“It is difficult to believe God without an example,” Luther asserted, but to be alone in one’s faith, utterly devoid of a role model, is a misery few have suffered. For Luther, the paradigm of such aloneness was the patriarch Abraham. Yet, ironically, while Abraham may have lacked an example to follow, he himself served the Christian church as more than an example; indeed, he was canonized by Paul in Romans 4 as the very prototype of justifying faith. In like fashion, exegetes have always treasured the Old Testament as a book about faithful men and women who were exemplars and pioneers in all the trials and uncertainties of the life of faith. Abraham is extolled as the ideal husband, his marriage with Sarah the ideal marriage. Ambrose found in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob “a pattern of how to live,” that we may “follow in their shining footsteps along a kind of path of blamelessness opened up to us by their virtue.” In Calvin’s day, the degree to which Genevans were encouraged to pattern their lives after the saints of the Old Testament was reflected even in the names they gave their children.


Unfortunately, as Ambrose, Luther, Calvin, and virtually all exegetes acknowledge, the footsteps of the patriarchs often proved to shine not with the gold of virtue but with a slick of common clay. Abraham shrinks from fear, denying that Sarah is his wife at the risk of prostituting her—and that, not once but twice—following which he becomes a bigamist. Jacob’s name, “supplanter,” merely hints at the litany of lies and sharp dealing on which he built his life and fortune. And the other Old Testament heroes often rise no higher. Remarkably, the names of these dubious characters also appear in the genealogies of Christ or are listed as heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 or elsewhere. But how can the apostles, not to say the church, endorse such people as exemplars of Christian faith and life who seemed to know so little of Christian ethical standards?

Historians have regularly taken incidental notice of the many and diverse arguments by which Christian and Jewish exegetes have traditionally defended or excused the apparent moral lapses of the Old Testament saints. Few, however, have studied these arguments in systematic or synoptic fashion, that is, beyond the context of a single exegete. The best-known English-language survey of the problem is that of Roland Bainton, alongside of which one should mention Arnold Williams’s digest of Renaissance commentaries, in which several views of the patriarchs’ misdeeds are summarized. Other studies may be noted, including some which focus especially on Abraham and others which deal especially with Luther. Studies of Calvin’s views, however, prove to be far fewer. As an attempt to fill this lacuna, then, this essay will explore how Calvin uses or avoids these traditional arguments to excuse the behavior of the Old Testament heroes of faith by comparing Calvin’s treatment of the misdeeds of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis to the views of Calvin’s exegetical forebears and contemporaries.

Of all the studies noted above, the most systematic approach to this exegetical problem remains that of Bainton, who discerned essentially four ways in which theologians and exegetes have reconciled what he called “the immoralities of the patriarchs” with their status as exemplars.

1. The first was that the heroes of the old covenant had a special command, or revelation, from God, which is not repeated in our day.
2. Some thought, however, that these revelations might recur.
3. Others, who could not pretend to revelations but were interested in the revival of some features of the Old Testament morality, justified both the patriarchs and themselves on the basis of natural law, of the law of necessity, and of Aristotelian epieikeia.

4. For example, Bornkamm nicely surveys Luther’s approach to the patriarchal misdeeds in *Luther and the Old Testament*, pp. 18-25, but he makes few correlations with Luther’s predecessors and contemporaries.
6. Bornkamm (*Luther and the Old Testament*, pp. 23-25) guides the reader to several such studies. However, the provocatively-titled “Abrahams Lüge,” (by Hans Hellebard, *Theologische Existenten heute* 42 [1936]: 4-23) is a thinly-veiled allegory of how the German Church has co-opted the Third Reich; rebuttals were quickly issued by Adolf Schlatter in 1936 (“Allegorien—klingende Schellen, tönnendes Erz,” *Evangiische Theologie* 3 [1936]: 422-29) and by Ernst Haenchen in 1938 (reprinted in *Die Bibel und Wir* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968], pp. 28-49). More useful for understanding Luther’s position on Abraham’s (and, perhaps, his own) mendacity is the monograph by Walther Köhler, *Luther und die Lüge* (Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 109-110; Leipzig: Rudolf Haupt, 1913). Köhler’s essay is one of many works dating from this period which were provoked by some rather polemical Roman Catholic interpretations of Luther (esp. that of Heinrich Denifle). Luther’s real-life application of patriarchal precedents is cast into a broader perspective by Hastings Eells, *The Attitude of Martin Bucer Toward the Bigamy of Philip of Hesse* (New Haven: Yale University, 1924). A more exegetical-historical approach to the patriarchs is provided by Walther Völker’s brief essay, “Das Abrahamsbild bei Philo, Origines und Ambrosius,” in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 103 (1931): 199-207; and by David C. Steinmetz’s essays, “Luther and the Drunkenness of Noah” (in *Luther in Context* [Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986], pp. 98-111) and “Calvin and Abraham: The Interpretation of Romans 4 in the Sixteenth Century” (in *Church History* 57 [1988]: 443-59).
7. In addition to the works of Bainton and Williams already cited, one may find useful comments in Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1931). Despite the growing body of literature on Calvin’s hermeneutics and exegesis, the problem of patriarchal immorality has occasioned little comment. Richard Stauffer’s detailed study of Calvin’s sermons on Genesis does not mention this problem (see *Die, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin* [Bern: Peter Lang, 1976]). Calvin’s cautious appropriation of Old Testament “examples” is addressed by Marten H. Woudstra in “The Use of ‘Example’ in Calvin’s Sermons on Job,” in *Bezuid Verband*, ed. M. Armten et al. (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1984), pp. 344-51; and in “Calvin Interprets What ‘Moses Reports’: Observations on Calvin’s Commentary on Exodus 1-19,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 170-73. The treatment of patriarchal mendacity by Calvin and others is addressed at several points in the recent study of Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990).
[4] The fourth solution was to seek an escape by way of definition. The patriarchs did not really lie, nor kill, nor steal. Bainton's fourfold analysis is a useful grid, but there are some flaws in his approach. First, his application of the four solutions tends to pigeonhole his subjects, as if all exegetes fit neatly into only one of these categories. Bainton himself acknowledges that this approach breaks down in the case of Luther, who employs several of these solutions. In analyzing Calvin and some eighteen or so of Calvin's exegetical "colleagues," we will follow the somewhat simpler scheme of dividing the many excusatory arguments into two groups: those which presup-

9. Williams notes this option only in passing (Common Expositor, p. 167).
10. Commentaries examined for comparison with Calvin include various works (chiefly on Genesis) of Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Chrysostom, Augustine, Nicolaus of Lyra, Denis the Carthusian, Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, Oecolampadius, Pellican, Martyr, Zwingli, Cajetan, and Erasmus. With an occasional look at Philo, Josephus, Peter Lombard, and Rashi. My selection is not exhaustive but focuses on works which Calvin probably used or of which he was at least aware, or which were written by those whose other exegetical writings he is known to have read. I have been guided here by T. H. L. Parker's observations on John Calvin as a writer and reader of commentaries in Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), esp. pp. 27, 85-88; and also by the shelf-list of the library of Calvin's academy (Alexandre Ganoczy, La Bibliothèque de l'Académie de Calvin: Le Catalogue de 1572 et ses Enseignements [Geneva: Droz, 1969]). Admittedly, a book's presence on this inventory of the Genevan Academy is only suggestive, not conclusive, of what Calvin may have read or had access to. In any case, my concerns are not to demonstrate lines of influence but simply to establish a plausible exegetical context for Calvin's own views.

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pose some sort of special divine intervention, and those which do not. Given that the episodes of patriarchal immorality even within the confines of the book of Genesis are many, while the arguments which are employed to ameliorate or excuse their behavior are often applied with only minor changes from incident to incident, our discussion will proceed by surveying these various arguments, noting their distribution among the commentators and narratives, and by examining in detail any special advocates or detractors for each argument. In the course of that survey, we will note in passing our commentators' conclusions concerning the patriarchs' morality. Such conclusions are by no means foregone, for even the patriarchs' severest critics offered at least partial excuses, and there are remarkable divisions among exegetes over the extent of the patriarchs' culpability. Following this detailed survey, we will attempt to locate Calvin relative to other biblical commentators, especially those of his own day.

I. EXCUSES BASED ON SPECIAL DIVINE PERMISSION

To excuse a questionable action by claiming special divine sanction is truly to invoke an excuse than which none greater can be conceived: princeps legibus solutus est. As the author of nature as well as the legislator and judge of all creation, God may dispense from his usual order as he sees fit, regardless of whether the reasons are clear to us. With respect to the patriarchs' misdeeds, then, it was commonly argued that they received special permission from God or were secretly guided by the Spirit—and it would seem self-evident that what God allows cannot be condemned by mere mortals.

Nonetheless, even here authors found some parameters. As Bainton points out, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, and Scotus argued that while God might grant a dispensation from the duties of the second table of the Decalogue, it would be a virtual self-contradiction for God to...
enjoin a violation of the first table, which comprises our duties not to neighbor but to God himself.  

