

CALVIN AND THE BEASTS: ANIMALS IN JOHN CALVIN'S THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

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In the twentieth century, John Calvin's theology of creation has been the subject of much debate, especially as it has figured in controversies regarding the legitimacy of natural theology in Christian thought and of what is now called "animal theology" in Christian ethics. Read through systematic Barthian categories, Calvin's thought on nature has been construed as conceptually negative, simply a thematic foil for an exclusive "theanthropocentric" gospel of salvific revelation in Jesus Christ.¹ At the hands of animal rights theologians, his thought has been reduced to a "humanocentric" misreading of the Christian message, a severe departure from the biblical vision of the peaceable kingdom and a significant contributor to the Western desacralization of nature.² Consequently, studies in historical theology, shaped by such ideological concerns, have routinely obscured what Calvin actually said about the excellence and integrity of creation.

The publication of Susan Schreiner's study of Calvin's theology of creation has signaled the beginning of an attempt to reassess the longstanding negative verdict on Calvin's view of nature. In *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (1991), Schreiner makes the case that Calvin's theological vision was profoundly shaped by a deep appreciation of nature. "In all of [his] writings," she states, "Calvin taught that God's glory extended beyond the fate of the individual soul and encompassed the whole of creation."³ Arguably, Calvin's thought reveals an intimate acquaintance and engagement with nature absent in most modern forms of theology, even those advertising themselves as creation-centered. While it certainly does not anticipate twentieth-century experiments in ecological theology, neither does it represent the kind of exclusive "humanocentricism" that some theologians have found characteristic of the dominant Christian theological tradition. Rather, Calvin's theological imagination, instinctively shaped by assumptions regarding the interface of the natural and supernatural, conceives of nature as a created order whose theological

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¹ H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 122–133.

² Cf. Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) and *Animal Theology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

³ Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1991) 5.

significance far exceeds its importance as the setting for a divine-human drama of redemption.

It is difficult to turn a page in Calvin's sermons, commentaries, or treatises without finding a reference to some aspect or creature of the natural world. Raging winds and churning seas shape the landscape of his thought, while growling beasts and twittering birds render his work a veritable bestiary of Christian doctrine. The power and variety of creation, including the beautiful, the violent, the charming, and the grotesque, are regularly set before the reader of his theology. In Calvin's mind, the world of nature is never separated from the realm of divine revelation. For him, to borrow a phrase from Horace Bushnell, "the outer world is the vast dictionary and grammar of thought."⁴

One reoccurring element of Calvin's theological language of nature—even overlooked by contemporary theologians reevaluating his theology of creation—is his fascination with the animal kingdom. In his reflections on the order of creation, Calvin gave considerable attention to the place of non-human animals in the total scheme of things. Likewise, in his rhetoric, he drew suggestive imagery from the material sphere, frequently exploiting animals or animal characteristics as metaphors in his theological discourse. This essay will show how animals played a significant part in Calvin's construction of Christian theology, determining both the subject matter for theological reflection and the language for the expression of that reflection. The first section of the essay will investigate Calvin's views of the animal world as an integral part of God's creation. The second part, which stands in some tension with the first, will focus upon his distinctive (and often pejorative) use of animal imagery in the service of theological literature. Together, the sections of the study demonstrate the prominent role that animals played in Calvin's theological imagination.

I. ANIMALS IN THE SCHEME OF CREATION

The Western intellectual tradition inherited by the sixteenth-century Reformers treated the diversity of life on earth as a standard category of the Christian theological enterprise, often speaking of non-human creatures as components in a "second book" of divine revelation.⁵ One thing that strikes the modern reader of ancient and medieval texts is the frequency with which animals appear as subjects for theological analysis or as images in theological argument. Augustine's writings, for example, betray an imagination fascinated by the appearance, behavior, and mystery of animals. According to his understanding, the defense of Christian doctrine and the interpretation

⁴ Horace Bushnell, "Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language as Related to Thought and Spirit," *Theology in America* (ed. Sydney E. Ahlstrom; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) 325.

