing blame to sinful behavior; he also wants to edify the people of God. Thus, in the sermons under study, Calvin points to Noah and Abram as models not simply of faith but of the Christian life. They were men who trusted in God in dangerous times. They were men who sinned suddenly and unexpectedly. They were men who repented and received God’s grace. Abram and Noah are heroes of faith, not because they were impeccable, but because they persevered in their faith despite failure and difficulty. In that sense, we too are companions with the patriarchs.

IV. Conclusion

Scholars who have studied John Calvin’s hermeneutics have limited their analysis almost exclusively to the reformer’s theological and exegetical writings. His sermons have been all but ignored. This article has demonstrated that the reformer’s sermons on difficult biblical passages from Gen 1–12 depart at important points from the interpretation found in his commentaries. As Calvin moves from exegesis to homiletics, he is more positive in assessing the character of the patriarchs, more willing to interpret the silence of the text in a manner that accentuates the patriarchs’ status as spiritual models. This discrepancy is most likely explained by Calvin’s conviction that the Christian preacher should edify the people of God. In the sermons examined, Calvin does not attempt to rationalize sinful behavior, but he is concerned to strengthen his congregation’s confidence in the reliability of the biblical author as well as to preserve the reputations of Abram and Moses as exemplars of Christian faith and life.

This article has also shed light on the strategies that Calvin employed as he preached difficult passages from Genesis. Five principles evident in Calvin’s ministry of pulpit and pen seem particularly relevant for Christian preachers, for those who travel frequently the path between exegesis and homiletics. We will state these insights as propositions: First, difficult texts should be preached. Second, difficult texts provide access points to deeper Christian truths. Third, difficult texts offer preachers the opportunity to model before their congregation basic principles of biblical interpretation. Fourth, difficult texts should be preached with an eye to edifying the Church. Fifth, difficult texts should move the interpreter to worship the wise and inescrutable God. As Calvin reminds all who elucidate and preach the sacred text: when reason fails, adoration is the appropriate response of the Christian interpreter.