Lying, however, is an act perpetrated upon one’s neighbor and does not necessarily breach the first table. Consequently, with respect to the various lies the patriarchs told, most commentators agreed that such mendacity was not sinful when done by divine command. Zwingli thus thinks Abraham lied when he said Sarah was his sister, but since his deed was divinely directed it was no sin. Zwingli even compares Abraham’s act to Peter’s denial of Christ, in that both were directed by providence. One of the most “excusable” lies in the Old Testament (judging by the commentators) is the deception by which Jacob secured the blessing of primogeniture from his father by masquerading as Esau. It is undeniable that Jacob lied when he said to Isaac, “I am Esau, your firstborn,” but even those who, like Musculus, find this kind of lie most reprehensible “in itself” admit that it is praiseworthy if done at God’s command. Luther compares Jacob’s lie to the Israelites’ spoiling of the Egyptians on the eve of the exodus and states that “to take from another by deceit what God has given you is not a sin,” but rather (if done by divine command) “a saintly, legitimate, and pious fraud.” Indeed, Luther compares Jacob’s trick to the deception which Christ practiced by God. It is not surprising, then, that with respect to crimes considered worse than polygamy—such as Abraham’s endowment of his wife, Lot’s willingness for his daughters to be ravished, and the incest committed by Lot and by Judah—almost no one is willing to posit a special dispensation per se, despite the frequent recognition that these misdeeds served good ends. The greater shamefulness of these deeds probably underlies the dual exposition which is commonly found with respect to Abraham’s endowment of Sarah and Tamar’s sexual entrapment of Judah, wherein commentators are far more willing to excuse the lies of

12. Bainton (“Immoralities of the Patriarchs,” p. 40) also briefly notes the view of Ockham on the possibility of odium Dei.

13. Zwingli, Farnago annotationum in Genesis 12:13, 31:33 (CR 100.71f, 208) hereafter cited as Zwingli’s Comm. Gen. (Note that this designation will be used for all commentaries after their initial notation, except where confusion might result.) Augustine, Chrysostom, Lyra, Denis, and Oecolampadius also presume that Abraham was specially guided and assured by God that Sarah would be protected; see Augustine, Contra Faustianum 22.33 (PL 42.422, NPNF 4.285); Chrysostom, Hom. 32.3 on Gen. 12:10 (PG 53.297); Hom. 45 on Gen. 20 (PG 54.416-22); Hom. 51.3 on Gen. 26:10 (PG 54.455); Lyra, Postilla Super Tolum Biblias on Gen. 20:11 (Strassburg 1492; facsimile reprint: Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1971), sig. F ix; for Denis on Gen. 20:11, see Doctoris Ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia, vol. 1 (Monstrolis, 1896), p. 279b; Oecolampadius, Expositiones in Genesis 12:9-15 (Basel, 1536), fol. 131*, 132*.

14. Notwithstanding the incredible exegesis of Rashi, who posited a massive ellipsis between “I am” and “Esau” (reported by Lyra, Comm. Gen. 27:19, sig. G iv), this suggestion is not taken up by later commentators.


16. Luther, In Primum Librum Mose Enarrationes 27:34f (WA 43.531f; LW 5.149).

17. Of eight commentators who address the morality of Joseph’s charade (namely, Ambrose, Lyra, Denis, Cajetan, Luther, Zwingli, Pellican, and Musculus), all except Lyra finally excuse him, and all except Cajetan and Luther on the grounds of special dispensation or guidance. For Calvin, see below.

18. Denis, of course, proceeds to argue that what God dispensed Abraham from was something other than adultery; see his Comm. Gen. 36.4 (p. 338b).

19. There are a few exceptions. Zwingli (Comm. Gen. 19:31; CR 100.126) invokes divine dispensation as the chief cause of Lot’s incest, implying that God sometimes ordains that the pious fall into disgrace. In the same instance, Chrysostom implies that God wanted Lot, if not drunk, at least oblivious to his daughters’ cohabitation, so that he might be found guiltless; in any case, Scripture “obviously” intends to provide Lot with an excuse (Hom. 44.5 on Gen. 19:33, PG 54.411f). Most notable is Conrad Pellican, who not only cites Lot’s offer of his daughters as governed by general providence, but also believes that both Lot’s daughters and Tamar conceived with God’s blessing—as the birth of twins to Tamar attests; his exegesis of these incests is redolent of Chrysostom and Origen. See Pellican on Gen. 19:8, 19:31-35, and 38:13-27 in his Commentarius Bibliorum, vol. 1 (Zürich, 1532), fol. 24v-25r, 50v-51r. Calvin may be correcting Pellican when he asserts that twins may portend good or evil; see his Comm. Gen. 38:27 (CO 23.500; ET may be found in the two-volume Calvin Translation Society edition [hereafter abbreviated as CTS] of Calvin’s Comm. Gen. at 2,289).
Abraham and Tamar than their sexual misconduct. In the latter case, while Luther excuses Tamar's lie, even comparing it to Jacob's holy deception of his father, he echoes Denis in repudiating her harlotry: "The Holy Spirit does not move or impel anyone to fornication and incest."  

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. Evidence to the contrary, while not wholly absent, is rare. Thus, the first time Calvin comments on Abraham's lie about Sarah, he does adduce some ameliorating considerations, but a special dispensation is not among them. When Abraham and Isaac repeat this folly, no excuse at all is to be found. Calvin nowhere excusesJacob for deceiving his father on the grounds of a dispensation; and even with respect to Joseph's charade, Calvin will do no more than allow the possibility of special divine influence. That the absence of this explanation in these texts represents a deliberate omission on Calvin's part is supported, I think, by one place where he does appeal to special dispensation. In his earliest remarks on polygamy, Calvin admits that Abraham had such a dispensation. What makes this admission worth noting, though, is that in none of his later discussions of polygamy (at least a dozen instances over the course of twenty-five years) does Calvin repeat this argument—presumably indicating that he had second thoughts.

Needless to say, Calvin finds no dispensation in the case of Lot and his daughters, nor in that of Judah and Tamar.

As already stated, the appeal to special dispensation was an argument which was capable of controverting all opposing considerations, and one may wonder why it was not employed even more liberally to combat the offenses caused by the scandals of the patriarchs. The answer is not hard to come by, in that most of these narratives make no mention of the divine intervention which a dispensation must presuppose. God does not appear to command Abraham to lie about his wife, nor does he so command Isaac. There is no evidence that God specially commanded Jacob to deceive his father—though Denis may imply that such a command was mediated by his mother, and others think Isaac's "trembling" (in Gen. 27:33) is proof that he received some divine confirmation. There is also no sign of special instruction given to Abraham to marry Hagar—though, again, some think he "assumed" that Sarah must have had such a command in initiating the polygamous union. That so many commentators seem to know so much about unrecorded special dispensations calls forth two observations:

First, herein may lie a rationale for Calvin's reticence to cite special dispensation as an excuse—namely, while he may have seen the need for an excuse, he does not see the evidence from on high that one was actually granted. Accordingly, one must qualify one's assessment of Calvin, lest one conclude that he does not believe in divine intervention in moral affairs. He does, but usually only where he can find it in the text. In his comments on Genesis there are three instances in which Calvin invokes special dispensation to excuse otherwise unseemly behavior. Thus, while it is not the place of a private person to arm himself and undertake a public war, when Abraham did so in Gen. 14:13, he was "armed with a heavenly command, lest he transgress the bounds of his vocation." Similarly, while Calvin does not approve of the "divination" by which Abraham's servant seeks a wife for Isaac, he...
observes that, in light of the salutary outcome, the servant must have been moved "by a secret impulse of the Spirit." And, with respect to Jacob's genetic manipulation of Laban's flocks, Calvin justifies Jacob's cleverness in light of a special command he received. Insofar as other commentators comment on these three ethical problems (not all do), their solutions include those of Calvin. What is to be noted here, however, is the fact that in the first and third of these instances the exegetical tradition is able to find textual support for a divine dispensation, and Calvin's own exegesis reflects this tradition. Thus, Abraham's special command to undertake a war is grounded by Calvin and others in Melchizedek's encomium (in Gen. 14:20) that "the victory was guided by God." While the special command by which Jacob (quasi-fraudulently) manipulated Laban's flocks is not reported at all in the narrative of Jacob's actions, Calvin asserts that Moses records it later. The "fleece" set out by Abraham's servant does not seem to have such a command, yet Calvin infers it nonetheless, based on the good outcome of the episode.

A second observation concerning the tendency to appeal to "unreported" dispensations is that this tendency, evidence as it is of the desire to get the patriarchs off the hook, may be seen in other forms. In fact, there are a number of other excusatory arguments which, as Bainton suggested, are but variations on this theme. I would isolate four, including excuses based on (a) allegory, (b) typology, (c) the special mission of the patriarchs, and on (d) the special gifts of the patriarchs.

a. Excuses based on allegory. As is well known, allegory was commonly employed in the exposition of Scripture as a means of reducing the scandal of the "unedifying" aspects of the Old Testament. While more common and more overt among ancient and medieval exegetes, the Reformers by no means abandoned allegory altogether. For the purpose of the present discussion, allegory is to be distinguished from typology as a more general, moralistic interpretation of a text, while typology (below) does not so sever the text's interpretation from its historical content. Regardless of how our commentators may have used or eschewed allegory in other circumstances, almost all refuse to appeal to allegory as a means of excusing patriarchal immoralities. The chief exception in our survey is Origen, whose remarks on Abraham's concealment of Sarah's identity are typical of his general approach.

What edification will we receive when we read that Abraham, such a great patriarch, not only lied to king Abimelech, but also surrendered his wife's chastity to him? In what way does the wife of so great a patriarch edify us if she is supposed to have been exposed to defilements through marital indulgence?

Origen's comments on patriarchal polygamy are similar:

What then? Are we to suppose that the inducements of the flesh flourished in so great a patriarch [sc. Abraham]? ... Or, as we have already often said, do the marriages of the patriarchs indicate something mystical and sacred?

