Patriarchs, Polygamy, and Private Resistance: John Calvin and Others on Breaking God's Rules

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This essay explores the convoluted relationship between biblical exegesis and social change, with special attention paid to Calvin. A correlation of the exegetical history of the patriarchal narratives with two specific sixteenth-century case studies underscores the ambiguity with which commentators viewed biblical exemplars as precedents. For some, this ambiguity gave rise to a series of tentative (albeit often unstated) guidelines which reflected the general but not necessarily unyielding reluctance to use scripture as a warrant for changing or bending conventional ethical mores. However, these same case studies also show Calvin's exegesis as singularly resistant to the use of scripture as a warrant or pretext for social change, largely because Calvin refuses to concede any ambiguity to the teachings and examples of scripture.

"CHANGE NOTHING" was one of John Calvin's deathbed admonitions to his fellow ministers,¹ and one might be tempted to infer from this pithy exhortation that now, at the end of his career, Calvin had finally brought the Genevan church to a point where its polity and practice fully conformed to his own ecclesiastical theory. Or one might infer that now, with his view of the future blocked by an impending death, Calvin was simply expressing his preference for the devils he knew over those he did not. Either of these inferences would seem to run counter to a recent re-reading of Calvin on the question of social change. After examining Calvin against the magisterial Reformers' perpetuation of women's subordination, one historian has asserted that Calvin is not at all to be included among an otherwise unanimous consensus in favor of traditional female roles. On the contrary, with respect to women preachers, Calvin was genuinely open to major change in the future.² Given the slenderness of textual attestation for this

assertion, the degree of ambiguity in Calvin's remarks, and the consistent affirmation of women's subordination elsewhere by Calvin, it seems both bold and provocative to claim that Calvin was open to future change in the public role of women. Nonetheless, Calvin's supposed openness is worthy of investigation not only so far as concerns Calvin's view of women, but also in a more general sense. Calvin himself provides a poignant counterpoint: "Change nothing." Under what circumstances, one might ask, would Calvin have changed his mind?

Protestant Reformers styled themselves as captives of the Bible. These were men of one book or, in the sarcastic words of Cardinal Sadoleto, 'new men, with the scriptures much in mouth and hand." So in an age in which to be an innovator was to court heresy, perhaps a blueprint for change is too much to ask. After all, what Luther, Calvin, and their colleagues sought was not novelty or change but merely fidelity to the clear biblical patterns. Precisely here, however, lay a hermeneutical crux: What are those biblical patterns? Fidelity to scripture ought to entail abiding by the rules and precedents that scripture establishes, but at many points scripture does not speak univocally; sometimes scripture teaches one thing, but elsewhere models another. This was traditionally seen to be the case with respect to the patriarchs, for while the New Testament extols their faith and virtue, the Old Testament tells a somewhat different tale. The Abraham whom Paul praises in Romans 4 is the same Abraham who abandoned his wife to adultery in Genesis 12. The Jacob who models faith in Hebrews 11 is the same Jacob who multiplies lies and wives. Similar examples abound. When canonical saints act at variance with canonical precepts, where should precedent be lodged?

Herein might be found an open door to break with exegetical tradition or with the received Christian morality by urging a reconsideration of the patriarchs' practices. But this was a door that few dared to enter, and it is remarkable to see the urgency of virtually all commentators to bar this way, lest the patriarchs be rashly imitated. Nonetheless, even in seeking to prevent entry by others, exegetes almost always sought excuses for the patriarchs themselves. In reconciling these conflicting texts, exegetes invariably became casuists and, unwittingly or unwittingly, paved a way to invoke these supposed exceptional cases as contemporary precedents. Here, then, is what we want to learn from Calvin, as well as from his predecessors and contemporaries: Are there arguments or circumstances that justify certain patriarchal actions and which might be legitimate and relevant for one's own day?

In this context, the sixteenth-century exegetes regularly consulted the patriarchs on two particular ethical issues. First, given the dramatic changes in Protestant thinking about marriage—that it was not a sacrament, that it was not less meritorious than celibacy, and so forth— one might suppose it inevitable that more radical minds would go on to question the Christian tradition of monogamy as well. In fact, polygamy did prove to be of special interest to some religious radicals, but it was just as often an option considered by various monarchs in need of male offspring or, perhaps, of a remedium peccati. For both groups, the patriarchs were enlisted to provide pretext or precedent. Second, and more pressing still, the patriarchs and other Old Testament saints offered early Protestants what they truly desired but rarely could accept with a clear conscience: a biblical justification for resisting religious tyranny.

In attempting to fathom the mind of Calvin and his fellow exegetes with respect to this question of their openness to change, this essay looks at the role of patriarchal precedent in some sixteenth-century commentators, paying particular attention to two issues: polygamy and private resistance. Using these two as test cases, we then examine how a few sixteenth-century exegetes were willing to suggest general theories and rules about how patriarchal precedents might be applied in their own day. As we will see, Calvin is indeed to be distinguished from his exegetical forebears and colleagues, but not necessarily by his openness.

**Patriarchal Precedents in the Sixteenth Century**

The issue of patriarchal precedent in the history of theology and exegesis was surveyed comprehensively some sixty years ago by Roland Bainton, who distinguished a number of general approaches by which theologians have attempted to reconcile the supposed immoralities of the patriarchs with their canonical status. Since then, this topic has been addressed only occasionally, usually in studies of individual theologians. My own study of this issue seeks to clarify the arguments used by various exegetes from the patristic era through Calvin's day by simplifying

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*Elsewhere I have examined Douglass's interpretation of Calvin's doctrine of woman in greater detail as part of my attempt to locate Calvin relative to his contemporaries in the history of exegesis. See John L. Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors, and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: Droz, 1992).*

*Jacopo Sadoleto to the Genevans (March 18, 1539), in CO 5:380.

*Here, Henry VIII constitutes only the best known of several examples.


*As is often the case, Luther has received more attention than other Reformers. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (1948; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 23-25 guides the reader to a few other Luther studies, though not all of them pertain to the history of exegesis. The only other survey known to me is Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis*, 1527-1633 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), who defers in part to Bainton; see esp. 166-73.*
Bainton's categories and by refining some of his generalizations. In brief, there are two strategies by which the patriarchs are excused for what seems like immoral behavior (whether lying, polygamy, incest, drunkenness, rebellion, or whatever). The first strategy argues that the patriarchs had some sort of special divine permission for their actions. This argument is invoked simply by asserting that, for example, Abraham received a special revelation or dispensation that allowed him to lie to Pharaoh or to take a second wife. Naturally, we who lack such a dispensation are forbidden to imitate Abraham. The argument takes other forms, too. Some commentators beg the question of immorality altogether by asserting that the story is not literal history but rather allegory; so when a patriarch takes several wives, the reader should understand that these are not really wives, but rather virtues. Not too different is to claim that the patriarchs' actions are typological; accordingly, Abraham's marriage to Hagar was divinely ordained to prefigure the two covenants (as per Galatians 4), and this type took precedence over moral considerations. Still other variations on this theme involve imputing to the patriarchs some special mission or special gift; thus Abraham was divinely obliged to polygamy in order to increase the chosen people, and similarly, he cannot be charged with wife-endangerment because—as a prophet (Gen. 20:7)—he foreknew a good outcome. Again, commentators regularly stressed that none of these excuses are easily taken up nowadays, unless we are likewise commissioned, visited, or gifted from above.

