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Calvin, Angelology and Christology in the Visions of Zechariah 1 and 2.

Rev Colin Burcombe

John's Calvin's commentary on Zechariah is one of the most fruitful places to explore his teaching on angels and his 125ulfillment125al exegesis. In this article we will examine the opening visions in order to discover how he connects angelology and Christology. We will conclude that his exegesis is shaped by his teaching on mediation and accommodation.

With regard to angels, John Calvin's rejection of medieval speculation is almost legendary. He says "Let us remember here, as in all religious doctrine, that we ought to hold to one rule of modesty and sobriety: not to speak, or guess, or even to seek to know, concerning obscure matters anything except what has been imparted to us by God's Word".⁵⁴ One would expect then that his teaching on angels will be marked by restraint and limited to clear deductions from the biblical material.

With regard to Christ, a tension seems to exist between Calvin's hermeneutical goal and his exegetical method. In a New Testament commentary he states unambiguously that "the Scriptures should be read with the aim of finding Christ in them".⁵⁵ However his Old Testament exegesis has been 125ulfillment125a as theocentric rather

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Vol. 1, ed. J.T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Library of Christian Classics 20. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.14.4, 164.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St John* (Vol. 1, trans. T.H.L. Parker; Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), John 5:39, 139.

than fulfillment⁵⁶, he was accused of being a Judaizer,⁵⁷ he reacted strongly against allegorical methods⁵⁸ and he argued against traditional fulfillment interpretations.⁵⁹

It is intriguing therefore to discover in Calvin a nexus between Angelology and Christology in his exegesis of the Old Testament. From reading the *Institutes*, one might initially expect this to be located in the mysterious figure of the angel of Yahweh, given his initial references to the angel who appeared to the patriarchs and to Manoah. However as we shall see it extends further than that. It is right to begin with the *Institutes* because Calvin's intention was for readers first to read his *Institutes*, then his commentaries. The *Institutes* were to serve as a guide for interpreting Scripture as well as a reference for doctrinal discussions and commonplaces so that his commentaries would be brief. His teaching about the angel of Yahweh is primarily found in 1.13.10 where he is adducing proofs for the deity of Christ in the Old Testament. In his sights are the Jews but this section also boasts the first reference to Servetus in the *Institutes*. One of the charges against Servetus was that he asserted that the angel of Yahweh was no more than a created angel. For Calvin the fact that the angel claimed for himself the name of the eternal God and received worship cannot be explained in a merely representational sense. To support this conclusion he cites various Old Testament passages, the opinion of the *orthodox doctors of the*

⁵⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 137.

⁵⁷ See David Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

and more recently G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ See for example John Calvin, *Zechariah, Malachi* (Vol. 5 of *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. J. Owen; Michigan: Baker, 2009), 33.

⁵⁹ This can be seen in his exposition of Isaiah 63:1 and Micah 5:2.

*Church*⁶⁰ and Paul's saying in 1 Cor. 10:4 that Christ was the leader of the people in the wilderness.

Thus in the *Institutes* Calvin makes the case strongly for the angel of Yahweh being Christ. The angel of Yahweh is mentioned in the first and fourth visions of Zechariah. It would not be unexpected were Calvin to assert that this angel, by virtue of his title alone, is Christ. However Calvin does not approach the text like that. In fact he does not comment on the title מַלְאָךְ־יְהוָה at all in his exposition of the first vision.

Calvin's commentary on Zechariah was originally a series of lectures which were noted down in short-hand, then transcribed in full before being put into book form. As a result of the extemporaneous lecture format, the commentary suffers from some limitations. While Calvin makes frequent reference to other interpreters, he seldom names them or the works to which he is referring. Some repetition is discernible so that when a subject is mentioned in more than one place Calvin tends to restate his arguments for understanding it in the way he does. Finally, the verse by verse style and the time constraints of each lecture do not always make it possible for Calvin to deal with obvious sub-sections (such as a vision in its entirety) in a single lecture.

An angel is at Zechariah's side as he receives visions from God. At times he asks questions of Zechariah, at other times he responds to questions asked by Zechariah. Calvin lectured on Zechariah while he was completing his last revision of the *Institutes* for publication and the mutual relationship between his exegetical work and the updating of his theological fulfillment¹²⁷ has often been commented upon.⁶¹ In this paper I will continue to refer to the *Institutes* to further explain Calvin's conclusions in his commentaries.