Origen proceeds to interpret the patriarchs' multiple wives as their multiple virtues and to encourage his listeners to take to wife as many such virtues as they can. He thus abandons all exposition of the historical narrative in favor of moralizing of this sort. It remains a minor curiosity, then, that his comment on Lot's incest does not invoke allegory but attempts to excuse Lot and his daughters by appealing to their worthy motives. Of still greater interest, however, is the utter paucity of this kind of allegory in exegeses after Origen, at least so far as concerns excusing the patriarchs' misdeeds.

b. Excuses based on typology. If most commentators avoided the kind of allegory employed by Origen, they did not hesitate to use another kind of figurative exposition: typology. Augustine invokes this as one of several excuses for the patriarchs' polygamy; specifically, the patriarchs were obliged to procreate for the sake of "typology." Augustine has in mind here the precedent provided by Paul in Galatians 4, according to which Abraham's two wives figure the two covenants. Unlike Origen, however, Augustine does not forsake the literal or historical narrative; rather does he embrace typology as part of the history itself, indeed, as an unseen but determinative factor in the patriarchs' behavior. It is proof of Augustine's desire to preserve a historical dimension—however

28. Calvin does not say where. In the main, commentators cite two excuses for Jacob's fraud: (1) a special command from God and (2) a laborer's natural right to his wages (see below, under "prudence"). Lyra, however, finds proof of the dispensation in the dream which Jacob reported in Gen. 31:10-13; see Lyra, Comm. Gen. 30:37 (sig. H iii 3). The same text is cited by Musculus, Comm. Gen. 31:10-12 (p. 669), and Calvin's remarks would imply that he, too, has Jacob's later vision in mind.
much he upstages it—that he even attributes to the patriarchs a full awareness of their role in the drama:

Nor do we believe that the holy and spiritual men of these times—the patriarchs and prophets—were taken up with earthly things. For they understood, by the revelation of the Spirit of God, what was suitable for that time, and how God appointed all these sayings and actions as types and predictions of the future. Their great desire was for the New Testament; but they had a personal duty to perform in those predictions. . . . So the life as well as the tongue of these men was prophetic.30

By appealing to the “personal duty” of the patriarchs “to perform in those predictions,” Augustine has imputed to them a special divine permission to engage in acts which appear unseemly but which presuppose New Testament truths. To be sure, the text itself seems less determinative for such dispensations than the sensitivity of the interpreter to types. One of the more poignant passages in Augustine is where he says that Moses’s murder of the Egyptian could be excused in light of its prophetic significance, if only he (Augustine) could think of some; apparently, since he can’t, it’s not.31

The use of typology as an excuse for patriarchal immorality was more popular among the church fathers than with the Reformers. Augustine invokes it to explain Abraham’s lie about Sarah, who is his “secret spouse” even as the church is the secret spouse of Christ. Similarly, what Jacob did

is no lie, but a mystery. . . . They are accounted lies only because people do not understand that the true things are what is signified by the things said; [instead] they believe the false things that are [literally] spoken.32

Thus Jacob, in bearing kidskin on his arms, is a type of Christ, who bears our sins. More often is typology invoked as an excuse for polygamy; it is so applied by Justin, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, as well as by Lombard, Lyra, and presumably by other medievalists. Chrysostom does not use this excuse much, but he is unusual in his willingness to extend such an excuse to Tamar, in whose twins he finds a type of the church and synagogue; Pellican and Martyr appear to follow in this instance, perhaps on the strength of Chrysostom’s authority. The only Reformer who consistently appeals to typology, “mystery,” or “prophetic significance” to excuse the patriarchs, however, is Zwingli, who excuses just about everything on this basis.33 But aside from two other instances in Martyr and another in Musculus,34 the argument is not used by the Reformers (Zwingli notwithstanding), and despite Martyr’s own occasional inconsistency, he best articulates the drawback of typological excuses. Of Lot’s incest he says:

Those who wish to protect at any cost the misdeeds of the patriarchs say that these [deeds] are to be excused because they were prophecies of types and shadows of future things. Therefore they think that nothing is to be sought here beyond what these [deeds] signify, but not whether they happened lawfully or not. We, however, freely embrace the signs, types, and shadows, but nonetheless not so as to neglect the history.35

c. The special mission of the patriarchs. Another form of the argument from divine dispensation is that the patriarchs had a special mission, that is, a special set of “standing orders” which bound them to engage in various unseemly actions. The obligation to take multiple wives for the sake of typology could be seen as one such mission; there are perhaps three others.

First, there is the command given to Adam and Eve, to “increase and multiply.” While this had little relevance to patriarchal lies, it was cited as a mandate pertaining to patriarchal polygamy. Thus Chrysostom allowed Jacob multiple wives to increase the race—an excuse which no longer applies to us. The same argument is cited by Augustine and Jerome. Here, too, there are variations. Ambrose excused the patriarchs’ polygamous marriages by appealing to their circumstances, namely, the depopulated condition of the postdiluvian world. Lombard also seems

30. Augustine, Contra Faustum 4.2 (PL 40.218f, NPNF 1 4.162), emphasis added.
32. Augustine, Contra mendacium 10.24 (PL 40.533, NPNF 1 3.491f), emphasis added for clarity; cf. De mendacio 4.5-5.7 (PL 40.491f, NPNF 1 3.460).
33. Zwingli cites typology to excuse Abraham’s lie about Sarah, Jacob’s polygamy and sheep-breeding, and Rachel’s theft of Laban’s idols; in addition, he says the excuse is applicable to the patriarchs in general; see his Comm. Gen. 29:30, 30:40, 31:33 (CR 100.189, 198, 205).
34. Martyr excuses Abraham’s polygamy typologically and offers typology as an alternative explanation for Jacob’s sheep-breeding, while Musculus offers typology as one excuse (among others) for Joseph’s lie. See Peter Martyr on Gen. 16:2 and 30:33, In Primum Librum Mois . . . Commentarii (Zurich, 1569), fol. 65r, 126; and Musculus, Comm. Gen. 42:8 (p. 783).
35. Martyr, Comm. Gen. 19:31 (fol. 78r). The closest Calvin comes to a typological appeal is his admiration for the explanation of Jacob’s lie as a figure of how we are blessed not in ourselves, but in Christ; see Serm. Gen. 27:11-29 (CO 58.1730). The figure is probably taken from Ambrose, but Calvin does not thereby fashion this figure into an excuse for Jacob.
to trace the legitimate institution of polygamy to the period after the flood, only his concern was not the general depopulation but the dearth of the people of God; hence, polygamy was allowed in order to preserve true religion and right worship. Neither the command to "increase and multiply" nor the variations noted above are embraced by the Reformers as valid excuses for the patriarchs' polygamy. Significantly, this very command was the cornerstone of Bernard Rothmann's argument for polygamy in Münster, and that alone would have poisoned the argument for the Reformers.

A second conception of the "special mission" of the patriarchs was more popular among the Reformers, however. While refusing to invoke the more general mandate to increase and multiply, they were remarkably receptive to what could be called a Christological form of the same argument. The seeds of this argument appear in Augustine, who argues that the patriarchs were obligated to marry not only to increase the people of God, but also to increase that people "through whom the Prince and Savior of all people should be born." Thus the patriarchs were husbands and fathers "not for the sake of this world, but for the sake of Christ." It does not appear that Augustine applies this as an excuse for polygamy, though the implication is undeniable in his explicit mention of Abraham and Jacob. In any case, procreation for the sake of obtaining the "promised seed" is cited by Luther as a praiseworthy motive not only in the monogamous union of Adam and Eve, but also in the polygamous marriages of Abraham and Jacob. At the same time, Luther points out what ought to be obvious, that this promise has been fulfilled and this motive can no longer apply to us. The same argument is used by other Reformers, and it plays a minor role in Calvin, appearing in his comments on polygamy in 1538 (above) and less explicitly in a later account of Sarah's motive for bringing Hagar to Abraham. Something similar also occurs in Calvin when he attempts to explain the state of mind which led Abraham to conceal Sarah's identity and thus endanger her: Abraham was concerned for his wife, Calvin states, but he was even more concerned for the promise to himself and to his seed which seemed, at the moment, to depend wholly on his personal survival. Calvin does not conclude, however, that such considerations are sufficient to excuse Abraham or Sarah in either of these affairs.

There is a third conception of the patriarchs' special mission which also serves to excuse and explain some of their questionable deeds. This concept of Abraham's mission was developed (though not coined) by Chrysostom, who depicts Abraham as a sort of Old Testament apostle. Abraham's "mission" is to spread true religion, and to this end God not only drives him from place to place but also leads him into all sorts of scrapes so that, by rescuing and vindicating him, Abraham's virtue is made conspicuous and the fear of God is instilled in all who hear of it. This concept of "mission" is applied not to the patriarchs' polygamy but chiefly to the deception practiced by Abraham and Isaac with respect to their wives' identity. Again, the appeal to a special mission is really just another way of invoking special dispensation: Abraham's deeds and intentions are superseded by the divine plan, which overrides lesser moral concerns. The argument also tends to vindicate Abraham by the outcome of the event, as if means are a minor issue when the end is directed by God. Such an excuse based on Abraham's special mission is also cited by Paul of Burgos, Denis, Pellican, Martyr, Musculus, and Luther—but not by Calvin.

38. Augustine, De bono conjugal 9.9, 26.35 (PL 40.380, 396; NPNF 3.403, 413). The same argument seems to surface briefly in Lyra's explanation of Rachel's desire for children (Comm. Gen. 30:1, sig. H ii').
39. Luther, Comm. Gen. 4:1, 16:1f, 20:1, 30:3 (WA 42.176, 578-81, 43.655, 659; LW 1.237, 3.42-46, 5.328, 334). Luther sees the so-called "protoevangelium" of Gen. 3:15 as a reaffirmation of Gen. 1.28.
41. See Hom. 32.4 on Gen. 12:10 (PG 53.297), Hom. 45 on Gen. 20 (PG 54.416-22), and Hom. 51.3 on Gen. 26:10f (PG 54.455). Chrysostom probably took this argument from Josephus (Antiquitates 1.158f, 161-68; LCL pp. 77, 81f), although P. R. Coleman-Norton does not mention this in his brief note, "Chrysostom's Use of Josephus" (Classical Philology 26 [1931]: 85-89). It is especially at this point that Chrysostom is revealed as at once the most enthusiastic and the least critical defender of the patriarchs. Yet however much Abraham's fame was increased by these incidents, it is difficult to grant (with Chrysostom) that Abraham's virtus was the content of his notoriety!
42. Burgos (Lyra's "corrector") adds this excuse to Lyra's account at Comm. Gen. 12:13
The special gifts of the patriarchs.