THE IMMORALITIES OF THE PATRIARCHS IN THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS: A REAPPRAISAL OF CALVIN'S POSITION,” CALVIN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL 26 (1991): 9–46. That study examined the excuses traditionally applied to patriarchal misdeeds and found Calvin singularly reluctant to invoke any of them. Here we wish to see how the history of exegesis correlates with some sixteenth-century case studies and whether such a correlation resulted in any guidelines—hermeneutical or ethical—for evaluating similarly exceptional behavior or deeds. Both studies are based on a survey of the exegetical history of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, including the following passages: Abraham's concealment of Sarah's identity (12:10–20; 20:1–18), along with Isaac's similar action (26:6–11); Abraham's war against Lot's captors (14:11–16); Abraham's polygamy (16:1–6), along with Jacob's (30:1–4); Lot's offering of his daughters to the frenzied Sodomites (19:8) and his subsequent incest with them (19:30–38); Jacob's deception of Isaac to gain the blessing intended for Esau (27:1–46); Laban's substitution of Leah for Rachel on Jacob's wedding night (29:21–30); Jacob's manipulation of Laban's flocks to increase his own holdings (30:25–43); the treachery of Jacob's sons towards the Shechemites (34:1–33); the sin of Onan and Judah's incest with Tamar (38:8–26); and Joseph's deception of his brothers in Egypt (42:7; 44:1–5). The focus of my research is John Calvin, but in attempting to understand his exegesis in its proper context, I have examined the parallel comments of eighteen or so of his predecessors and contemporaries. These include various works (chiefly on Genesis) of Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Chrysostom, Augustine, Nicolas of Lyra, Denis the Carthusian, Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, Oecolampadius, Pellican, Vermigli, Zwingli, Cajetan, and Erasmus, with an occasional look at Philo, Josephus, Peter Lombard, and Rashi. My selection is not exhaustive but is limited to works used by or known to Calvin, or which were written by those whose other exegetical writings he is known to have read.

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In brief, the other strategy for dealing with the patriarchs' apparent misdeeds seeks to excuse or explain their actions on the grounds of purely natural considerations. Accordingly, what looks like an ethical infraction or a moral lapse may well be understandable and even laudable when seen in the light of extenuating circumstances, the intention behind the act, the custom of the day, the exigencies of prudence, the warrant of one's natural right, the need to avoid a greater evil, or similar considerations. To be sure, such extenuating factors were also far more liable to contemporary imitation, though commentators usually tried to discourage readers from this line of thought.

These two general strategies—one invoking supernatural intervention, the other stressing natural considerations—were by no means mutually exclusive, and commentators are prone to offer readers an ever-growing list of excuses. The most observable trend is the near abandonment of the allegorical excuse among the sixteenth-century commentators whom I surveyed. The appeal to typology also declines, though it proves to be one of Zwingli's favorite arguments and appears at least briefly in virtually all commentaries. Still, aside from this trend, Renaissance and Reformation exegetes seem just as eager to excuse their Old Testament forebears as were patristic and medieval writers. Only in a handful of commentaries are there the stirrings of a reaction against that exegetical contortionism that would excuse the patriarchs at any price. This reaction may be detected occasionally in Martin Luther, more frequently in Wolfgang Musculus and Peter Martyr Vermigli, but nowhere more consistently than in the comments of John Calvin.

All this may be gleaned from a survey of the commentary tradition. However, patriarchal precedent was more than a theoretical issue in the sixteenth century—it was, for some, a legal precedent quite susceptible of contemporary application. As we investigate the issues of polygamy and private resistance, we will have opportunity to test the correlation between our commentators' exegesis and their social practice.

THE PATRIARCHS AND POLYGAMY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Over the course of the 1530s—a crucial decade for Calvin's theological formation—there were at least three events which would have forced any theologian to consider the question of polygamy, however briefly, insofar as a proposed (and sometimes accepted) recourse to polygamy had international repercussions for politics and for the course of the Reformation. Specifically, some counseled polygamy as a more attractive solution than divorce in the case of Henry VIII, and likewise, at the far end of the decade, in the case of Philip of Hesse. (The crucial difference between these two cases, for our purposes, is that whereas Henry manufactured his own annulment, Philip proceeded to commit bigamy). Between these two inci-
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Luther’s limited approval of polygamy is undeniable, if quite convoluted. In the lectures on Genesis which occupied the last decade of his life, he excuses the patriarchs on several grounds; specifically, they acted with good intent (insofar as they were eager to obtain the “promised seed,” Christ), they acted in accord with custom, and they had a special dispensation. However, since the promised seed has long since been attained, custom has changed, and we have no similar dispensation, the patriarchs are to be seen not as examples or precedents for us, but as heroic exceptions. Even though Luther thought Deut. 22:29 and 25:25 established polygamy, he also stated that the practice was part of Old Testament ceremonial and legal matters which no longer apply to Christians. Luther’s general attitude toward exceptions in these lectures is one of caution, but he also warn against a legalistic rigidity that violates equity in the name of juristic consistency—and this is almost the only indication that Luther might allow polygamy in the present. Consequently, one might suppose that his position in these lectures has become more conservative than what he once expressed concerning Henry VIII, namely, that he would rather see Henry take a second wife than divorce Catherine of Aragon.

Actually, Luther’s mature position is fully consistent with his earlier statements, such as his 1526 response to Philip of Hesse’s inquiry. There, he states that polygamy is not to be generally re-instituted: it is allowable only as an exception in a case of “necessity” (e.g., if one’s wife is leprous), on the condition that one has a special dispensation, and to avoid a greater evil such as divorce or unchastity. The last factor was decisive in Luther’s reluctant approval of Philip’s bigamy (examined below). Remarkably, there is little difference between his lectures on Abraham’s polygamy in Genesis 16 (ca. 1538) and those on Jacob’s in Genesis 30 (ca. 1542), despite Philip’s intervening bigamy. Nonetheless, if Philip’s bigamy did not alter Luther’s views, it did summon his clearest statement on the matter in the so-called Wittenberg Rathsschlag, a quasi-

7Thus one may note that there were other Anabaptist advocates of polygamy, such as John of Battenburg (d. 1537), David Joris (d. 1559), and Jan Willemsen (fl. 1567–80). And, as John Cairncross notes, there are some who suggest that Bernard Ochino’s “embarrassing quasi-defense of polygamy (1563) was on behalf of King Sigismund Augustus of Poland, whose marital circumstances were remarkably similar to those of Henry VIII. See John Cairncross, After Polygamy Was Made a Sin: The Social History of Christian Polygamy (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 1–93, esp. 27 and 72.

8The elements of this argument go back at least to Augustine, Contra Faustum 22.47 (PL 16:178); also see Thompson, “Immoralities of the Patriarchs,” 30–32.

9See Cajetan (Thomas de Vio), Commentarii illustris . . . in Quinque Mosaios libros (Paris: Guillelulum de Bossozel, 1539) on Gen. 16:2 and 31:19 (pp. 79, 127). Cajetan thus disagrees with his mentor Aquinas, who felt a divine 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 other commentaries; see Dennis Doherty, The Sexual Doctrine of Cardinal Cajetan (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1966), 200–205. On Cajetan and Henry VIII, see Cairncross, After Polygamy, 58–59; and John Alfred Faulkner, “Luther and the Bigamous Marriage of Philip of Hesse,” American Journal of Theology 17 (1913): 219. (Subsequent references to commentaries on Genesis are cited as Comm. Gen.)


11Luther to Robert Barnes, Sept. 3, 1531 (WABr 6:178).