⁶⁰ It is notable that Augustine and Jerome did not share this opinion.

⁶¹ See the discussion in Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*. (Oxford University Press, 2000), 145-152.

Accommodation.

Accommodation has long been a subject of interest to Calvin scholars. His uses of this concept are diverse and multi-faceted and affect his exegesis in several ways, as well as his exegetically-derived theology.⁶² In his treatment of angels, Calvin shows how God accommodates himself to human capacity by interacting with us through angels rather than directly. He does not say it as directly in his *Institutes* as he does in his commentary on Zechariah but he does state emphatically and prove convincingly there that God makes use of angels not for his own sake but for ours.⁶³ Having established that point, Calvin teaches that we are to look away from the angels to the Lord of the angels so that we ascribe all glory to him. He says they “lead us away unless they lead us by the hand straight to him”⁶⁴ In addition, he says they lead us away “unless they keep us in the one Mediator, Christ, that we may wholly depend upon him, lean upon him, be brought to him, and rest in him”.⁶⁵ To summarise then, Calvin says that angels are used by God not because he needs them and cannot carry out his will without their help, but rather because in our weakness we need them. But we are not to think of them in isolation, we are to fulfill them as servants of our Lord so that while we may be helped by them, we pray to him and honour him. Angels are also meant to remind us of our Mediator since it is only at his direction and through his intercession that their ministry comes to us.

In his exposition of the first vision of Zechariah, Calvin is even more explicit about how angels are an accommodation of an infinite God

⁶² See the brief essay by Jon Balsarak “Accommodatio Dei” in *The Calvin Handbook* (ed. Herman J. Selderhuis; trans. Henry J. Baron, Judith J. Guder, Randi H. Lundell, and Gerritt W. Sheeres; Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), 372-378. He discusses six aspects of God’s accommodating behaviour, treating angels under God’s pastoring of his flock.

⁶³ See *Institutes* 1.14.11.

⁶⁴ *Institutes* 1.14.12.

⁶⁵ *Institutes* 1.14.12.

to finite human beings. In this vision the angels appear to be sent out by Yahweh to the four quarters of the earth then they return and report to him. Calvin answers a possible question in the minds of his hearers: since God is omniscient, why should he need angels to see what is happening in his world and tell him of it? He answers:

It is indeed certain, that God receives no information from angels, for nothing is hid from him: nay, all things were fully known to him before he created angels. God, therefore, needs no such helps in order to know what is going on from the rising to the setting sun; but such a mode of speaking often occurs in Scripture; and it is a common thing, that God assumes the character of man in order that he may more familiarly instruct us. Let us then especially bear in mind, that the riders who appeared to the Prophet were angels, who are ever ready to serve God. And they were sent here and there, not that they might declare to God anything unknown to him, but that we may believe that God cares for human affairs; and that though angels appear not to us they are always engaged, and survey the world, so that nothing is done without the knowledge and will of God.⁶⁶

Calvin is saying that in this vision God is assuming the character of a man, as if he were an earthly King whose kingdom is the whole earth. Such a King would need helpers to patrol the earth for him, to observe its inhabitants, and to report back to him so that he could take informed decisions for the benefit of his subjects. Calvin adds later:

Angels are here introduced, because it would be difficult for us to ascend to the highest glory of God. . . . When therefore God thus speaks, it is a mode of teaching suitable to the capacities of men.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 32.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 35.

So in all he says about angels in the visions to come, Calvin will be working from within this framework of understanding. While angels are real⁶⁸ and they do carry out God's will and serve his people, we are meant to think of him when we are given a glimpse of them. They point us not only to the Creator, their Lord and ours, but also to the Mediator through whom they carry out their ministry to us. The angels are just one instance of God accommodating himself to human capacity and as they are "intermediary messengers"⁶⁹ from God to us so they should remind us of and lead us to the true Mediator, Christ.