It is possible for God to control Abraham’s destiny with him unwitting, then it is also possible for Abraham to intend and direct that destiny in the same way, albeit with divine insight. A few commentators thus excuse Abraham’s misdeeds by appealing to his own knowledge of the future. How can Abraham be accused of risking his wife to adultery if he knew ahead of time that no adultery would come to pass? Augustine says that God (through some unspecified means) assured Abraham that Sarah would not be violated. Both Lyra and Burgos go further and argue that, as a prophet (see Gen. 20:7), Abraham would have foreknown that his ruse would result not in Sarah’s violation but in both her deliverance and his. Pellican and Martyr also adopt this line. The argument here can begin to overlap with the arguments from prudence or from Abraham’s extraordinary trust in providence (below). In all three cases, whether one appeals to prophetic foreknowledge, prudent insight, or providential assurance, Abraham’s actions are seen to be quite reasonable in view of his keen and sure knowledge of probable consequences. Nonetheless, the argument from special gift is seldom cited by most Reformers, and its premise is implicitly refuted by Luther when he states that Abraham did not have a word from God to guide him. And Musculus attacks the argument with still greater deliberation, arguing that Abraham’s own words reveal not his prophetic spirit but his fear of death! Calvin, for his part, makes no mention of Abraham’s foreknowledge but interprets his “prophetic office” as an honorific way of calling attention to Abraham’s intercession for Abimelech. For all this, however, Abraham’s ruse is still not excused by Calvin.

II. Excuses Based on Natural Considerations

The chief difference between supernatural excuses and those based more on natural factors would seem to lie in the accessibility of the excuse for contemporary application or imitation. Excuses based on natural for...
Similar extenuating circumstances are cited to ameliorate Lot’s offer of his daughters and his later incest with them. Specifically, a common excuse for Lot’s outrageous offer is that he acted under duress or out of mental perturbation. This excuse is used by Augustine, Lyra, Denis, Luther, Zwingli, Martyr, and Musculus, but is not mentioned by Calvin. Lot’s drunkenness is used by virtually everyone, including Calvin, to acquit him of the crime of incest—though he is then universally upbraided for his inebriation. Some also adduce Lot’s sorrow and depression (especially over the loss of his wife) as reasons why he sought comfort from drink; this excuse Calvin disallows.49

Lot’s inebriation is itself a variation on the excuse of ignorance. Augustine cites ignorance as a factor in Abraham’s polygamy: while he knew a son was promised to him, the argument runs, neither he nor Sarah knew for certain that she was ordained as the mother of that son. Lacking a sure indication, Abraham tried in his ignorance to fulfill the promise. Augustine’s argument is followed by Denis, Luther, Pellican, and Martyr.50

A final extenuating circumstance to be noted is an argument as old as Adam, namely, *cherchez la femme.* Several commentators pointedly observe that neither Abraham nor Jacob initiated his polygamy, but each merely complied with the wishes of his wife. The “weighting” of this observation varies: at one extreme, Pellican and Martyr think Abraham assumed Sarah was guided by special divine leading; at the other, Musculus compares Abraham’s error in listening to his wife to Adam’s own downfall, granting, however, that Adam acted in defiance of a divine prohibition whereas Abraham did not.51 Calvin does fault Sarah for her plan here and imputes the plan to her lack of faith, but he does not appear to minimize Abraham’s guilt on her account. In one text, however, he shifts some of the blame for Jacob’s polygamy onto Laban.52

b. Excuses based on good intentions. The ancients, no less than we moderns, were well aware that intention is a crucial factor in determining the criminality of a deed. Consequently, much exegesis of these problem passages was devoted to establishing that the patriarchs did not intend harm or evil, however their deeds appeared. Some of what we have described as extenuating circumstances could also be included here, such as Lot’s drunkenness, which prevented him from intending incest, though that was in fact the substance of his deed. Here we may add other instances. One involves the motives of the patriarchs in taking plural wives. It was argued virtually *pro forma* that Abraham and Jacob were not moved by lust—unlike those who advocate a return to that custom. However, two writers do not defend the patriarchs against this charge. One is Agrippa von Nettesheim, who contrasts the “libidinous” patriarchs to their chaste and continent wives.53 The other is Calvin, who excuses Abraham of lust but brands Jacob with the charge without reservation.54 More to Calvin’s point, however, is that while Abraham’s motive is not faulty (since he did not act out of lust), his polygamy with Hagar is still a sin in and of itself.55 The excuse that they were not moved

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In his *Serm. Gen. 26:6-10* (CO 58.103, 112), Calvin states that both Abraham and Isaac were chastised for their fear by pagan kings because (in the case of Isaac) “he was not worthy to be corrected more honorably.” Some of Calvin’s severity at this point is paralleled in Musculus; see the letter’s *Comm. Gen.* 12:13, 202 (pp. 309, 489).


53. Agrippa—a Renaissance man of letters whom Calvin once characterized as a “skeptic” and as “that impure dog”—thinks his estimate of the matriarchs’ chastity is buttressed both by their abstention from intercourse once their sterility became apparent and by the absence of polyandry among them; See Agrippa’s *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia feminarum,* in idem, *Opera,* vol. 2 (Lyon, n.d.; reprint ed.; Hildesheim, 1970), p. 523.

54. Calvin excuses Abraham and faults Jacob in his 1538 letter to Pignaeus (CO 10b.258f). He also excuses Abraham in his *Serm. 1 Tim.* 3:2 (CO 53.249) and possibly in his *Comm. Mal.* 2:15 (CO 44.453, LTS p. 555). Jacob, however, he later charges with depravity, license, sin, adultery, and abrogation of divine law; see *Comm. Gen.* 29:27, 30:3, 30:15 (CO 23.403, 409, 412; LTS 2.133, 142, 147).

55. That Calvin does not have a secret soft spot in his heart for Abraham is also proved by his comments on Abraham’s marriage to Keturah. Calvin wrestles with the traditional question of how to reconcile Paul’s description (in Rom. 4:19) of Abraham’s body as “as good as dead” with the fecundity Abraham and Keturah manifested. While the narrative of Genesis 25 places this marriage after the death of Sarah, Calvin reconciles Paul by placing it earlier, during Sarah’s lifetime—even though this solution then drives him to admit Abraham committed polygamy a second time! Nonetheless, Calvin proceeds to vilify Abraham for this “adulterous marriage,” which rendered him “unworthy to be blessed by God.” See *Comm. Gen.* 25:1 (CO 23.342, LTS 2.33f).
by lust is also applied by most commentators to Lot and his daughters, as well as to Tamar; here, for the most part, Calvin grants the point but exonerates no one.56

“Good intention” is also employed to relieve Abraham of the charge of lying to Pharaoh and Abimelech. There are a number of exegetes who employ the threefold stratification of lies which is attributed to Augustine.57 Accordingly, there are jocular lies, pernicious lies, and officious lies. The first harms no one and is simply for sport; the second harms by intent; and the last is intended for a neighbor’s benefit and is usually conceded to be excusable. Luther oscillates between two explanations, but he prefers to admit that Abraham lied officiously, that is, without intent; and the last is intended for a neighbor’s benefit and is usually condemned. Of a piece with Calvin’s attitude towards the midwives is Augustine’s technical distinction, but both admit the fact of Abraham’s lie and excuse it by his good intention.58 The same argument is applied by a few to the lie Jacob told his father, whereby he is excused by his pious intent.59 Even more do exegetes tend to excuse Joseph’s lie to his brothers by his honorable intention-

The appeal to a good intention also underlies what Bainton has called the “escape by way of definition.”60 That is, in the case of Abraham, he did not really lie. This is a more common excuse than the appeal to a notion such as the officious lie not least because Augustine himself—having posited eight kinds of lie—proceeds to dismiss them all.56 By contrast, the account of Tamar’s lie to Judah is accepted in both of the narratives, but it is in the context of the, shall we say, “gender struggle” that the lie is excused.61

Augustine prefers the route of (re-)definition: “It is not the same thing to hide the truth as it is to utter a lie.” Abraham did not deny that Sarah was his wife, he merely asserted that she was his sister, which in an extended sense was true. Augustine’s argument (that what Abraham said was not technically a lie) is also cited by Lyra, Denis, Martyr, and, apparently, by Cajetan—but usually with serious reservations appended.62 Both the notion of officious mendacity and that of the “redefinition” by which disimulation is not counted as a lie are rejected by Calvin. It is not that Calvin disregards the significance of intention, but he is exasperated with the way these overly clever exegetes obscure the patriarchs’ intention—which, Calvin thinks, was improper. Hence Calvin finds no problem with Augustine’s reading of Abraham’s mindset, insofar as Abraham himself seems to have realized that to keep silent is not to tell a direct lie, and Abraham’s words do not contradict the actual facts. “Nonetheless, when every excuse has been registered, it remains that Abraham’s defense was either frivolous or, at the very least, too feeble. . . . Although he did not lie in words . . . his disimulation was implicitly a lie.” Elsewhere, Calvin declares that “God is not a sophist” and faults Isaac precisely for his intention, which was to mislead Abimelech. And, commenting on the lie told by the Hebrew midwives to protect Moses, Calvin argues against those who find no sin in an officious lie: “I hold that whatever is opposed to the nature of God is sinful; and on this ground all dissimulation, whether in word or deed, is condemned.” But neither does Calvin negate the midwives’ intent, for he implies that their good intention was the basis on which God indulged what he could have justly condemned. Of a piece with Calvin’s attitude towards the midwives is the attention he calls to Joseph’s intent (in deceiving his brothers in Egypt), which was “free from all enmity and vindictiveness.”63

Abraham’s deed but finds it merely ameliorated; see Pellican, Comm. Gen. 12:13 (fol. 16).64 Martyr also makes a case for the officious lie but eventually disallows it as an instance of the “compensatory evil” condemned by Paul (see below); Martyr’s discussion is found in an excursus on Judges 3:30, in his In Librum Iudiciwm . . . Commentarius (Zürich, 1561), fol. 63v. 65 Augustine, Contra mendaciam 10.23 (PL 40.533, NPNF 3.491); Lyra, Comm. Gen. 12:13, 2011 (sig. E viii”, F ii”); Denis, Comm. Gen. 12:13 (p. 209b); Martyr, Comm. Judg. 3:30 (fol. 63’); Cajetan, Comm. Gen. 12:11 (p. 69).