12One may note that Luther here is recommending a practice (the resort to compensatory evil) which elsewhere he forbids. Both Luther and Bucer allowed this in practice, if not in theory, as proved by their separate counsels to Philip that he should keep his polygamy secret by telling “a holy lie” like the one Abraham used (Bucer) or simply “a strong lie” (Luther). See Hastings Eells, The Attitude of Martin Bucer Toward the Bigamy of Philip of Hesse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), 116, 120–21, 124–30, 230–31, 236.
consent to Philip’s bigamy in which Luther (along with Melanchthon, Bucer, and others) refused to take upon himself a responsibility which had to rest with Philip’s conscience alone. At the same time, the signatories’ crucial assumption is therein set forth, that “what was permitted concerning marriage in the law of Moses is not forbidden by the Gospel, which does not change the regiment in external life, but brings eternal righteousness and eternal life.”

It was also in the messy affair of Philip’s bigamy that Melanchthon and Luther found themselves in close agreement with Bucer, who embraced the same assumption as Luther, but articulated it somewhat more clearly. Whereas some held that Christ denigrated the Mosaic provision for divorce and intended to restore monogamy as a law (Matt. 19:8: “from the beginning it was not so”), Bucer argued that Christ did not abrogate the Old Testament divorce law—and, Christ did not condemn anything taught by the Father. It is no surprise, then, that Bucer had also recommended bigamy over divorce for Henry VIII, at least in his preliminary opinion.

The basic presupposition shared by Bucer, Luther, and Melanchthon (and presumably also by Bucer’s colleagues in Strassburg—Capito, Matthew Zell, and Caspar Hedio) thus revolves around an a fortiori view of the New Testament economy. That is to say, if Christians have a clearer revelation than the Old Testament believers had, how much more ought they to enjoy equal or greater privileges in other respects? Bucer . . . declared that anything once permitted by God and not clearly forbidden in the Scriptures was permitted to Christians.” Nonetheless, while Bucer sided with Luther and Melanchthon both in the matter of Philip’s bigamy and of Henry VIII’s annulment, none of these parties was about to advocate that the marriage laws and customs of Europe be changed in favor of plural marriage—indeed, all were concerned lest the shortsighted conscience of Philip lead him to indulge in his constituents what he sought for himself. At the same time, however, Luther, Bucer, and the others did give Philip’s conscience the final say, and this action may be the most telling for the question of patriarchal precedent. That is to say, given that Luther and Bucer held polygamy to be permissible in their own day only by special dispensation, it is significant that they judged the conscience sufficient to mediate that divine permission, so long as the decision was accompanied by heartfelt prayer and the advice of other godly Christians. No other, external or apodictic controls—at least in the case of Philip—were to be imposed.

The signatories of the Wittenberg Rathschlag were not popular for their opinions concerning Philip. Not only did their approval of the bigamy, however grudging, provide fodder for Roman Catholic polemical cannons, but it scandalized their allies, Lutheran and Reformed alike. Hastings Eells states that the bigamy gave considerable offense at the Diet of Regensburg (April–May 1541), where Calvin the Genevan exile was among Bucer’s companions—although Eells also notes that Bucer’s avidity to compromise doctrinal matters at Regensburg was more offensive still. Heinrich Bullinger attacked these modern defenders of polygamy in his 1542 commentary on Matthew, and Vermigli’s remarks on polygamy may likewise have been shaped by this affair. Commenting on Jacob’s wives in his Strassburg lectures (ca. 1545), Vermigli states that polygamy was then “free and adiaphora,” and although “polygamy is not forbidden by any divine law,” custom and imperial law have grown to oppose it and it is no longer permissible, as it once was. Vermigli concludes:

Whoever wishes to take several wives at the same time thus scorches the laudable custom of the present and breaks the restraining bars of the laws of society (receptarum legum), and he cannot deny that he is driven by the furies of lust. But whether the church ought therefore to condemn him is not to be defined in the present setting.

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15 Both Luther’s 1526 response to Philip and the Wittenberg Rathschlag are translated in Paulkner, “Bigamous Marriage,” 207–8 and 213–16. In the latter document, Luther affirms that polygamy was the ancient custom, but considers it a bad custom and a pernicious influence on Abraham.

16 Eells states that this was Bucer’s position on divorce by 1530 and was still his view in De regno Christi (1550), shortly before his death; see Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 27–29, 41.

17 Notably, Bucer based his opinion partly on the example of David in the Old Testament; see Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 33–42, 125.

18 Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 78.

19 In seconding Luther’s advice concerning Henry VIII, Melanchthon stated “it is certain that polygamy is not prohibited by divine law” (Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 124; quoting CR 2:527). A vigorous dissent, however, was registered by Zwingli and Oecolampadius, who held that the Levitical laws on prohibited degrees of consanguinity were still binding. If nothing else, this rift shows how divided the Reformers could be over the contemporary validity of Old Testament laws in practice, regardless of general agreement in theory.

20 This is implicitly the view of the Wittenberg Rathschlag. Cf. Luther’s 1526 remark that a Christian bigot must have a divine word for himself” (Paulkner, “Bigamous Marriage,” 207: “Bucer sets out these three criteria (prayer, advice, conscience) in his Argumenta Buceri pro et contra, written in November or December of 1539; see Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 100. Conscience also emerged as a determinative factor in Cranmer’s 1531 treatise in support of Henry VIII; see Guy Bedouelle, “The Consultations of the Universities and Scholars Concerning the ‘Great Matter’ of King Henry VIII,” in The Bible in the Sixteenth Century, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 28.

21 Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 147–8; also see Cairncross, After Polygamy, 45–47.

22 Bullinger’s remarks parallel the ambiguity of Calvin (below), for while Bullinger excuses 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 Estand (1579), Bullinger argues that Matt. 19:8 constitutes the Lord’s re-establishment of monogamy; see Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 181, 213–17.

23 Peter Martyr [Vermigli], In Primvm Librvm Mois, Qui Vulgo Genesis Dicitur Commentarii (Zürich: Froeschauer, 1569), fols. 120v–121r on Gen. 29:27.
It would appear that Vermigli is to be placed somewhat in Bucer's camp, for despite Bucer's proscription of polygamy in the present, the forbidding agency is human law, not divine. On the other hand, despite the politic nature of Vermigli's final sentence, he has voiced a distinct disapproval of Philip insofar as he brands such an act as motivated by lust and disrespect for custom and law; indeed, Vermigli may even be reproving Bucer for his failure to condemn the bigamy. Finally, Bucer himself may have joined his own critics. Eells contrasts Bucer's 1527 commentary on Ephesians with his lectures on the same book in 1550: while the earlier work was silent concerning polygamy, the later work cites Eph. 5:22 as a proof text for monogamy, and adds three arguments against polygamy, including the notion that Christ's remarks in Matthew 19 constitute a restoration of monogamy.26

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What of Calvin here? Of the three scandals of the 1530s in which polygamy figured directly or indirectly, two—Henry VIII's annulment and the Anabaptist debacle in Münster—occurred prior to Calvin's earliest remarks on polygamy, while the third (Philip's bigamy) transpired early in Calvin's career, during his exile in Strassburg. How much did Bucer open his mind to Calvin concerning Philip's bigamy? Although the basic framework of the a fortiori argument by which Bucer justified polygamy (on the grounds of the greater privilege of New Testament believers) does appear in Calvin, it plays no role in his consideration of polygamy, but is restricted to such applications as his argument for infant baptism as the counterpart of circumcision.25 And Calvin's use of even the framework of the argument is no proof of Bucer's influence.