⁵ Cf. George H. Williams, "Christian Attitudes Towards Nature," *Christian Scholar's Review* 2 (1971) 3–35 and 2 (1972) 112–126. Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

of its picture of reality required theological consideration of the non-human forms of life on earth. For one who sought to know the wonder of nature and the range of universal history, knowledge of the ways and meaning of animal life was an intellectual necessity.⁶

Calvin, too, though he constantly warned against excessive metaphysical speculation, though animals, like angels, created beings worthy of theological reflection. Appropriately animals occupy a prominent position in Calvin's Christian cosmology. All of nature, variously described by Calvin as a mirror or a "most glorious theater," acts as a channel of revelation (*Institutes* 1.6.2).⁷ It discloses the goodness and majesty of the Creator, who has assigned the world of animals its own role in the natural revelation of divine glory. Moreover, each creation individually represents the divine powers "as in a painting" (*Institutes* 1.5.10). All creatures, Calvin wrote, "from those in the firmament to those which are in the center of the earth, are able to act as witnesses and messengers of his glory." The "little birds that . . . sing of God" and the beasts that "clamor for him" guide the human mind to contemplate the wonders of the sacred.⁸ Calvin saw every living thing, no matter how humble or harmful, as a vehicle for the self-disclosure of its Maker.

The God revealed by the life of animals, from Calvin's perspective, is the deity whose providence maintains the whole of corporeal reality. Animals reveal the full range and scope of the sustaining activity of the Creator. Using the behavior and survival of animals to demonstrate God's care for the earth, Calvin reaffirmed the ancient understanding of providence as a continual reenactment of the primordial creative act. In other words, the health and habits of animals show that nature's God was no "momentary Creator." Echoing scripture, Calvin also emphasized the immediate involvement of God in creation by observing how "even to the least sparrow" God grants his creatures direct attention (*Institutes* 1.16.1). "Every single one of God's creatures is under his hand and care," he asserted.⁹ Divine intervention into the affairs of creation, just like the potential of nature to declare the glory of God, extends to all members of the animal community.

Aside from its ultimate cause of divine glorification and its manifold enjoyment of heaven's providence, creation for Calvin is fundamentally anthropocentric. "True it is that God hath given us the birds for our food, as we know he hath made the whole world for us."¹⁰ With the majority of theologians before him, Calvin maintained that humans enjoy a privileged condition in the hierarchy of being. Humanity, he insisted, is the "most excellent

⁶ Peter Huff, "From Dragons to Worms: Animals and the Subversion of Hierarchy in Augustine's Theology," *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992) 27–43.

⁷ All quotations from Calvin's *Institutes* are from John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

⁸ Joseph Haroutunian, trans. and ed., *Calvin: Commentaries*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958) 59–60.

⁹ *Commentaries* 266.

¹⁰ Quoted in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983) 154.

example" of God's works; the entire universe "was established especially for the sake of mankind" (*Institutes* 1.14.20, 1.16.6). Yet despite his anthropocentric view of the cosmos, Calvin was determined to protect the dignity of animals bestowed upon them in their divine origin. Though he agreed with those who believed that scripture permitted the proper use of animals, including the rightful consumption of animal flesh,¹¹ for him the administrative dominion of humans never entailed unjust domination of non-humans.

When the Creator placed animals in subjection to the needs of humans, Calvin explained, "he did it with the condition that we should handle them gently." The Old Testament commands regarding the suitable treatment of animals are in no way canceled by the new law of Christ. Rather, the moral injunctions of the Bible still require humans "to practice justice even in dealing with animals." Men and women, therefore, are granted superiority over animals, not to abuse them, but "to nourish them and to have care of them."¹² Calvin's respect for the natural dignity of animals was even translated into the legislation of the churches under the pastoral care of the Genevan ministers. The Ordinances of 1547, for example, required that all citizens attend Sunday worship in church, "unless it be necessary to leave someone behind to take care of children or animals."¹³

In contrast to this motif of responsible stewardship and paternal respect, Calvin's thought is periodically charged with a negative attitude toward animals. The threatening and objectionable dimensions of animal existence did not escape his notice. In a famous passage on the contingency of human life in the *Institutes*, animals are employed to illustrate the precarious and menacing character of everyday experience. In addition to disease, natural disasters, freak accidents, and malicious human violence, there are ferocious beasts "armed for your destruction," deadly serpents poised to strike, and numerous other horrors "which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad" (*Institutes* 1.17.10). In several places, as William J. Bouwsma has shown, Calvin also revealed his disgust with the more repulsive parts of animal life.¹⁴ This response is nowhere more apparent than in his exposition of the biblical story of Noah. Calvin's exegesis of the Genesis text concentrates on the nauseating prospect of being locked up with a boat load of filthy shipmates for ten months "almost immersed in the dung of animals!" (*Institutes* 2.10.10).¹⁵

Besides these textual expressions of the negative side of the human-animal relationship, Calvin's own life demonstrates that he did not always see the animal world as the benign vehicle of revelation for a benevolent

¹¹ Cf. Andrew Linzey and Tom Regan, eds., *Animals and Christianity: A Book of Readings* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 21-23.