64 Calvin, Comm. Gen. 2012 (CO 23.292f, CTS 1.530); Serv. Gen. 26:6-10 (CO 58.104); Comm. Gen. 44:1 (CO 23.547, CTS 2.366); Comm. Exod. 1:18 (CO 24.19, CTS 1.34). Calvin’s mixed review of the Egyptian midwives does not differ appreciably from the comments of Augustine, Gratian, Aquinas, and others; see Zagorin, Ways of Lying, pp. 21, 23, 27, and 30.
Another argument which is hard to categorize, but which may be considered as an excuse by good intention, is the argument based on the patriarchs’ great faith and trust in providence. What seems unspoken here is the notion that a strong faith can move God; of course, what looks like faith may merely be presumption, or vice versa. In any case, the argument that Abraham trusted God to protect Sarah, or that Jacob or Joseph acted in great faith, is alleged not merely as an encomium but as like faith may merely be presumption, or vice versa. In any case, the here is the notion that a strong faith can move God; of course, what looks argument that Abraham trusted God to protect Sarah, or that Jacob or Pellican. So much does Luther like this argument that he even allows it to Lot, whose offer of his daughters was motivated by an enormous trust in providence to keep them safe, and he himself is thereby to be held blameless. Musculus, however, has as little patience for those who extol Abraham’s great faith as he had for those who praise his prophetic gift. Abraham’s very words display not faith or prescience, Musculus argues, but a lack of either! Calvin also dissents here on exegetical grounds, and although he does not address the findings of other exegeses, he makes it clear that the misdeeds of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are not excused by their great faith but are rather to be faulted for their unbelief.

Excuses based on nature, custom, and law. While no one advanced as an excuse for lying the idea that there was once a time or place where mendacity was perfectly acceptable, this is an important argument with respect to polygamy. Rather than construe the patriarchs as recipients of a special dispensation, some commentators argued that they lived in a time of general dispensation to polygamy. Indeed, it is possible to pursue this argument without reference to divine intervention at all, as Augustine seems to do:

[A plurality of wives] was no crime when it was the custom; and it is a crime now, because it is no longer the custom. There are sins against nature, and sins against custom, and sins against the laws. With which of these crimes, I pray, is Jacob charged? . . . As regards nature, he used the women not for sensual gratification but for the procreation of children. As for custom, this was the common practice at that time in those countries. And as for the laws, no prohibition existed. The only reason it is now a crime to do this is because custom and the laws forbid it.

Augustine thus posits three criteria, all of which sanctioned the patriarchs’ polygamy in their own day. Two of these, custom and law, once allowed plural wives but these customs and laws have changed. Augustine presents the third criterion—nature—in analogous fashion, admitting that polygamy was also allowed by nature at one time. Has nature also changed? Augustine tries to say as much by implying that people have now degenerated from the patriarchs’ purity of intention. That is, the primary and natural result of intercourse is procreation; sex which has gratification and not offspring as its motive thus violates nature. Theoretically, were one to take a second wife purely for the sake of procreation and not to gratify lust, the “nature” of marriage would remain intact. In order to complete his argument’s third leg, that “nature” no longer allows polygamy, Augustine asserts that it is no longer possible to muster the heroic self-control displayed by the patriarchs and that, to a man, modern polygamists violate nature by their lustful motives.

This is the sticking-point of the argument for a general dispensation: while the erstwhile approval of custom and law is more or less empirically demonstrable, the approval of nature and natural law is linked to the approval of nature’s creator—an approval which is far easier assumed than proved! Many commentators (such as Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Martyr, and Musculus) found in Augustine’s remarks about pre-Christian customs and laws a ready means for excusing patriarchal polygamy while disallowing a general return to that practice. Augustine’s argument from the “nature” of marriage, however, was mostly ignored. Cajetan alone attempts to excuse the patriarchs on the grounds not merely of custom, but of natural law. In short, Cajetan explains the law of nature here in light of patriarchal practice and not vice versa; that is, Cajetan argues that the use of polygamy by the righteous men of the Old Testament is itself proof that polygamy is not contrary to the law of nature—indeed, he counters, what is unlawful, is to believe that Abraham violated the law of nature.

None of these considerations of nature, custom, and law make any impact on those commentators most opposed to polygamy. In this

66. Augustine, Contra Faustum 22.47 (PL 42.428, NPNF 1 4.289).
67. Cajetan, Comm. Gen. 162, 31:19 (pp. 79, 127). Cajetan thus disagrees with Aquinas, who felt a dispensation was necessary despite the fact that polygamy does not violate the first order of natural law. Cajetan retains Thomas’s distinction in his commentary on the Summa, but appears to abandon it in his own Bible commentaries; see Dennis Doherty, The Sexual Doctrine of Cardinal Cajetan (Regensburg: Friedr. Pustet, 1966), pp. 200-205.
company one would number Heinrich Bullinger, but especially Calvin, who disputed whether custom and law ever did, in fact, approve of polygamy. To be sure, Calvin admits that polygamy may once have been the custom among Eastern peoples, but his point is that it was a bad custom and not at all divinely-sanctioned. Nor did polygamy ever have the status of law in the Old Testament, for Calvin argues at length that Jesus’s words in Matthew 19 constitute not a restoration but a reaffirmation of the divine order for marriage, an order which God has never suspended—not even in Moses’s supposed indulgence of divorce (which Calvin also disputes!). Clearly, Calvin will not yield an inch in this matter.

d. Excuses based on prudence, necessity, or natural rights. Perhaps the most interesting as well as the most threatening excuses are those which could be most readily invoked to justify contemporary imitation of the patriarchs. Such are the various excuses based on natural insight and natural right. We will look at three variations on this theme: the obligation to exercise prudence, the appeal to natural rights, and the question of compensatory evil.

The first of these excusatory arguments is nicely formulated by Augustine in his defense of Abraham’s concealment of his wife’s identity:

It is part of sound doctrine that, when a man has any means in his power, he should not tempt the Lord his God. . . . Accordingly, when Abraham was among strangers, and when, on account of the remarkable beauty of Sarah, both his life and her chastity were in danger, since it was in his power to protect not both of these, but one only—namely, his life—to avoid tempting God he did what he could; and in what he could not do, he trusted to God. Unable to conceal his being a man, he concealed his being a husband lest he should be put to death, trusting God to preserve his wife’s purity.

68. Bullinger attacked the “modern” defenders of polygamy in his commentary on Matthew (1542). While Bullinger does excuse the patriarchs’ polygamy by special dispensation, he also says Abraham and Jacob received their plural wives not from God but from human error (namely, Sarah’s presumption and Laban’s fraud). In the third edition of Der Christlich Eeestad (1579), Bullinger argues that the Lord reestablished monogamy in Matthew 19 (perhaps following Calvin, below). See Eells, Attitude of Bucer, pp. 181, 213-17.

69. See Calvin to Pignanus (CO 10b.258); Comm. Gen. 21:1, 22:19, 26:34 (CO 23.223, 320), 370; CTS 1.424, 1.573f, 2.77); Comm. Matth. 19:7 (CO 45.529f); and Sermon. Eph. 5:31ff (CO 51.775f).

70. Augustine, Contra Faustum 22.36 (PL 42.423f, NPNF 2.86).

The moral life is thus not a passive one, Augustine argues; Abraham devised the best plan he could and trusted God for the rest. How can that be wrong? Connected with a general appeal to Abraham’s legitimate use of prudence are two practical insights which may have informed the patriarch’s behavior in this instance: first, his concern over the Egyptians’ notorious reputation for license and immorality and, second, his supposed knowledge that there was a twelve-month period of purification before Sarah could be approached by the king. These two considerations were often advanced to show how Abraham’s actions were further in accord with reason and prudence. Nonetheless, it is what might be termed Augustine’s “maxim” which shapes this line of argument most: to neglect the means at one’s disposal is to tempt God. In this basic form, the argument is employed by Lyra, Denis, Oecolampadius, Martyr, Musculus, and Luther in order to exonerate Abraham’s apparent lie; indeed, even Calvin will concede this as a general theory of prudence, however much he will dispute this specific application.