In fact, it is difficult to trace Calvin's views on polygamy to any specific influence, though he surely was aware of the three scandals mentioned above.26 But if Calvin's response to these scandals cannot be directly documented, it is still quite feasible to trace his response to the substance of the basic argument—that nature, custom, and law permitted polygamy in the patriarchs' day, and that only custom and law prohibit it now. All the key elements of Calvin's enduring position seem to be in place by 1538, and the detectable changes only underscore his opposition to polygamy.27 In any case, Calvin's most important point was also his most enduring, that monogamy was and has always been "the order which God wants to endure to the end of the world."28 Indeed, in several passages that can be seen as a rebuttal to Luther and others, Calvin states that polygamy is a worse departure from the divine institution than even divorce.29 It is a virtual maxim for Calvin that God said the two—not the three or the four—shall become one flesh, for "God did not give three Eves to one Adam."30

With this maxim as his starting point, Calvin was well equipped to deny the validity of all the pro-polygamy arguments that were grounded in custom, law, and nature. Concerning custom, Calvin grants that polygamy was a common custom among "the eastern peoples," but his point is that the patriarchs erred in adopting what was a bad custom, and Calvin frequently repeats his analysis of how a bad custom gradually acquires the appearance of law, but is not thereby licit. It is also improper to infer God's approval of what distancing themselves from the practice; see Benjamin Wirt Farley, Introduction to Treaties Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 107, nn. 17, 19; cf. 18–19. Sometime around 1553 (in Comm. Gen. 31:50; CO 23:433), Calvin refers to certain "fanatics who today delight to defend polygamy," Calvin could be referring to various religious extremists, or even to Bucer or Luther, but that Calvin would so tarnish the memory of the recently departed Bucer (d. 1551) seems unlikely. Moreover, Calvin generally reserves such strong words for those whom he holds in utter contempt (such as "libertines" and freethinkers), so it also seems unlikely that this barb is directed at Luther. In his sermon on Titus 1:6 (1555), Calvin's extended remarks on polygamy include polemic directed not against the Anabaptists but at the Roman Catholic doctrine of celibacy, which Calvin thinks is refuted by this text (CO 54:422–25). In sum, while it may be difficult to identify Calvin's opponents by name, it remains that there was no shortage of advocates for polygamy throughout his lifetime.

26Contemporary events scarcely surface at all in Calvin's remarks on polygamy. His earliest mention of polygamy is occasioned by Antonius Pignaeus's inquiry about how to deal with various superstitions and doubtful doctrines. Calvin's response (Oct. 1, 1538; CO 10b:257–62, no. 144) refers to certain "defenders of polygamy," but furnishes us with no names. Hermijard prefers to read Calvin's subsequent reference to the doctrine of "soul sleep" as implying that he may have Anabaptist polygamists in mind, but Calvin's description of these "defenders" as "garrulous brethren" surely is more in line with Hermijard's other suggestion, that Pignaeus's inquiry was provoked by some philandering pastors who had tried to justify their misconduct by invoking patriarchal precedent; see A.-L. Hermijard, Correspondance des Réformateurs (1874; reprinted, Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1966) 5:129–32, nn. 10 and 12. Calvin's condemnation of polygamy in his 1544 treatise against the Anabaptists is but a single sentence (see CO 7:103), and it has been suggested that this may represent Calvin's awareness that many Anabaptists were

27Eells, Attitude of Bucer, 220. Later Lutheran theologians also must have regretted Luther's stance, insofar as they sided with the majority view and allowed no possibility of dispensation for Christians. See Arthur Carl Piekorn, "The Theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy on Polygamy, Celibacy, and Divorce," Concordia Theological Monthly 25 (1954): 276.

28See Institutes 4.16.6.

29Contemporary events scarcely surface at all in Calvin's remarks on polygamy.

30See Serm. 1 Tim. 3:2 (CO 53:251) and all the references in n. 28, above. The maxim is not original to Calvin but may be found in Zwingli, Farago annotationum in Genesim on Gen. 38:8, in Zwingsli Sämtliche Werke, vol. 13 (Corpus Reformatorum 100, hereafter cited as ZSW), 233–34 and probably others.
he has merely long tolerated. How ever much polygamy may have prevailed among many, Calvin concludes, “to overthrow the law by which two are mutually joined together was never left to human discretion.”

This quotation is a natural bridge to the argument from law, that is, the argument that polygamy was licit in the Old Testament and in other ancient cultures, but no longer. So far as the argument hinges on human positive law, it is refuted by Calvin’s remarks on custom. So far as the argument appeals to divine law, however, both the Mosaic legislation and the patriarchs’ actual practice could indicate that there was a general dispensation to polygamy in the Old Testament. In fact, several exegetes had implied that there was such a general dispensation, terminated only by Christ’s restoration of “the order of creation,” namely, monogamy. Calvin disagrees. Writing to Pignaes, he insists that not only is monogamy the order of marriage as first instituted by God, but also as reaffirmed—not “restored”—by Christ, and Calvin goes on to assert that “none of the matrimonial laws found in scripture furnishes a defense for polygamy.”

What he briefly asserted in 1538 Calvin argued in detail later on, as he sought to buttress his case that polygamy was never permitted by Old Testament law. The most crucial piece of legislation was Moses’ supposed indulgence of divorce—a law that Calvin (and others) saw as bearing directly on the question of plural wives. Here, Calvin denies that the Mosaic permission altered the order established at creation. What Moses intended was not an indulgence but a punishment, as well as a means to protect the dignity of the wife who had been rejected. On Calvin’s reading, then, Christ did not “restore” the law of monogamy, simply because it had never been suspended.

33The text in question is Matt. 19:4-8, where Jesus cites Gen. 2:24. See the discussion above at notes 22-24. Other commentators espousing a “restorationist” view of monogamy include Augustine, De bono conjugali 18.21 (PL 40:387); Lombard, 4 Sent. 33.1, 33.4 (citing Ambrose and Augustine); Denis de Carthusian, Comm. Gen. 16:1-2 (p. 236b); and Vermigli, Loc. Communis 2.10.13-14 (London: Thomas Vautrocelli, 1583), p. 278-79 (citing Chrysostom, Jerome, and Clement). For Bullinger, see Eells, “Attitude of Bullinger,” 213-17. Ambrose, De Abraham 1.4.22f (PL 14:4505), states that not only did Abraham marry Hagar before the promulgation of the gospel, but also prior to the Mosaic law, whence “adultery did not yet appear forbidden” (the Migne editors have a field day trying to clarify Ambrose’s “mis-speak”). Zwingli, whose comments frequently suggest dependence on Ambrose, similarly excuses Lot’s daughters as acting before there was a law against incest (Comm. Gen. 19:31, ZSW 13:126).
34CCC 257-58.
35Calvin, Comm. Matt. 19:7 (CO 45:529) and Serm. Eph. 5:31ff (CO 51:775). In Serm. 122 Deut. 21:15 (CO 27:666-67), Calvin describes the law which regulates the taking of wives in war in similar terms, that is, as a means of imposing some restraint upon men who had long since transgressed their own bounds and God’s intention; also cf. Serm. 121 Deut. 21:10-14 (CO 27:652).

The pro-polygamy arguments based on divine law having been demolished, those based on nature fall of their own weight, for nature is nothing more (says Calvin) than what God has ordered and arranged. And what nature teaches, Calvin argues, is nothing other than the law of monogamy, and although the patriarchs committed polygamy, he states, “it was never lawful.”

These, then, are Calvin’s counterarguments to the notion that the saints of the Old Testament enjoyed a general dispensation from monogamy. From this, his response to the a fortiori arguments of Luther, Bucer, and others may be inferred. However much Calvin may have agreed that Christians are in a position of greater privilege than the Old Testament believers, he would never have extended that privilege to matters he considered inherently contrary to the will and laws of God. It may well be true that what God permitted to the patriarchs is that much more permissible for us, but Calvin’s point is that God never permitted polygamy—to anyone.