¹² Quoted in Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* 154. *Commentaries* 329.

¹³ J. K. S. Reid, trans. and ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 77. Cf. *Institutes* 2.8.32.

¹⁴ William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 47.

¹⁵ Cf. John Calvin, *Concerning Scandals* (trans. John W. Fraser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 37.

deity. Recalling his 1541 return to Geneva shortly before his death, Calvin told his ministerial colleagues, "I had as great difficulty as before in performing my office. People set their dogs on me, which caught at my robe and my legs."¹⁶ In fact, the opposition to Calvin became so nasty that the Consistory had to deal with abusive residents who named their pets after Calvin.¹⁷ The aggressive wife of one of Calvin's enemies even "amused herself by making his horse shy."¹⁸ While his cosmological views accorded animals a noble place in the order of the world, his practical experience with animals fueled feelings of ambivalence and occasionally resentment toward nature.

II. ANIMAL IMAGERY IN THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Whether writing of the gentle sparrow or the grisly savage beast, Calvin, as one critic observed, "wrote more elegantly than was decent for a theologian."¹⁹ Accordingly his theological prose has drawn the scrutiny of a number of interpreters interested in his literary affiliation with Renaissance humanism's rhetorical tradition.²⁰ Analyzing the use of nature metaphors, especially animal imagery, in his theological discourse yields additional insight into Calvin's theology of nature. Not only was Calvin interested in animals in themselves as fellow creatures; he also drew figurative language from the natural realm of creatures to illuminate the situation of humanity on earth and to bolster his prose in polemical contest.

Habitually Calvin referred to humans as animals. He accepted the classical definition of humankind as "by nature a social animal," but he also used animal metaphors to emphasize the more troubling or disagreeable traits of human nature. "God knows best," he confessed, "how much we are inclined by nature to a brutish love of the world." Humanity, he went so far to say, is "a five-foot worm" (*Institutes* 2.2.13, 3.9.1, 1.5.4). For Calvin, of course, it is sin that makes people such creatures. Recalling the many-headed monster of pagan myth, Calvin said that the wicked tendency of the human heart "lurks in the breast" of each person like a hydra. The sinful inclinations are so plentiful, he continued, that few people understood "how many heads" this beast bears, "and what a long tail" it drags along (*Institutes* 2.3.2, 3.4.16).

¹⁶ Quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988) 247.

¹⁷ Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin* (trans. Francis Sibson; Philadelphia: Whetham, 1836) 44. Cf. Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (New York: Abingdon, 1958) 37.

¹⁸ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation* (trans. Audrey Butler; 2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963) 2:181.

¹⁹ Cf. John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 102.

²⁰ Cf. Bouwsma, *John Calvin* 113–127; Suzanne Selinger, *Calvin Against Himself* (Hamdon, CT: Archon Books, 1984) 93–95. See also Roland M. Frye, "Calvin's Theological Use of Figurative Language," *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (ed. Timothy George; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) 172–194; Francis Montgomery Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); Quirinus Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (2nd ed.; Hamdon, CT: Archon Books, 1968).

Under the conditions of the Fall human faculties, despite their divine origin, are now animal-like in nature. Adopting a familiar conceit,²¹ Calvin compared the human will to a horse mounted by either God or the devil, and the “passions of the flesh” to “so many wild and untamed beasts” (*Institutes* 2.4.1).²² He also knew from personal experience that the emotion anger could become a “ferocious beast.” Luckily, he conceded, the affections fear and anxiety retain enough of their original constitutions to keep humans from behaving “like straying animals.”²³ By the grace of God, the “worm of conscience” dwells in the ruin of the human soul, gnawing away within (*Institutes* 1.3.3).