The comments of Luther and Musculus on Abraham’s prudence are of special interest insofar as they suggest some general rules. To be sure, Luther’s comments here are a study in ambivalence. He pronounces

71. This ethnic stereotype is traceable to Josephus, Antiquitates 1.162, 2.201 (LCL pp. 80, 250), if not to the text of Genesis itself. In their comments on Gen. 12:10-20, Lyra (sig. E vii’), Pellican (fol. 16’), and Oecolampadius (fol. 131’) cite this as an ameliorating factor. However, the stereotype is contested by Denis (p. 2096), Luther (WA 42.479f, LW 2.305), and Musculus (p. 308)—the latter two on exegetical grounds.

72. Based solely on Esther 2:12, this argument seems to originate with Jerome in Quæstiones in Genesim 12:15f (PL 23.957f). It was taken up by Augustine (Quæstiones in Heptateuchum 1.26, PL 34.855) and by many others (all Comm. Gen. 12:13-20), including Lyra (sig. E vii’), Martyr (fol. 51’), and Luther (WA 42.479f, LW 2.304). Denis (p. 210b) thinks the argument errs by anachronism, while Musculus (p. 309) demurs that even if Pharaoh observed such a custom, other Egyptians may not have been so bound. A similar argument is sometimes proposed to ameliorate Lot’s offer of his daughters in Gen. 19:8f, whereby Lot is judged to have shrewdly calculated his offer based on his prudent insight into the Sodomites’ perversity. In short, he foresaw that his offer would be rejected but expected it would have a dissuasive effect. This argument is advanced by Denis (p. 269a), Cajetan (p. 92), Luther (WA 43.61, LW 3.299), and Musculus (p. 461). It is disputed by Musculus (1) as well as by Calvin, who thinks Lot merely seized the first defense that came to mind and so erred (Comm. Gen. 19:8, CO 23.269f, CTS 1.499f).

Abraham's lie excusable, but not the adultery to which he exposed Sarah. He then proceeds to pursue two lines of thought, first condemning Abraham for losing sight of the Word, forsaking faith, relying on his own reason, and sinning from fear and weakness. Then he suggests that Abraham may not have sinned but acted out of faith, protecting the promise by using his reason to escape earthly dangers, as is proper. This, he says, is the explanation he prefers. What is notable is the constant role of Abraham's reason in both accounts. When Abraham falls back on this ploy in Genesis 20, however, Luther states:

By this procedure, which he supposed would be a means of safety, Abraham exposes his wife to danger. And he did not sin by resorting to such a plan; for where there is no higher word to guide us, we are right in following our reason. But I am speaking about civil matters; for so far as spiritual matters are concerned, God has made everything abundantly clear in His Word. But outward and physical matters He has put under the control of reason, and, to state it simply, there is no need there for the exhortations of the Holy Spirit. What is needed is diligence, persistent effort, and care; otherwise we are tempting God.

Luther's lucid defense of the role of prudence in Abraham's crisis would seem to exonerate Abraham. But such a vindication is short-lived, given Luther's reaffirmation that Abraham sinned, not to mention his later retraction to the effect that "when Abraham has been left in the lurch by his own counsel, he is saved by the promise," that is, by God. Clearly, Luther is of two minds concerning the potential role of reason in the moral life—at least in this episode! More importantly, however, Luther's affirmation of the role of prudence and reason cannot be wholly eclipsed or set aside, whether by his own retraction or by his insistence that Abraham is not an example for our imitation at this point.

Musculus is less ambivalent than Luther, and his exegesis constitutes a careful dismantling of his predecessors' arguments. We have noted above how Musculus dismisses for want of evidence the notion that Abraham was moved by a prophetic spirit as well as the idea that he should be excused for his great faith in God's providence. More to the point, Musculus disallows "Lyra's" appeal to prudence ("lest Abraham tempt God") on the grounds that prudence is obliged only where it does not act against God, against another's well-being, or against decorum—all three of which Abraham violated. Musculus thus articulates an axiom which challenges the "obligation" to prudence: "It is no work of faith to do what is unjust and dishonorable in order to obtain the promise of God." Hence, Musculus concludes, the surest explanation is simply that Abraham is not to be excused. Furthermore, Abraham compounded his sin by repeating it. Rather than learning a lesson from his impropriety in Egypt, Abraham presumes that what worked once will work again and that his wife's escape from Pharaoh was a sign of God's approval of his plan. But even if an affair turns out well by God's grace, Musculus states, it is not proper to conclude that there was no sin on our part. In other words, one ought to avoid what is unjust and dishonorable in seeking the promise of God—even if, pragmatically speaking, it seemed to work before.

Turning now to Calvin's theoretical statement concerning the role of prudence (alluded to earlier), one finds that Calvin might as well be quoting what Augustine wrote against Faustus when he states that it is very clear what our duty is: thus if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if he makes remedies available, not to neglect them. The Lord has inspired in men the arts of taking counsel and caution, by which to comply with his providence in the preservation of life itself.

But if Calvin's theory is redolent of Augustine (or, for that matter, Luther), his exegesis of the patriarchs anticipates Musculus. With respect to Abraham's deceit (as well as his polygamy), Calvin does not commend his resourcefulness but faults him for trusting his own means—means which Calvin finds "unlawful." Calvin refuses to condemn Abraham entirely, for his goal was proper. But where other commentators exalt Abraham's great trust in God, Calvin says Abraham erred by not casting his cares upon God. Where other exegetes find a legitimate use of

75. Luther, Comm. Gen. 20:3 (WA 43.107, LW 3.323).
76. It adds a further difficulty that Luther seems to class wife-endangerment among civil and external matters, while he judges the fairly similar deed of Lot (in endangering his daughters) to be a spiritual matter; see Comm. Gen. 19:9 (WA 43.60, LW 3.258).
prudence, Calvin finds rashness and presumption. Indeed, Calvin concludes, far from avoiding it, Abraham tempted God. A somewhat different form of this argument is widely employed to excuse Jacob's quasi-fraudulent dealings as the steward of Laban's sheep. Here, one of two common arguments entails an appeal to natural rights or necessity. (The other argument, used by Augustine and Chrysostom, appeals to special dispensation.) Thus Jerome attributes Jacob's action to his own prudence and skill, and alleviates any taint of wrongdoing by asserting that Jacob thereby also "preserved justice and equity." By the time Denis writes, he is able to report not only Augustine's solution but also that, in manipulating the flocks, he was recovering what was his by right (and with God inspiring him), just as the Israelites were recovering what they had justly earned by their slave labor when they despoiled the Egyptians. Luther is especially struck by the account. In his view, Jacob's deception was "necessary" on account of Laban's "unjust rapacity." Luther later adds that looking after one's own family is a matter of both divine and human law. Finally, when he addresses whether or not Jacob cheated Laban, Luther offers three excuses: Jacob is excused (1) by human right (as well as by natural and civil law), according to which those who serve unjust masters without pay may recover what is owed to them, so long as they do not act to their master's detriment; Luther thinks the spoiling of the Egyptians is a good example here. Jacob is also excused (2) by divine authority (the usual invocation of special dispensation), and (3) by extreme necessity, a virtual corollary of the first excuse. In a postscript to these excuses, Luther belabors Jacob's hardships and his benefits to Laban so as to stress how rare Jacob's circumstances were, and how unlikely it is that anyone else would ever have call to take him as an example. Nonetheless, the appeal to natural right implicitly furnished a rationale for resisting oppression which, once spoken, Luther could neither deny nor call back.

The other Reformers who commented on this text all invoked a combination of "prudence" and "special dispensation." Among them were Pellican, Martyr, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Musculus. The last three, like Luther, appeal to divine law—in this case, 1 Tim. 5:8—to support the duty to provide for one's family, but they do not comment as extensively as Luther. It is tempting to see Luther's remarks behind the comments of Calvin, who likewise states early on that taking care of one's family is prescribed by nature. But if Calvin agreed on the principle, he was not so keen on the application. For while there is "some color" to the argument that Jacob was merely recovering his own losses, "before God [that argument] is neither firm nor probable," for we are not permitted to avenge our own wrongs. Hence, Calvin appeals to a heavenly mandate to explain Jacob's departure from the rule dictated by Rom. 12:21, that we should "overcome evil with good." Is Calvin distancing himself from Luther's argument as being too liable to contemporary imitation here? Either way, Calvin remains distinctive among his contemporaries for his refusal to place any weight on the argument from prudence or natural right, both in the case of Jacob and throughout the book of Genesis.

A final variation of the excuse based on prudence is the argument from compensatory evil, that is, that it is permissible to perform a lesser evil if by it a greater is avoided. It is a curious argument precisely because it is so often cited only in the course of dismissing it. The sole writer who seems to be a sincere advocate for it is Ambrose, who ameliorates Lot's offer of his daughters on the grounds that it is less unnatural for women to be defiled by the (male) Sodomites than for Lot's male guests to suffer the same. Although he does not dispute Ambrose's judgment that it is less evil for women to be ravished than

Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers, 1896), 2.392f.