How to Interpret Visions

Susan Schreiner says that "the history of exegesis requires its students to fulfill that premodern exegetes approached a biblical book as a coherent whole."⁷⁰ That this is true for Calvin is confirmed in his introductory preface to Zechariah where he says "what our prophet had especially in view was, to remind the Jews why it was that God dealt so severely with their fathers, and also to animate them with hope, provided they really repented, and elevated their minds to the hope of true and complete deliverance... There was among them hardly any fear of God, or hardly any religion. It was therefore needful to blend strong and sharp reproofs with promises of favour, *that they might thus be prepared to receive Christ. This is the substance of the whole.*"⁷¹ It is clear then that for Calvin the purpose of this book was to prepare the returning exiles for the coming of Christ, to lift up their minds to their true and complete deliverance in

⁶⁸ He takes time to establish this point in *Institutes* 1.14.9.

⁶⁹ *Institutes* 3.14.5.

⁷⁰ Susan E. Schreiner "Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job" *Church History* 58 (1989), 323.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Zechariah*, xiii - xiv.

Him. So in his preface he has identified at least a christotelic⁷² if not a fulfillment purpose for the book.

Calvin admits that visions are obscure in their very nature but aims to explain them clearly with the goal of edifying his hearers.⁷³ He gives some interpretative principles for understanding his visions, noting that many have entertained allegorical interpretations which seem to him frivolous and overly refined. Other interpreters have sought to examine “every single syllable” and he doesn’t believe that is profitable or even possible for this genre of revelation.⁷⁴ In addition to this desire to see the big picture and learn the main lessons, Calvin sets out three principles. First he wants to find the prophet’s design, to discern the authorial intention.⁷⁵ It is important to notice that while Calvin speaks often about the design or meaning or intention of the prophet, he also refers to the design of the Holy Spirit⁷⁶ or God’s design⁷⁷ and he is willing to refer to other passages in the New Testament as well as the Old to shed light on the one he is examining. We might say that he had respect for (prophetic) authorial intention but could also read a passage in light of (divine) Authorial intention. Second, the circumstances of the time will be an aid to understanding the passage. That is he will test his interpretation not only by the exegetical context but also by the historical context. An understanding of the message of the prophet to the people *then* is necessary to understand the prophet’s message for now. His third principle is fascinating when he talks of following the analogy between the sign and the thing signified. Calvin not only believes that the sign points towards the thing signified and teaches about it, but also holds that the thing signified helps us to interpret

⁷² The word is coined by Peter Enns “Apostolic Hermeneutics And An Evangelical Doctrine Of Scripture: Moving Beyond A Modernist Impasse” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 277.

⁷³ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 31.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 34.

⁷⁵ These principles are found in Calvin, *Zechariah*, 35.

⁷⁶ For example Calvin, *Zechariah*, 59, 91.

⁷⁷ For example Calvin, *Zechariah*, 81, 96.

the sign more correctly. In other words the clearer light of historical fulfillment shines back on the sign and helps us observe what it teaches more clearly.

The Angel of Yahweh.

The mysterious figure of the Angel of Yahweh is mentioned in the first and the fourth of Zechariah's visions, specifically at 1:11, 12 and 3:1, 6. We must restrict ourselves to the first vision here. Contemporary Old Testament scholars are divided about the significance of this designation and the identity of this specific angel. Is the same angel meant each time the construct phrase is used? If so, is it simply an angel speaking as God's representative? Is it a theophany? Is it a christophany? These three interpretive paths were also open to Calvin.

In Zechariah's first vision found in Zechariah 1:7-17 a man on a red horse is the leader of a company sent out by Yahweh to patrol the earth. This man, later identified as the angel of Yahweh, speaks with Zechariah, explaining what he sees in the vision, then intercedes for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah.

Calvin begins by considering that one angel is set apart from the rest and they report to him. What does it mean that the angels have a leader?

There was one more eminent than the rest, and in this there is nothing unusual; for when God sends forth a company of angels, he gives the lead to some one: and this is the reason why one is described here as more illustrious than all the others. If we regard this angel to be Christ, the idea is consistent with the common usage of Scripture; for Christ, we know, being the head of angels, ever exercises such dominion over them, that in obeying God they do nothing but under his authority. It may be then that one angel assumed here a pre-eminence over the rest, that the Prophet might think of

the Redeemer, who exercises power over angels and the whole Church.⁷⁸

Calvin's conclusions here are cautious. First, the angel here may simply be the leader of this particular angelic mission, since God gives the lead to some angel when he sends forth a company of angels. Second, the angel may be Christ. Calvin does not press this point here or reason for it from first principles, though he does suggest it is apparent elsewhere in Scripture that Christ is head of the angels. We might also distinguish a third possibility, namely that this angel may not be Christ but assumed pre-eminence in order that Zechariah might think of Christ since He is pre-eminent over the angels as well as the church.