The Patriarchs and Private Resistance in the Sixteenth Century

Calvin’s position on resistance to tyrants is well known and is usually summed up in the phrase, “magisterial” or “constitutional” resistance. That is to say, Calvin was quite traditional in denying private persons any right to take up arms against an oppressive ruler, but he exhorted them to repent over their own sins and to pray for deliverance. Calvin was less traditional, however, in allowing a qualified right on the part of the lesser magistrates to resist a tyrant when constitutional laws so provided. This idea appears in Calvin early on, in the 1536 Institutes, but it is clear that Luther and especially Ulrich Zwingli held the position well before Calvin. The literature here is immense, and it is not our intention even to survey the issues. Instead, we want to examine not the general problem of...
Many of the Protestants in particular had witnessed how that road led Thomas Muntzer and the peasants straightaway to armed insurrection and resistance theory, but the more exegetical subquestion of patriarchal precedent. The sixteenth-century commentators I examined, whether magisterial Reformers or Roman Catholics, were not keen on private resistance.\footnote{Indeed, one of the findings of Skinner, \\textit{Foundations}, 2:221–30, 303–4, is that both early Lutherans as well as Calvin and the early Calvinists shied away from even implying that private persons (or the general populace) could resist tyranny without also resisting God. The development of a theory of legitimate private resistance (at least, among the Reformers) may be credited to two radical English Calvinists writing in the late 1550s, John Ponet and Christopher Goodman. The "classic texts of revolutionary Huguenot thought" that advocate private resistance may be inferred from his response, for he offers not one but two possible excuses for Abraham's apparent misdeed. First, Calvin thinks Abraham acted in obedience to a secret prompting of the spirit, "armed with a heavenly command, lest he transgress the bounds of his vocation." In other words, Abraham is excused by special dispensation. This is a traditional excuse, and it would occasion no comment were it not for the fact that Calvin is almost never willing to invoke it.\footnote{Calvin himself says as much; see n. 46, below.} Calvin's second excuse is more subtle. It is not necessary to view Abraham as a private person, says Calvin. After all, Canaan was promised to Abraham and his seed, making Abraham the de jure (if not de facto) monarch of that realm. As the king (the king-to-be) of that region, he was fully within his right and office to undertake a war.\footnote{\textit{Patriarchi, Polygamy, and Private Resistance} 17. Few other commentators were troubled by the question of Abraham's private status. Many passed over the story with little comment. Some, such as Chrysostom, Konrad Pellican, and Musculus, stressed the role of providence in the outcome, but without addressing Abraham's right to declare war. Only for Luther, Zwingli, and Vermigli was Abraham's private status an issue. Zwingli's remarks are unguarded, to say the least, for not only does he find neither impropriety in the retribution Abraham undertook nor any special divine impulse, but he also states that Abraham is an excellent example for Christian warfare. Indeed, "those who wage war... to free the oppressed from injury and violence... not only do not sin, but they undertake what is most pleasing to God."\footnote{\textit{Zwingli, Comm. Gen.} 14 (ZSW 13:86).} By contrast, Luther seeks out his whipping boy, Thomas Münzer, in order to reiterate how Abraham is not an example; in fact, had Abraham not had a special command here, he would have sinned.\footnote{\textit{Luther, }Letters 71–72, 84, 88–89 (pp. 135–36, 151, 156–57). Luther is generally sensitive to the hazard of rashly imitating Old Testament examples, particularly where the issue is private resistance, and he elsewhere warns his students "you have more and greater examples which testify that one should not slay a magistrate"; \textit{Comm. Gen.} 30:1 (WA 43:653), emphasis added.} Calvin's from 1554, it would be reasonable to find Calvin dependent on Vermigli for the otherwise unprecedented notion of Abraham's proleptic lordship—but Vermigli's comments were not published until 1569. There may be a common source on which both Calvin and Vermigli have drawn, but I have not found it.}  

Few other commentators were troubled by the question of Abraham's private status. Many passed over the story with little comment. Some, such as Chrysostom, Konrad Pellican, and Musculus, stressed the role of providence in the outcome, but without addressing Abraham’s right to declare war. Only for Luther, Zwingli, and Vermigli was Abraham’s private status an issue. Zwingli’s remarks are unguarded, to say the least, for not only does he find neither impropriety in the retribution Abraham undertook nor any special divine impulse, but he also states that Abraham is an excellent example for Christian warfare. Indeed, “those who wage war... to free the oppressed from injury and violence... not only do not sin, but they undertake what is most pleasing to God.”\footnote{\textit{Zwingli, Comm. Gen.} 14 (ZSW 13:86).} By contrast, Luther seeks out his whipping boy, Thomas Münzer, in order to reiterate how Abraham is not an example; in fact, had Abraham not had a special command here, he would have sinned.\footnote{\textit{Luther, }Letters 71–72, 84, 88–89 (pp. 135–36, 151, 156–57). Luther is generally sensitive to the hazard of rashly imitating Old Testament examples, particularly where the issue is private resistance, and he elsewhere warns his students “you have more and greater examples which testify that one should not slay a magistrate”; \textit{Comm. Gen.} 30:1 (WA 43:653), emphasis added.} Calvin’s remarks on patriarchal precedent are not surprising. However, two further observations may be made. First, Calvin is willing to generalize about all the apparent acts of private resistance in the Old Testament on the basis of this one instance. So far as his opinion of Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson can be known, it would seem that Calvin treated them as exceptions after
the fashion of Abraham. His comparison here of Abraham to Moses is especially of interest, since in sixteenth-century discussions of the Christian response to tyranny, “Moses” became a virtual eponym for the divinely sent help for which oppressed Christians of private status might pray but which they should not otherwise initiate. Second, while Calvin is willing to justify Abraham on the basis of special dispensation, he clearly prefers the argument that cedes public office to Abraham and thereby avoids the problem of private resistance altogether. This is not to say that Calvin denies the possibility of deliverers being raised up from the private realm, but it does underscore his discomfort with the notion and his desire to appeal on behalf of oppressed Huguenots not to private avengers, but to such bodies as the Estates General.

In his reluctance to resist the religious oppression of a tyrant on any other than constitutional grounds, Calvin was in the company of most of the Reformers of his day. While this proposition is better substantiated from Calvin’s more directly political writings (in particular, Institutes 4.20), it is equally detectable in his commentaries and in those of his contemporaries, as the remarks of Luther and Vermigli illustrate. Accordingly, the patriarchs, like Moses and the judges, turn out to be as circumspect about their private status as Calvin and his colleagues would have been. This is surely no coincidence. Because the terminus ad quem of this survey of commentators is set roughly at Calvin’s death, there is little sign of the shift in “political exegesis” that developed as the situation of the Huguenots worsened and especially in the wake of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre. Bainton provides a hint of such exegesis when he cites the statement of Theodore Beza that the Israelites were delivered by an extraordinary means only because “they were too stupid to see that they might have resisted tyranny without it.” But in the exegesis of Calvin and most of his contemporaries, the boundary between public and private was not easily crossed, and Abraham and Moses were better known for their sensitivity to special revelation than to natural rights and necessity.

ON DERIVING RULES FROM EXAMPLES AND EXCEPTIONS

The sixteenth-century discussions of polygamy and popular resistance are two illustrations of the interplay between current issues and exegetical findings. The correlation is not so easily analyzed, of course, that one could say that exegesis is determined by social and political opinions or vice versa. Would the radicals at Münster, for instance, have adopted polygamy if they had found no scriptural warrant—or, for that matter, had there been no surplus of unmarried women? Which factor was determinative? It is clear, I think, that whatever political course an exegete charted, one would somehow find the saints and heroes of the Old Testament among one’s companions: the patriarchs were Münster’s heroes no less than Luther’s. To this point we have looked at the variety of excuses which commentators offered for the patriarchs’ numerous misdeeds, and at polygamy and resistance in particular. We conclude our study with the more general question of transferability: Might the patriarchs’ excuses ever apply also to us? If so, are there any rules to guide one through such uncharted terrain?