81. Jerome, Quaestiones in Genesis 30:32f, 41f (PL 23.984f); Denis, Comm. Gen. 30:42 (p. 346); Lyra also reports both solutions (Comm. Gen. 30:37, sig. H ii').
82. Luther, Comm. Gen. 30:25-43 (WA 13.40-80, 684, 694; LW 5.365, 371, 385). Zagorin (Ways of Lying, p. 160) indicates that this was precisely the sort of rationale employed so loosely by Roman Catholic casuists of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But the discussion of necessity as a rationale for (say) theft is much older, traceable to Gratian or earlier, and Luther's reference to "extreme necessity" may reflect the technical use of the term as coined by Alexander of Hales; see Henry Charles Lea, A History of Auricular

83. Bullinger's remarks are found in Der Christlich Eestand (Zürich, 1540), sig. L'. All others Comm. Gen. 30:30-33: Pellican, fol. 40f; Martyr, fol. 126f; Zwingli, CR 100.195; Musculus, p. 662.
84. Calvin, Comm. Gen. 30:30, 37 (CO 23.415, 417; CTS 2.152, 155). One place where Calvin does invoke natural or divine rights, after a fashion, is in his explanation of Abraham's war against the four kings (discussed above, n. 25). The alternative defense he offers for Abraham's apparent misdeed (a private person undertaking a public war) is to impute public status to him: to wit, since Canaan was promised to Abraham and his seed, he was its uncrowned king. Thus Abraham acted by right of his kingship, even as Moses slew the Egyptian as a proleptic demonstration of his divine authority (Comm. Gen. 14:13).
men, Augustine tries to avoid justifying Lot on the basis of compensatory evil and prefers to excuse him as mentally disturbed. The excuse based on compensatory evil is mentioned in this context—and dismissed—by Denis, Cajetan, Martyr, Musculus, and Calvin, many of them citing Rom. 3:8 as proof of the excuse’s illegitimacy. Only Luther furthers the discussion by distinguishing two applications of compensatory evil:

It is right for you to cut off a finger or a hand in order to preserve the entire body. In material situations (corporalibus) the general rule holds good that in order to avoid a greater evil you should choose the lesser evil; but in spiritual affairs the situation is different, and evils should not be done in order that good may result. It is a sin to kill one’s wife; but if by adultery you could save her from being killed, this should by no means be done.

It is true, Luther implies, that Lot chose the lesser evil, but the point is that his lesser evil was itself forbidden by God. Luther similarly disallows houses of prostitution, for not only does he disagree that greater evils are thereby avoided, but (and this is determinative) prostitution is contrary to the law of God. Nonetheless, as we saw earlier (n. 76), Luther is not always clear about what differentiates bodily and spiritual matters.

85. Ambrose, De Abraham 1.6.52 (PL 14.462); Augustine, Contra mendacium 9.20-22 (PL 40.529-32, NPNF 3.488f) and Questions in Heptateuchum 1.42-44 (PL 34.559f). It is notable that while Augustine believes no impending bodily harm can justify telling a lie, he seems finally to make an exception for the avoidance of sodomy; see De mendacio 9.15, 14.25, 20.41f (PL 40.499f, 505, 515f NPNF 3.465, 469, 475f).

86. All Comm. Gen. 19:8f; Lyra, sig. F viii; Denis, p. 268f; Cajetan, p. 92; Martyr, fol. 76f; Musculus, p. 461; and Calvin, Co 23.270 (CTS 1.500).

87. Luther’s discussions of bodily and spiritual matters and of prostitution (WA 43.60, LW 3.258) develop topics addressed earlier here by Lyra (Comm. Gen. 19:8, sig. F vii-viii).

Barbarisms of the ignorant, so, in their own way, the figurative actions of the prophets differ from the lascivious sins of the vicious. Augustine is attributing to the patriarchs a wisdom which is so far beyond our understanding that it appears to us as vice. Luther also finds grammatical exceptions a good analogy to the exceptions of the patriarchs: even as the Latin noun poema is heroic or miraculous (as a neuter noun with a feminine ending), so are the patriarchs “heroes” or “wondermen.” They are exceptions, and Luther underscores the uniqueness and inscrutability of their vocation:

Abraham kills four kings in Egypt, twice he exposes his wife to danger in regard to her honor, and Lot offers his daughters for defilement. Why they do this is none of your concern. For in this way God wanted to reveal His wisdom and power. Therefore I can marvel at these deeds but I cannot imitate them. In like manner, we marvel at Peter when he walks on the sea and at Christ and Moses when they fast for forty days; but we do not imitate them.

According to Luther’s “grammar of heroes,” then, although poema and Abraham do not conform to the rules, in neither case is there wrongdoing. At the same time, we ourselves have no similar license to devise our own rules but, whether in grammar or ethics, are bound by the common customs, rules, and laws. Yet though “these heroes are rare and few,” Luther does not deny the possibility that such a special call could recur. On the other hand, Luther’s recurring example is that of Münzer, who thought he could imitate the Old Testament judges and kings but merely brought destruction upon himself.

88. Augustine, Contra Faustum 22.25 (PL 42.417, NPNF 4.282f).

89. Luther, Comm. Gen. 19:9, 29:28-30 (WA 43.62, 640-44; LW 3.261f, 5.307-13). According to Bornkamm and others, Luther’s doctrine of heroic exceptions as manifesting God’s wisdom “continued the interpretation of the sins of the patriarchs found in the Scotist-Nominalist tradition”; see Luther and the Old Testament, p. 25 n. 57.

would surely be sympathetic to this intention, but he nowhere compares the patriarchs to heroes (as Luther does) nor does he excuse their improprieties as the small faults of great minds (following Augustine). 91

III. Calvin and "Patriarchal" Exceptions

In surveying the exegetical findings of Calvin's predecessors and contemporaries, I have focused on the various arguments used to excuse patriarchal misdeeds. One could have covered the same ground on a case-by-case basis, that is, by analyzing each incident in Genesis separately. In my judgment, however, the kinds of argument a commentator uses or avoids furnishes a clear index of his overall disposition towards the patriarchs—and, more important, of his disposition towards contemporary "exceptions" which might invoke these patriarchs as precedent.

Nonetheless, if a tally-sheet were compiled to record our commentators' final assessment of the various patriarchal misdeeds (that is, to what extent a given misdeed is to be excused), the results would also be of interest. In brief, Calvin's judgments of all the patriarchal misdeeds studied are significantly harsher than those of his predecessors and contemporaries. Thus, his position on the patriarchs' polygamy is almost without compromise insofar as Calvin calls it a failing and a sin on their part. His view of patriarchal mendacity is also unyielding. Only Jacob's sheepbreeding and Joseph's charade are excused, by special dispensation. With respect to any given misdeed, one can usually name other commentators who find the patriarchs guilty as charged, but it is the relentlessness of Calvin's prosecution which sets him apart.

The degree of Calvin's severity with the patriarchs is further illuminated by his disposition toward the individual arguments which other exegetes traditionally employed to put the patriarchs in a better light. In short, Calvin dismisses almost all of these excusatory arguments, and not infrequently with a measure of contempt. While in a few instances he appeals to special dispensation to justify apparent misdeeds, he does not employ any of its variations, including the excuses based on allegory, typology, or the patriarchs' special mission or gifts. While he does acknowledge that intention determines a deed's degree of criminality, he often dissents from the majority by finding bad intention and a lack of faith in the patriarchs—cowardice in Abraham, deceit in Isaac, and lust in Jacob.

The sanction of custom is thrown out of court by Calvin, and he cites the excuse of prudence only to condemn it as a faithless and compromised alternative—notwithstanding his contrary (if theoretical) remarks in the Institutes. Calvin also explicitly condemns the officious lie and compensatory evil. 92

Is there, then, any room for exceptions in Calvin's exegesis of the patriarchs? Are there any circumstances or excuses which might justify suspending or bending the usual moral requirements of divine or natural law? Given Calvin's rigid (even legalistic) account of the patriarchs' misdeeds, one would expect no affirmative answer. Consequently, it is a bit of a surprise to find in Calvin the assertion that "the Lord often changes the law (ius) of nature deliberately, to teach us that what he freely confers upon us is entirely the result of his own will." 93 At first glance, one might think Calvin were furnishing here a rationale for exceptions. In a way, he is. The law of nature Calvin has in view here, however, is the right of the firstborn which Jacob transferred from Manassas to Ephraim. Calvin is like most of his colleagues in understanding primogeniture as the order of nature, indeed, as the order appointed by God, so it is no light matter for this order to be inverted.94 Can one argue by analogy from this text to exceptions in general? In part, yes. When Calvin speaks of "inverting the order of nature," he is usually referring to some heinous crime which perverts the order established by nature's creator. But in a few cases Calvin invokes the concept not pejoratively but favorably. These cases invariably pertain to key moments in the history

91. Of Calvin's three references to heroes in the Institutes, none draws any analogy to the patriarchs. In a letter to Bullinger, however, Deborah is described as possessing a "heroic spirit" (CO 15.125).

92. The conclusions I draw in these two paragraphs are further corroborated by Zagorin's study of the particular issue of dissimulation. While virtually all magisterial Reformers opposed the dissimulation associated with Nicodemism, Zagorin finds Calvin to be singularly harsh (Ways of Lying, pp. 68-82; cf. pp. 100-107). Moreover, while many Reformers (as well as Augustine, Aquinas, and others) also found the patriarchs culpable for the lies they told, most of these exegetes were willing to ameliorate the patriarchs' sin by invoking other excuses. What sets Calvin apart, then, is the degree to which he refuses even to consider the traditional excuses.

93. Calvin, Comm. Gen. 48:17 (CO 23.586, CTS 2.431). There is a similar statement in Luther at Comm. Gen. 19:9 (WA 43.62, LW 3.261), except that Luther says God's purpose is "to reveal his power and wisdom." See also following note.

94. Luther is especially forthcoming on the significance of the divine reversal of primogeniture, possibly because it was no longer the local custom; see his Comm. Gen. 4.2, 275-510, 379, 48.176, 493 (WA 42.181, 43.505, 44.252, 702, 730; LW 1.2436, 5.112, 6.337, 8.169, 8.208 n. 7). Calvin agrees that God may abrogate this right, but his attitude towards its legal standing is firm: to violate primogeniture without divine sanction is to commit theft and even to usurp a divine prerogative; see Comm. Deut. 21:15 (CO 24.709, CTS 3.174).
of salvation, such as the deliverance of Noah, the miraculous conception of Isaac, the oracle given to Rebecca concerning Jacob and Esau, and the reversals of primogeniture suffered by Esau and Manassas. In all of these instances, God orchestrated events contrary to the usual order of nature and against the common rule and law in order to make conspicuous his own role as the initiator of the church's salvation.