Calvin explains his assertion that Christ is Head of the angels most clearly in some later correspondence. He wrote two letters to believers in Poland to refute the belief of a man named Stancaro that Christ was Mediator only in his human nature, not his divine nature. In them he explores further what it means that Christ is head of the angels and mentions three passages which may well be the ones he is thinking of in his exposition of Zechariah 1:11 when he speaks of 'the common usage of Scripture'.

We maintain, first, that the name of mediator suits Christ, not only by the fact that he put on flesh, or that he took on the office of reconciling the human race to God, but from the beginning of creation he already truly was mediator, for he always was the head of the Church, had primacy over the angels, and was the firstborn of every creature (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:15; 2:10). Therefore, we conclude that not only after Adam's fall did he begin to exercise his office of mediator, but since he is the eternal Word of God, both angels as well as men were united to God by his grace so that they would remain uncorrupted. . . . In the role of mediator he is no

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 35.

less head of the angels than of men. This can be seen from the first chapter of Colossians which is by no means appropriate to human nature alone.⁷⁹

Calvin reaches Zechariah 1:12 at the beginning of his next lecture. He considers the fact that the angel intercedes for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah.

The Prophet now shows that the angel who was his guide and teacher, became even a suppliant before God in behalf of the welfare of the Church. Hence the probable opinion is, that this angel was Christ the Mediator. For . . . it is nothing new, that Christ should exercise care over his Church. But if this view be disapproved, we may take any one of the angels to be meant . . . and in this we also see the singular love of God towards us; for he employs his angels especially for this purpose, that he might show that our salvation is greatly valued by him.⁸⁰

Calvin says it is probable that the angel was Christ the Mediator. Then he draws back, saying that any one of the angels could be meant. He infers from the guardian role of the angels that they pray for the church so that the intercession here could be from an angel. It should be noted that Calvin's primary interest here was to speak against the Roman Catholic practice of praying to angels, since one interpretation of this passage may be seen to support that practice.

This section illustrates one of the difficulties of Calvin's verse by verse approach where he simply continued expounding consecutive verses until his time ran out. This verse comes from the same vision as the last and the same angel of Yahweh is speaking that spoke in the previous verse. However Calvin has started a new lecture. He

⁷⁹ Joseph N. Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator: Calvin versus Stancaró," *Calvin Theological Journal* 8/1 (1973): 12.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 38.

does not refer to his earlier conclusions nor does he refine them in light of this intercessory activity of the angel. Instead he is content to let this verse stand alone and allow that the angel of Yahweh may simply be any of the angels in the company.

If he had been able to treat this vision as a whole in a single lecture, perhaps he would have combined these two ideas – the role of leader over the angels and the activity of intercession for the people of God – to point more clearly to Christ.

One of the most striking omissions in Calvin's exposition here is any discussion of the name of the angel, מְלֹאֲכֵי־יְהוָה. Calvin does not assume here that when this designation is used a created angel cannot be in view, instead he looks at what the angel says and does each time in order to see if this is more than a mere angel.

*Not only an angel but God Himself.*⁸¹

When Calvin expounds the second vision (Zech. 1:18-21), a vision in which the angel of Yahweh is not specifically mentioned, he states his conclusions about the first vision more dogmatically than earlier.