In the question of transferability, there are two considerations which tend to render the patriarchs unique and inimitable, and a third consideration which works the other way. First, the patriarchs are routinely given the benefit of any doubt, largely on account of their other virtues, their status as exemplars in the New Testament, and the embarrassment of having scoundrels prominent among one’s religious forebears. Accordingly, Augustine argued that even if Abraham did sin, that sin would not cancel out his other merits any more than in the case of Peter’s denial of Christ. But Augustine believes that there is no proof that Abraham sinned, and in the absence of such proof, there is no necessity which compels one to condemn Abraham without cause. In other words, the sympathetic explanation is to be preferred. Vermigli cites Augustine with approval on this point, and Chrysostom says much the same thing: that we who are also sinners should somehow find the saints and heroes of the Old Testament among one’s religious forebears. Accordingly, Augustine believes that there is no proof that Abraham sinned, and in the absence of such proof, there is no necessity which compels one to condemn Abraham without cause. In other words, the sympathetic explanation is to be preferred. Vermigli cites Augustine with approval on this point, and Chrysostom says much the same thing: that we who are also sinners should not be quick to condemn those whom scripture supplies with excuses. Other factors also predisposed commentators to excuse. For example, in magistrates, not to private individuals (except, of course, those with special revelation). However, Robert Dean Linder observes that Viret’s theory of resistance “could be extended rather easily to include all kinds of popular uprisings”; see R. D. Linder, The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 142. Skinner, Foundations, 2:302–48, argues that while the Huguenot theorists and pamphleteers would have preferred resistance to be led by lesser magistrates, they did make various allowances for popular, private resistance. That Beza’s remark (above) licensed private resistance only against usurpers and not against “legitimate” tyrants is underscored by Robert M. Kingdon, Myths about the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacres, 1572–1576 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 153–59, and cf. 165, 181.
the case of Lot's endangerment of his daughters, Cajetan took 2 Pet. 2:7–8 as canonical (if retrospective) proof of Lot's righteousness, while Luther's exoneration of Lot was forecast by two similar observations of fact, namely, that Lot was worthy to entertain angels, and since God did rescue him, after all, he must have been righteous.\(^\text{50}\) While such excuses are innovative, sometimes even persuasive, they all remain inapplicable to us.

A second consideration which tends to portray the patriarchs as sui generis is the general rule (derived from a principle of law) mentioned by many commentators and used sooner or later by all: examples, even famous examples, do not frame a law. It is difficult to underestimate the frequency with which admonitions against imitation appear in the commentaries. In addition to statements which merely condemn a given action and leave the reader to draw the obvious conclusion, most commentators seem driven to make the prohibition still more explicit by adding comments such as “Abraham is not an example or precedent for us.”\(^\text{51}\) Such warnings against imitation seem somewhat more frequent in sixteenth-century commentaries than in those of the fathers, though no one has a monopoly.\(^\text{52}\) Sometimes the warnings are polemical, as Luther's frequent denigration of Müntzer and the peasants, or Calvin’s anti-Catholic aside: “How foolishly the papists clamor that we ought to follow the fathers, when the Spirit expressly recalls us from the imitation of men except so far as they lead us to God.”\(^\text{53}\) Usually, however, such remarks are less polemical than parenetic, ostensibly directed to prevent the weak conscience from rationalizing or conceiving of sinful deeds on the basis of patriarchal precedent.\(^\text{54}\)

At the same time, there is a third consideration which prevents the first two from rendering the patriarchs beyond imitation. Even as the patriarchs were granted special consideration and excuses because of the New Testament's commendation of their faith and righteousness, so it is that they tended to become exemplars even in their misdeeds. The immoralities of the patriarchs could be reclaimed as examples in either of two ways: if excused of sin, they model faith under adversity; if convicted of sin, they testify to forgiveness and warn against presumption. Despite the grand consensus that the patriarchs' misdeeds established no precedent, the mere accumulation of their misdeeds was sufficient to establish “exception” itself as a category and, in a sense, as a precedent. Granted that the patriarchs' misdeeds are exceptions to the rule, they are frequent and regular enough also to imply (or even demand) a rule for exceptions. The tension is between God as legislator and God as ex lex, and between the horns of this dilemma one finds a few commentators struggling to regularize something which by definition admits of no rule.

It is by way of response to this slash of exceptions that some exegetes attempted to chart some fixed boundaries in the moral order. For example, some medieval theologians argued that exceptions to the Second Table were possible, but even God could not dispense from the obligations of the First Table.\(^\text{55}\) But this scheme does not show up in the commentaries, where the issue is argued on a case-by-case basis. And it would seem that many commentators would not find this distinction between the two tables of the Decalogue restrictive enough, for while most allowed God to command a lie, there was markedly less willingness to see dispensations granted for sexual misconduct (still only a violation of the Second Table). Nonetheless, a similar desire for well-defined moral limits may have led some commentators to declare that misconduct in the service of God is a confusion of categories, in that “a sinful deed offered to God” is itself a contradiction in terms. Thus did Vermigli say that it is not licit to act against divine laws or right reason to hasten the fulfillment of a divine promise, and Musculus said that it is no work of faith to obtain God's promise through unrighteous means. Likewise, Calvin said "the truth of God is not to be aided by falsehood," and "whatever is opposed to the nature of God is sinful."\(^\text{56}\) But even Vermigli, Musculus, and Calvin found instances of valid, excusable exceptions.

I have found no systematic treatment of exceptions among any of the commentators, but I believe five rules may be distinguished, which were pressed into service as guidelines for our commentators' readers and

\(^{50}\)Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22.34 (PL 40:422); Vermigli, *Comm. Gen.* 16.3 (fol. 65v); Chrysostom, *Hom. 44.5* on Gen. 19:33 (PG 54:411); Cajetan, *Comm. Gen.* 19:5–8 (p. 92); Luther, *Comm. Gen.* 19:9 (WA 43:59ff.). It is indicative of the patriarchs' special status that Luther, having presented a convincing argument that the sins of the patriarchs do not need to be excused (since, like us, they were human and fallible), proceeds to excuse Lot anyway, as if the tradition of excusing the patriarchs were irresistible. Sym pathetic exegesis is also generally urged by Vermigli, *Comm. Gen.* 16.3 (fol. 65v), and Musculus, *In Mosti Genesim . . . Commentarii* (Basel: Ioannes Hervagius, 1554) on Gen. 16.3 (p. 384).

\(^{51}\)Such disclaimers are applied to polygamy by Jerome, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Luther, Zwingli, Pellican, Musculus, Vermigli, and Calvin. Similar remarks qualify Abraham's lie about Sarah in Zwingli, Vermigli, Oecolampadius, and Musculus; Lot's offer of his daughters in Luther, Pellican, Vermigli, and Musculus; Jacob's sheep-breeding in Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin; and Tamar's incest in Luther, Vermigli, and Musculus. In the case of most other misdeeds examined, at least one commentator issues such a warning, and those who are silent may on no account be presumed to disagree. Calvin sounds this alarm at frequent and regular intervals.

\(^{52}\)Neither the genre nor the occasion of exegesis seems decisive; e.g., Chrysostom's comments were originally delivered as homilies, yet no one is less critical of the patriarchs.