To the lengthy list of the patriarchs' reprehensible actions which Calvin adduces, there must be added another, much shorter list of exceptional deeds which Calvin does not condemn. So far as concerns Calvin's "theory" of exceptions, one may observe that the inversions of "natural order" which he finds laudable generally meet two criteria: First, they are events in which human activity and intentional behavior are marginal, absent, or overridden. In other words, only God may initiate acts contrary to the order of nature. This "divine initiative" stands alongside Calvin's second criterion for a laudable exception, namely, the absence of moral turpitude. Most of Calvin's reversals of natural order also qualify here with ease (e.g., Sarah's miraculous conception), and Calvin takes pains to argue the legitimacy of all borderline cases. These two criteria are not always equally evident, but Calvin seems happiest when a text of Scripture yields them both.

Between his twin criteria of "divine initiative" and "moral propriety," however, there is little room for the longer list of patriarchal exceptions and traditional excuses which Calvin's contemporaries were often able to countenance. Indeed, aside from the few laudable exceptions mentioned above, Calvin is almost without interest in excusing patriarchal misdeeds. Far from sharing the predisposition of Augustine and others to give the patriarchs the benefit of every doubt and to excuse them if at all possible, Calvin may well hold the patriarchs to a stricter standard—though Calvin himself thinks he is treating them with moderation:

As in estimating the conduct of the saints we should be just and humane interpreters, so also superstitious zeal must be avoided in covering their faults, since this would often infringe on the clear authority of Scripture. And, indeed, whenever the faithful fall into sin, they do not desire to be lifted out of it by false defenses, for their justification consists in a simple and free demand of pardon for their sin.

Calvin has no wish to persecute the patriarchs, but he also has no wish to grant them any special favors. And it is in his avoidance of these extremes that Calvin begins, at last, to disclose his most immediate concerns. Earlier we saw Calvin brand the would-be defenders of patriarchal immorality as "sophists." Here he adds to the insult by charging these defenders with "superstitious zeal" and a contempt for "the authority of Scripture." These two charges call attention, in turn, to two possible explanations for Calvin's singular rejection of the traditional explanations for patriarchal misdeeds.

On the one hand, Calvin holds that what the patriarchs require is far less a rationalization than simple forgiveness. It would be tempting to read this comment as a product of Calvin's Protestantism, of his belief in justification sola fide, but—remarkably—Calvin does not use this text as an occasion for anti-papal polemic. Rather, one senses that Calvin's concern is more practical and pastoral: he is keenly aware not only that the patriarchs are often held up as examples for Christians, but also that his own exegesis of the patriarchs will itself be an example of how such misconduct ought to be addressed. Consequently, Calvin's exegesis of the patriarchs is concerned far less to exult in (say) Abraham's free forgiveness than to stress to his congregation and readers that Abraham's errant behavior is not material for imitation, regardless of its salutary outcome. To put the matter in a broader perspective, one may say that Calvin is walking a delicate line between the libertinism of the religious radicals of his day and what he here describes as "superstitious zeal"—presumably a fear that the gospel will be discredited if its forebears are found to have lapsed into serious sin. In simply accepting (rather than excusing) the sins of the patriarchs, Calvin is not quite an innovator. He is preceded here by Luther (who is happy to have it both ways: for example, to admit that Lot is a sinner forgiven by grace and therefore in need of no excuse, and then, having made that point, to...
proceed to excuse Lot on all the traditional grounds anyway). And in denying the patriarchs' misdeeds any precedential status, Calvin is even more amply preceded, for similar remarks are voiced by almost all the commentators. Where Calvin stands virtually alone, however, is (as already noted) in his refusal even to cite the traditional excuses, as if he fears his hearers will seize even a flimsy excuse as a warrant for foolish imitation.

At the same time, the text quoted above bears witness to another agenda which also seems to contribute to Calvin's severity towards patriarchal immorality and towards the arguments which would ameliorate their moral failings. To excuse such misconduct, Calvin asserts, somehow to impugn "the clear authority of Scripture." What does Calvin mean? Although he could certainly be clearer at this point, Calvin is surely addressing Scripture's silence in the face of the patriarchs' seeming improprieties. Most of Calvin's fellow commentators follow Augustine in exegeting the silence of Scripture in a way sympathetic to the patriarchs: some justify their sympathy on the basis of "proof-texts" which recount or imply the patriarchs' virtue, while others think Scripture itself "intends" to furnish the patriarchs with excuses. But Calvin reads the silence of Scripture differently. Following the traditional hermeneutic of interpreting the unclear in light of the clear, Calvin thinks anyone remotely familiar with divine law or with the nature of God will know what is sin and what is not. In other words, whereas many interpret Scripture as tacitly excusing (if not approving) the patriarchs' misdeeds, Calvin rows upstream: for it dishonors Scripture to read its silence as excusing the very sins which it elsewhere so loudly condemns.

But one must also not overlook that Calvin's view of Scripture achieves its consistency only at the expense of God's freedom to change his own rules. That is to say, Calvin is himself markedly less willing to entertain exceptions in principle—perhaps as a corollary of his doctrine of Scripture. The most that can be said is that Calvin's exegesis does not deny special dispensation when the text gives evidence thereof and that on rare occasion he even imputes a dispensation where proof is absent by appealing to successful outcome as confirmation. As to his own day, however, Calvin clearly avoids even implying that any among his readers or congregation might receive such a dispensation; on two occasions where he does use such language, he does so more as a slip of the tongue than with positive intent. As much as he can, Calvin restricts himself and others to what has been revealed in God's word. But he expects no new word, nor signs and wonders either:

At that time, God commonly made his will known by oracles... But a different method prevails for us. These days, God does not act in the future by such miracles; and the teaching of the law, the prophets, and the gospel, which comprises the perfection of wisdom, is abundantly sufficient for the regulation of our course of life.

Calvin's attitude here is in some contrast to other exegetes. While few displayed an uncritical attitude to contemporary claims of new revelation, few (if any) were as willing as Calvin seems here to rule it out altogether.

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In sum, our comparison of Calvin's assessment of patriarchal misdeeds to the views of his predecessors and contemporaries has underscored not only that Calvin is hostile to such patriarchal exceptions and to the arguments which traditionally served to excuse them, but also that Calvin's is the minority view—perhaps, even, a minority of one. Both Calvin's view of patriarchal misdeeds and his lack of interest in similar, contemporary exceptions would seem determined by two factors. One is his belief that no argument or excuse can justify an action which runs counter to God's nature or character. No matter how righteous the cause, one may never use unlawful means to achieve a noble end. As we have seen, among such unlawful means are counted not only lying, fraud, and

99. On this matter, see Augustine, Contra Faustum 22.34 (PL 40.422, NPNF 1.4.286); Chrysostom, Hom. 44.5 on Gen. 19:33 (PG 54.411, FC 82.465); Cajetan, Comm. Gen. 19:5-6 (p. 92); Luther (previous note); Martyr, Comm. Gen. 16:3 (fol. 65); and Musculus, Comm. Gen. 16:3 (p. 384).
101. The first concerns Joseph's charade, which we should not imitate "unless we are free from enmity" (Comm. Gen. 44:1 [CO 23.547, CTS 2.366f]). The second is Abraham's war, something we should not undertake "unless we also have the spirit" which Abraham had, "that is to say, that we have certitude that God so calls us" (Serm. Gen. 14:13-17 [CO 23.645]). If these seem like rather paltry concessions—which in their contexts are actually intended as prohibitions—it merely bears witness to how little Calvin wanted even to suggest such irregularities to his readers and auditors.
endangering another’s well-being, but also the usurpation of a public office to which one is not entitled. The second factor is Calvin’s belief in Scripture’s utter adequacy to regulate Christian conduct in all circumstances. While God may have intervened in the patriarchs’ day to make minor alterations in the moral economy (e.g., in reversing primogeniture), even these divine reversals do not contradict the morality later codified in Scripture. In any case, we today are to expect no special word: God’s written word will and must suffice. With this latter dictum, Calvin closes the circle, for Scripture thereby becomes the exclusive and final guide to the morality enjoined by God’s own nature. Calvin thus interprets the patriarchs not as laudable exceptions to the normal rules of Scripture, but as perverse illustrations thereof. Having strayed from the clear path of the decalogue, the patriarchs are yet apprehended for Calvin by another of Scripture’s precepts, namely, the well-known pattern of repentance and forgiveness—and in this pattern alone may their truancy serve as precedent for us. It is only a slight exaggeration, then, to conclude that Calvin will brook no exceptions to the rules prescribed by Scripture because, finally, in Scripture itself he finds none.

Voetius attempted not only to sketch the outlines of a solid theology of missions, but he was also the first who attempted seriously to give missiology a legitimate scientific place in the whole of theology.

H. A. Van Andel

Voetius deserves the honor of being the first Protestant theologian to attempt a serious scientific engagement with the significant missiological questions.

P. M. Galm

I. GISBERTUS VOETIUS (1589-1676) IN CONTEXT

The influential Dutch Reformed theologian Gisbertus Voetius was born on March 3, 1589, in the village of Heusden (North Brabant). After receiving his theological training at Leiden he served as a Reformed minister in Vlijmen (North Brabant) from 1610 to 1617 and in his birthplace from 1617-1634. He was appointed to teach Semitic languages and theology at Utrecht in 1634, a position he held until his death on November 1, 1676.

1. Translated from the Dutch by John Bolt.