It must also be observed, that in one place he calls him Jehovah, and in another angel; and indeed he speaks thus indiscriminately of one and the same person. It hence follows that God appeared among the angels. *But we must remember what I have already said, that this chief angel was the Mediator and the Head of the Church; and the same is Jehovah, for Christ, as we know, is God manifested in the flesh.* There is then no wonder that the Prophet should indiscriminately call him angel and Jehovah, he being the Mediator of the Church, and also God. He is God, being of the same essence with the Father; and Mediator, having already undertaken his Mediatorial office, though not then

⁸¹ This phrase is Calvin's from *Institutes* 1.13.10.

clothed in our flesh, so as to become our brother; for the Church could not exist, nor be united to her God without a head. We hence see that Christ, as to his eternal essence, is said to be God, and that he is called an angel on account of his office, that is, of a Mediator.⁸²

In these verses there is the angel who speaks and there is Yahweh who shows. Calvin seems to think that Zechariah is speaking of the same individual. Can Yahweh in 1:20 be the angel of 1:19? Why does Yahweh suddenly intervene and speak directly in this vision when he does not in the other visions? This is an issue which very few commentators address. McComiskey does think about it but holds the strange position that while Yahweh is clearly the subject of the verb in verse 20, it is not unreasonable to see verse 21 as a continuation of the conversation between Zechariah and the angel last mentioned in verse 19.⁸³ Meyers and Meyers suggest that the direct appearance of Yahweh emphasizes divine action and indicates “the fluidity between Yahweh and the angelic figures as mediators of the divine will”.⁸⁴ They say Yahweh is performing the role played by the Interpreting Angel⁸⁵ in the other visions. They also point out from chapter 1 that while Yahweh sent the horsemen out (verse 10), they report to the Angel of Yahweh (verse 11). They seem to be making a better argument for Calvin’s conclusion than he does himself, though they do not reach the same conclusion. Calvin teaches that this is a conversation between two persons one of whom is designated first as an angel, then as Yahweh. His explanation in the *Institutes* noted above gives other examples of this and affirms

⁸² Calvin, *Zechariah*, 57 (italics mine).

⁸³ Thomas E. McComiskey, *Zechariah* (Vol. 3 of *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*: ed. T. E. McComiskey; Michigan: Baker, 1998), 1048.

⁸⁴ Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers. *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1987), 139.

⁸⁵ I follow the convention of Meyers and Meyers in capitalising the title of this angel.

his belief that Yahweh is “frequently set forth in the person of an angel”.⁸⁶

Calvin is not only saying that Yahweh and the angel are the same person, he is also saying that the angel who talked with Zechariah and the angel of Yahweh are the same person. Here he differs from many commentators who would make a clear distinction between

מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה and הַמְּלַאֲכֵי הַדָּבָר בִּי seeing these as two distinct angelic characters.⁸⁷ One consequence of this is the perception that the fourth vision is seen to lack unity with the other seven. David Petersen writes “It has become a commonplace for modern commentators on Zech. 3 to observe that the fourth vision differs in certain formal ways from the other visions”.⁸⁸ The absence of the Interpreting Angel is identified as a key difference between the fourth vision and the others. הַמְּלַאֲכֵי הַדָּבָר בִּי is clearly identified in all of the visions except the fourth and sixth.⁸⁹ In the fourth vision Zechariah neither asks nor answers any questions and so the Interpreting Angel is not mentioned. In the sixth vision no title is given to the one asking Zechariah a question but the subject is clearly the Interpreting Angel of the previous vision who had similarly asked Zechariah a question. Thus it could be said that all of the visions, with the exception of the

⁸⁶ *Institutes* 1:13.10.

⁸⁷ See for example Redditt, Paul L. *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

He says that the man of v9 who is also designated an angel in v11 “is further to be distinguished from the interpreting angel, who is invariably identified as the angel who spoke with Zechariah”. Curiously Edgar W. Conrad, *Zechariah* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 64 as a result of attempting to read Zechariah in the context of the book of the Twelve, suggests that מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה may be Haggai because of Haggai 1:13.

⁸⁸ Meyers & Meyers, *Haggai & Zechariah 1-8*, 187.

⁸⁹ Zech. 1:9; Zech. 1:13; Zech. 1:14; Zech. 2:2; Zech. 2:7; Zech. 4:1; Zech. 4:4; Zech. 4:5; Zech. 5:5; Zech. 5:10; Zech. 6:4.

fourth, include the Interpreting Angel.⁹⁰ Only visions one and four mention מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה and in the fourth vision, מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה is a central character. If this is the same divine messenger (performing a different role) as Calvin suggests it means that scholars are wrong to question the unity of this vision with the others in the cycle with regards to the presence of the angel.