\(^{54}\)Although I found none who mentioned it in the context of the patriarchs, one may recall the Protestant fear of the confessional as a place where new sins were learned more often than the old ones shriven. See the 1523 accusation of Jacob Strauss, that "the confessional is a schooling in sin," in Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 52ff.

\(^{55}\)Bernard, Bonaventure, and Scotus fall in this category. See Bain ton, "Immoralities of the Patriarchs," 40–41, as well as Thompson, "Immoralities of the Patriarchs," 13–16.

congregations. The first rule allows exceptional actions only to those who have a special, extraordinary call, as Luther describes it:

One must adhere to the rule that the deeds of the saints should not be imitated or taken as examples. . . . [Rather,] the Word is a reliable rule, which cannot deceive. Thus the jurists, too, say that an action is not a law, just as a law is not an action. . . . What happens outside the law should not be taken as law but should be regarded as miracles, on the basis of which surely nobody should make a rule or law. And especially in the church should the teachers try to teach what is certain. Therefore they should not present examples; they should present the rule. . . . Those who are not called by a specific command outside the rule . . . should keep within the rule.57

Augustine had made a similar point: "Some actions have an indifferent character, so that people are justly blamed for presumption if they do them unasked, yet they are deservedly praised for doing them when required."58 That much is easy to affirm, but the hard question is unanswered: What does an extraordinary call look like? In the matter of Philip's bigamy, both Luther and Bucer granted such a de facto call to Philip on the basis of the testimony of his conscience, but Philip's conscience was just as clearly not sufficient warrant for the opponents of the bigamy. One doubts that Mützer's conscience would have been so respected by Luther, but perhaps does an extraordinary call look like? In the matter of Philip's bigamy, both Vermigli cites the miracles performed by the judges as proof that they did not act as private persons, but rather by the spirit of God.60 Bainton reports that in Luther's response to the peasants, he demanded that their rebellion (which he held to be contrary to scripture and to divine and natural law) be "corroborated by signs and wonders." It is arguable whether this was a serious request or merely a rhetorical demand for the impossible, but it seems beyond debate that Luther allowed the possibility of the miraculous, even if he did not really expect it here.61

A third rule follows similar lines by justifying exceptions on the basis of their outcome. This rule is affirmed by Cajetan to justify Lot's offer of his daughters; Zwingli applies it to Jacob's deception of Isaac; Luther finds it in the selling of Joseph; and even Calvin uses it to show how God approved the divination of Abraham's servant and Jacob's reversal of the primogeniture of Manassas and Ephraim.62 Hindsight or results make for a wonderfully safe course, one at least as old as Gamaliel (Acts 5:38–39), but it is naturally useless for predicting exceptions. On the other hand, if a contemporary misdeed were itself already a fait accompli, and a successful one at that, it is not inconceivable that success might itself be invoked as a rule to justify a deed after the fact.63 Luther seems to suggest such an application when he states "although heroic men break the laws, they do not tear states apart."64 But even salutary results are not infallible, for Musculus condemned Abraham on the grounds that a good outcome is not proof of one's sinlessness or wisdom.65 Luther, too, offers a counter-example: A dream may be known to be divinely sent by a number of criteria, he stated, one of which is that it come to pass as foretold. But in the case of the dreams of the papists, Luther writes, they are not to be accounted as true even if they are fulfilled as predicted, for they do not conform to true doctrine nor result in the confession of faith.66

A fourth rule involves the application of reason, necessity, prudence, or

58Augustine, Contra Faustum 22.73 (PL 42:446).
59Luther was certainly aware that the (public) bad example of a prince was much more harmful than the same behavior in a private person; see Comm. Gen. 34:3 (WA 44:144–45). But in Philip's case, Luther's desire to avoid an adulterous prince led him to prefer a bigamous one.
61On Luther, see Bainton, "Immorality of the Patriarchs," 44. Mützer voices the complaint, presumably against Luther, that it is "the wont of the godless biblical scholars" to "strut in demanding miracles"; see "A Manifest Expose of False Faith," in Collected Works, 276 (German text in Mützer, Schriften und Briefe, ed. Günther Franz [Göttingen: Gerd Mohn, 1968], p. 279a).
63For instance, Calvin was furious in the wake of the 1560 Conspiracy of Amboise (in which French refugees in Geneva were implicated in a plot to kidnap the young king)—a conspiracy from which he had held himself aloof. One can only wonder how he would have responded if the conspiracy had succeeded and contributed to the making of a Protestant France. Calvin recounts his attempts to discourage the conspiracy in a letter to Coligny (April 16, 1561; CO 18:425–31, no. 3374); also see Robert M. Kingdon, Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564–1572: A Contribution to the History of Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and Calvinist Resistance Theory (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 44–46.
64Luther, Comm. Gen. 29:29–30 (WA 43:645); although Luther had been speaking of Hercules, this barb is probably directed against Mützer.
66Luther, Comm. Gen. 37:9 (WA 44:248f). Here Luther really goes beyond mere "good results" to frame a further guideline in which a dream, to be valid, must not only come to pass but must also be tested by the so-called "analog of faith." See rule number five, below. Luther used a75...
the doctrine of compensatory evil. For example, might exceptional behavior ever be dictated by the lack of other options, by what is sometimes called a tragic moral choice? With the exceptions of Ambrose and, with qualification, Augustine, commentators are generally hostile to this option. Yet, such a repudiation notwithstanding, the recommendations of Luther and Bucer (that Philip lie about his bigamy in order to prevent public scandal) seem scarcely understandable as anything other than compensatory evil. This is not to say that the commentators always shy away from scandal or the appearance of evil. Vermiglly expressly states that the appearance of an act is an indifferent matter when it is performed in response to an extraordinary command, in that it does not compromise one’s salvation. But the party line on compensatory evil, necessity, and prudence tends not to approve of a deed — again, at least in theory — if the deed actually is (as opposed to “seems”) evil. Even the theories of resistance developed by the Huguenots illustrate this, insofar as they defined resistance to tyranny not as a lesser evil but as a duty of lesser magistrates obliged by the constitution and, in later theories, as a right granted by natural law.

A fifth rule often applied to exceptions dictates that a deed is not divinely approved if it contradicts God’s word. This may be read positively or negatively. Positively, exceptional actions might be granted legitimacy on the condition that the actors and their goals are doctrinally orthodox. Luther sometimes seems to speak this way, as if he might have allowed certain irregularities had those involved espoused correct doctrine, thus demanding a measure of continuity between God’s ordinary command or word and their claim to an extraordinary word. His dismissal of the dreams of the heterodox (above) might imply such a reading, as could his refusal to grant any weight to miracles in the case of Anabaptist preachers: “I won’t suffer a preacher in office, even though he works miracles, unless he is sure that he has the right teaching and Word and a certain office.” To be sure, Luther could also be read here as simply disallowing any behavior which is not in accord with the doctrine and polity of scripture as he understood it, and given his general opinion of “papists” and radicals, it seems unlikely that he would have been satisfied by any miracle short of conversion to Lutheranism. But a less restrictive interpretation is surely to be preferred, for Luther himself appeals to a general continuity with scripture as a virtual rule: “Prophets and dreamers are not to be despised if their prophecies and dreams are analogous to the Word of God and faith.” This brings us to the other reading of the rule that no deed is divinely approved which contradicts the word of God. Read negatively, the rule is applied not to prospective exceptions but only to the past, so as to counsel Christians not to imitate the saints of old unless their example is elsewhere confirmed by the word of God. On this reading, exceptions are practically impossible and scripture is used to define and delimit what is permissible. Pellican states this as his position, and even Luther implies it when he urges teachers to focus on the rule (as being more certain), not on examples. Calvin is yet clearer: “whatever the Lord commands in general terms is to be considered an inflexible rule of conduct, but to rely on particular examples is not only dangerous but even foolish and absurd.” Since the advice of Calvin, like that of Luther, was not intended to predict or

67Vermiglly, Loci Communes 4.20.15 (p. 965-66). His examples include Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, the spoiling of the Egyptians, and the early church martyrs who disobeyed Caesar. The last example would imply that he takes Acts 5:29—the so-called dama da Peri—as an extraordinary command, though most interpret it rather as a general command which is to be applied only under extreme circumstances.