In this state, Calvin believed, human beings need “to be sent to school to the beasts.”²⁴ Though he did not accept the theriophily of some classical authors, construing animals as morally superior to humans,²⁵ or foster a Franciscan vision of solidarity with animals in redemptive friendship, Calvin did believe that animals could teach people to be truly human. Throughout his writings Calvin repeatedly used metaphors of animal domestication and husbandry to express his conviction concerning the need for spiritual and moral discipline in personal life. His favorite images were the common accessories of the draft animal: the yoke, the bridle, reins, and the spur.²⁶ As the powers of chaos and even the devil bow to the restraining force of God’s harness, humans should not be like “mettlesome horses” that “kick against him who has fed and nourished” them, but should yield to the control of the Lord. Similarly, like the holy fathers and mothers of scripture, Christians should be “kept in obedience to the Word by God’s secret bridle” (*Institutes* 3.8.5, 3.2.31). Unlike the heathen who “can never submit to the yoke of being taught by human word and ministry” (*Institutes* 4.1.5), true believers must defer to the rule of legitimate authority in church and society. The mark of a godly commonwealth, he thought, is its submission to the training of God and his ordained servants.

The didactic and illustrative uses of animal imagery fit the purpose of much of Calvin’s theology, especially those works designed to educate Reformed Christians about themselves, the scriptures, or the details of Christian teaching. When he turned to treat his political and theological opponents, however, Calvin departed from the pedagogical use of animal metaphors and employed an even more forceful strategy of composition. While Francis Higman has shown that Calvin used animal imagery pejoratively in his French polemical treatises,²⁷ the depreciatory application of animal traits and behav-

²¹ Cf. Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio* in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (trans. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 18 n. 12, 140.

²² *Concerning Scandals* 55.

²³ Quoted in Bouwsma, *John Calvin* 51, 44.

²⁴ Quoted in *ibid.* 140.

²⁵ Cf. George Boas, “Theriophily,” *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (ed. Philip P. Wiener; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973) 4:384–389.

²⁶ Cf. Bouwsma, *John Calvin* 86–97. Also Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 191; Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory* 31, 38.

²⁷ Higman, *Style of John Calvin* 144–149.

iors to theological antagonists is actually a literary device operative throughout the entire Calvin corpus. For Calvin, the most effective form of insult was comparison with the animal world.

Calvin applied negative animal metaphors to the vast host of ungodly. Satan, the father of all crimes and errors, was singled out for particular abuse. His power is like “the jaws of a mad and raging lion,” while his temptations, enticing the saints into rebellion and ruin, betray an insidious human quality: they are “the mousetraps of his treachery.” The ancient pagan philosophers, too, though deserving measured respect, were “blinder than moles” when they tried to reach the sacred with unaided reason. Lucretius, for example, the Roman interpreter of Epicurus, was simply a “filthy dog” (*Institutes* 3.20.46, 4.12.12, 2.2.18, 1.5.5).

Enemies within the Christian household, however, more so than the ungodly of supernatural domains or the ancient past, drew the fire of Calvin’s invective. Viewing the long history of the church, Calvin saw true religion hounded by a pack of heretics and apostates “overturned by a monster fabricated in their brains” (*Institutes* 4.17.25). Especially troublesome, though, were the “treacherous and vile men who worm their way” into God’s holy church.²⁸ It is a disgrace, Calvin concluded, “if pigs and gods have a place among the children of God.” It is particularly reprehensible that the “sanctuary” in which God dwells “should like a stable be crammed with filth” (*Institutes* 4.1.15, 3.6.2).

In the embattled world of the sixteenth century, Calvin reserved the full force of his metaphorical maledictions for the opponents of the Reformed religion in rival churches, especially Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, and the spiritualists. Like the mongrels on Calvin’s heels in the streets of Geneva, these false Christians were “biting at our present faults,” “tearing the gospel to pieces with dog’s abuse.”²⁹ Scouring the animal world high and low, Calvin hunted for the most appropriate terms of opprobrium for his contemporary adversaries.

Roman Catholics Calvin scored on a variety of issues. He employed derogatory animal imagery to attack Catholic figures and institutions, but for the most part, his language was brutally comic, using the conventions of barnyard humor. For Calvin, Catholics deserved ridicule as much as serious criticism. He pictured ignorant monks as “asses” and the educated monastic as a strutting “peacock.”³⁰ Those that fled the monastery for the ecstasies of marital sex were like idiotic birds that “fly out of their cages” but then, when they discover the realities of worldly life, “beat a hasty retreat back to their former nests.”³¹ Likewise, men ordained to the level of the priesthood “are turned from horses into asses.” Even the rite of ordination itself, with its pretentious ceremonies, Calvin found to be a circus act. Bishops who think they imitate Christ by breathing on their ordinands are not “like actors whose

²⁸ *Concerning Scandals* 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 114.

³⁰ Quoted in Bouwsma, *John Calvin* 61.

³¹ *Concerning Scandals* 103.

gestures have some art and meaning," he jeered, "but like apes, which imitate everything wantonly and without any discrimination" (*Institutes* 4.19.29).

In contrast to his playfully derisive mockery of Catholics, Calvin's tone changed dramatically when he dealt with the swarms of radical challenging Christian tradition. Turning to the left wing of the Protestant movement, Calvin's language profited from his firsthand knowledge of the less savory side of animal life. The Anabaptists, Calvin declared, are rabid beasts. They "belch forth" streams of criticism against infant baptism and assail the holy sacrament of God with their "brutish madness." More importantly, though, Calvin saw the Anabaptists as dangerous threats to decent society. Like untamed creatures they "delight in unbridled license." Their desire to shake down the pillars of civilized tradition is a wild wish to "have men live pell-mell, like rats in straw" (*Institutes* 4.16.10, 3.3.14, 4.20.2, 4.20.5). Drawing from medieval theories of spontaneous generation, Calvin also spoke of other "frenzied persons" who sprang from "the scum of the anabaptists." These unfortunates were the radicals who disgorged their blasphemies against the holy Trinity like "filthy dogs."³² They were "slippery snakes," he warned, slithering with "such crooked and sinuous twisting" that they easily "glide away unless they are boldly pursued, caught, and crushed" (*Institutes* 1.13.4). Chief among these beasts was the "deadly monster" Servetus, who, according to Calvin, filled his writings with "furious dog-like biting and barking" (*Institutes* 2.14.5).³³ From the "morass" of his teachings, Calvin feared, other beasts would emerge like "so many Cyclops" (*Institutes* 1.13.23).³⁴

Calvin's imagery became most vituperative, however, when he discussed the Libertines, the most distressing of the antinomian sects threatening Calvin's Christendom. These "miserable people," he reckoned, "have less understanding than dumb animals." Anthony Pocquet, an infamous member of the party, was a "stupid ass" whose writings amounted to "goat dung," just as Quintin of Hainaut, a ringleader of the group, was a "notorious swine" who spewed his mystical ravings like "venom." Especially offensive to Calvin was the Libertines' experiment with the institution of spiritual marriage, "that wild impetuosity," he fumed, "that goads and inflames a man like a bull and a woman like a dog in heat." All together, Calvin estimated, these radicals were approaching the level of a "public epidemic." In the final analysis, the Libertines and their cohorts, he concluded, were nothing more than "vermin," unwelcome parasites on the Christian body politic.³⁵

III. CONCLUSION

Nature for Calvin was not a bare environment for humanity, but a theater alive with non-human creatures clamoring for God as their true end and pos-

³² Quoted in Albert-Marie Schmidt, *Calvin and the Calvinistic Tradition* (trans. Ronald Wallace; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960) 33. *Institutes* 1.13.22. *Concerning Scandals* 62.

³³ *Ibid.* 66–67.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 61.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines* (trans. Benjamin Wirt Farley; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) 298, 308, 299, 238–239, 282, 204, cf. 210.

sessing dignity in their own right. Nature also functioned as the rich seed bed for human language, a “vast dictionary and grammar” (to use Bushnell’s terms) for figures that enhance our comprehension of human existence and contemporary affairs. The animal kingdom in air, land, and sea may be a channel for the natural knowledge of God and a blessing to the life of humanity, but for Calvin it was also a living lexicon from which to cull provocative metaphors for the animation of human self-understanding and the quickening of theological debate.

Calvin’s language of nature, rendering animals theologically and rhetorically significant, can be interpreted as a decorative touch to a conventional theology of creation or as a scandalous excess in uncharitable religious controversy. In reality, however, it represents neither of these alternatives, but rather the stylistic mark of a world view assuming deep correlation between the natural and the supernatural. A close reading of Calvin’s theology of animals reveals a style of theological discourse alien to modern sensibilities. Moreover, it refutes the charge leveled by contemporary critics that he reduced the biblical vision of creation to a narrow “theanthropocentric” gospel.

Of course, Calvin never speculated about the role of animals in the divine plan of redemption. He did, however, place animals squarely in the foreground of theological thinking and writing. At times his thought appears to betray a religious vision that imagines the beasts of the earth not far from the kingdom of God. At others it exposes a deep ambivalence toward non-human creatures. Constructed in both positive and negative ways, the high visibility of animals in his theological discourse, as created beings and lively metaphors, demonstrates that non-human creatures figured prominently in Calvin’s theological imagination.