68Skinner, Foundations, 2:240, 302-48, contends that one of the crucial shifts in Huguenot resistance theory after 1572 is the gradual growth of the idea that resistance is less a religious duty than a natural right. The dating of this shift finds a correlate in the reluctance of the earlier Reformers (i.e., those surveyed here) to encourage their contemporaries to embrace any of the naturalistic “excuses” which they are willing to apply to the patriarchs. But surely their willingness to apply these excuses at least to the patriarchs helps one to see their continuity with later, more naturalistic political theorists.

69Of course, Luther still retains some strictures as to what God “never” allows (e.g., “fornication and incest”), and thus shares the general repugnance towards sexual sins (see the discussion above, following n. 55); see his Comm. Gen. 38:16ff., 20ff. (WA 44:324, 330). Lyra makes a similar statement about incest in his Postilla Super Totam Bibliam on Gen. 19:32 (Strassburg, 1492; facsimile reprint; Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1971), sig. F viii

70Luther, Sermon on John 7:16-18 (WA 33:359), as cited by Bainton, “Immorality of the Patriarchs,” 44; emphasis his.

71Luther, Comm. Gen. 37:9 (WA 44:251), emphasis added. Luther’s invocation of the “analogy of faith” here is a mark of sophistication that one misses in most other commentators. By binding visions (etc.) to an external criterion, Luther attempts to transcend the fatal subjectivity to which dreamers and visionaries are prone. This is also a step or two beyond the criteria for validating dreams offered by Thomas Müntzer, for whom confirmation of a dream’s divine origin remains ultimately subjective. Though Müntzer also wants dreams and revelations to conform to the pattern of scripture, there is a constant tension in Müntzer between the genuine spirituality that arises from tribulation and mystical discipline and the “mere” Bible knowledge of Luther and the Roman Catholics and their ilk. See Müntzer, “Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel,” in Collected Works, pp. 235-44; cf. his Letter no. 40, pp. 56-58 (Schriften und Briefe, pp. 247-56, 390). Luther’s intuition is all the more striking in light of a recent study of extracanonical Christian prophecy in the patriarchal era, which highlights the role of the “rule of faith” in evaluating and guiding charismatic utterances; see Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Canon, Regular and Irregular, and Continuing Revelation in the Early Church,” in Church, Word, and Spirit, ed. James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 65-91.

72The difference between these two readings depends on whether God’s “word” is exhaustively comprehended by scripture or whether a special “word” might be received which contradicts the morality or polity commended by scripture (but not its more directly theological teachings). The difference is worth noting in this context in view of the distinction between apostolic doctrine as fixed and apostolic polity as flexible, a distinction drawn by Calvin and others in discussing the possibilities for change and innovation in church order. It is not an easy distinction, insofar as polity is itself also a doctrine.

73Pellican, Comm. Gen. 38:15 (fol. 50v); for Luther, see the quote at n. 57, above.

encourage exceptions, but rather to define and promote the rule, he cannot be accused of circularity or evasiveness. Indeed, if Calvin's advice reveals a certain dislike for exceptions, it also testifies to his doctrine of scripture's utter sufficiency as a guide in matters of morality and policy. Unfortunately, the scripture which is detailed enough for the purposes of even a general casuistry is the same scripture which elsewhere presents exceptional cases. Unless one denies these canonical exceptions, one is cast back upon the first rule and—precisely there—back into the hermeneutical circle, so that an exception is divinely approved only if God approves it.

With the exception of the rule which appeals to considerations of necessity, prudence, or compensatory evil (rule no. 3, above), these rules are essentially variations on a common theme; or more specifically, they are all variations on a common question: Is God still working in extraordinary ways today, and if so, how can one be sure these works—these dramatic solutions to such desperate problems—are truly heaven-sent?

In the early decades of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers had to confront a Pandora's box of changes they had opened, not all of which were anticipated. In seeking solutions to a host of difficult problems, it was natural for them to consult all the traditional sources and to pry from these sources answers and solutions for which the sources themselves were not necessarily well suited. Such was the case with the precedents seemingly offered by the patriarchal narratives.

The answers given to the question of how God works today fall between two well-defined poles. At one extreme stands Thomas Muntzer, who affirmed that God's extraordinary deeds in the present are of the essence of the gospel message. Anyone who denies this is a hypocrite and no Christian.

This seems to be the way of all but a few of the biblical scholars today. With very few exceptions they teach that God no longer reveals his divine mysteries to his dear friends through genuine visions or direct words etc. . . . [But] to expect visions and to receive them while in tribulation and suffering, is in the true spirit of the apostles, the patriarchs, and the prophets.75

Almost all of [the scoundrelly biblical scholars] say: Look, Scripture amply stills our needs, thank you, we don’t believe in any revelation; God no longer speaks like that.76

At the other extreme would be the point of view that Muntzer so despised: that God no longer works by extraordinary means. This view, too, had its advocates:

76Muntzer, “Exposé of False Faith,” 296, 298 (Briefe, 297a).

[In the days of the patriarchs], God commonly made his will known by oracles. . . . But a different method prevails for us. These days, God does not reveal 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.77

Here the speaker is John Calvin, and what he says here about oracles is of a piece with his view of patriarchal immoralities. For Calvin, not only are we unlikely to be called to exceptional roles (say, as divinely commissioned deliverers), but the patriarchs themselves were cast in such roles far more seldom that the exegetical tradition would suggest. Just the opposite: in filling what are often portrayed as exceptional roles, the patriarchs (Calvin finds) more often than not simply sinned.

This is not the whole story to be told concerning Calvin's "openness to change," but it is a significant piece of the puzzle. While most (if not all) of Calvin's fellow commentators were equally uncomfortable with the dangers of the spontaneous spiritualism represented by Muntzer, none was so willing to rule out God's extraordinary dealings in human affairs as Calvin seems. Indeed, all other exegetes I surveyed fall between these polar extremes—closer to Calvin than to Muntzer, to be sure, but not yet so ready to rule out divine intervention as a factor both in the lives of the patriarchs and in their own. Indeed, it is their openness to change and to exceptions, however slight, that leads them to grope their way toward the five rules enumerated above, even if it means sacrificing some consistency in their theological ethics.78

Calvin, however, stands alone. Consequently, while Calvin could acknowledge how God raised up deliverers in the past, he had no general theory or rules for exceptions, and thus could give no encouragement to the Amboise conspirators: To deliver the oppressed people of God, however righteous a cause, was a role to which no Christian of private standing could aspire.79 So when Calvin urged his oppressed brothers and sisters in France to "wait for a Moses," the accent fell almost exclusively on "wait." While Calvin might have accepted a Moses had God sent one, he was not about to send his disciples into the bulrushes in search of a basket.

78As Luther and Bucer demonstrate by denying the propriety of compensatory evil and yet recommending such a course to Philip of Hesse; see n. 14, above.
79Constitutional resistance on the part of lesser magistrates, of course, would not be considered an exception by Calvin, but an obligation.