It must not be thought that Calvin is alone in his conclusion that these titles represent a single angel, although there are very few others who even engage with the possibility that מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה and מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה are the same. Meyers and Meyers are among the few who do and they fail to come to a definite conclusion. Commenting on the first vision they write,

The identity of this individual on horseback is a matter of some confusion. Subsequent figures in this vision, the Interpreting Angel (vv 9, 13, 14) and the Angel of Yahweh (vv 11 and 12), perhaps can be identified with each other. . . . The man on horseback, who is surely also an angelic being (cf. Gen. 19:1; 32:25), would then be a distinct actor in this vision; yet in verse 11 he appears to be the same as the Angel of Yahweh. The problem is further complicated by the sudden appearance of the Interpreting Angel as the object of the prophet's query in verse 9 . . . The lack of specificity in Zechariah's use of angelic figures perhaps befits their character as divine beings, which must remain beyond full ken.⁹¹

This 'confusion' and 'complication' and mystery are resolved by Calvin's contention that these are simply different designations for

⁹⁰ However it may be that angel who shows Zechariah the fourth vision (3:1). This interpreting angel did this earlier in 1:9, although Yahweh showed the prophet a vision in 1:20.

⁹¹ Meyers & Meyers, *Haggai & Zechariah* 1-8, 110.

the same individual.⁹² Sweeney is more definite. He recounts that Zechariah begins an interchange with the man of verse 8, then is answered by the ‘angel who talks with me’ in verse 9. Verse 10 suggests that the angel and the man are two different figures but the fact that verse 11 combines the two descriptions demonstrates that the man and the angel “are one and the same”.⁹³

For Calvin, the Interpreting Angel and the Angel of Yahweh are the same individual, namely Christ the Mediator. He is called an angel ‘on account of his office’⁹⁴ which at that time he had begun to fulfill ‘as a sort of foretaste’⁹⁵ of the incarnation. This is the key which unlocks Calvin’s exposition of these first two visions. It may demonstrate that Calvin’s understanding of the Old Testament is more Christ-centred than we would conclude from simply looking for how often he refers to Christ. With this in mind, we could say that for Calvin, in the first vision, Christ is the one riding on a horse, then standing among the myrtle trees, then speaking with Zechariah, then explaining the meaning of the vision, then interceding for the people of Jerusalem and Judah, then giving Zechariah a message for the people. Similarly in the second vision Christ is the angel who answers Zechariah, Christ is Yahweh who shows the craftsmen then explains what they represent. But Calvin did not elaborate on this, nor was he so dogmatic in his conclusions as he lectured verse by verse. He argues similarly in the *Institutes*.

He refers there to Zechariah as evidence that the Old Testament testifies to the divinity of Christ. He chooses to adduce not the Angel of Yahweh in chapter 1 or 3 but the angel found in Zechariah 2:3. He writes,

⁹² McComiskey also considers this and comes to the conclusion that one angel is meant in McComiskey, *Zechariah*, 1041. He does not however share Calvin’s conviction that ‘this angel was Christ the Mediator’.

⁹³ Marvin A. Sweeney *The Twelve Prophets* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press: 2000), 577.

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 57.

⁹⁵ *Institutes* 1.13.10.

If we review objectively the second chapter of Zechariah, the angel who sends the other angel is immediately declared to be the God of Hosts, and to him is ascribed the highest power.⁹⁶

This conclusion rests on his translation of the difficult verse Zechariah 2:8 (12 Heb.)

כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֲחֵר כְּבוֹד שְׁלַחְנִי אֶל־הַגּוֹיִם הַשְׁלֵלִים אֶתְכֶם כִּי
הִנֵּה גֵעַ בְּכֶם נִגְעַ בְּבִת עֵינֹו

The question is, where does the direct speech begin in Zechariah 2:8, 9? In Calvin's translation it begins immediately after the divine title.⁹⁷ Some versions choose to begin the speech in v9.⁹⁸ One way to approach this is to examine how Zechariah uses the phrase *אֲמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת* elsewhere. It occurs nineteen times in Zechariah.⁹⁹ It is obvious in every other occurrence that the direct speech begins immediately after the subject, except for two instances where *לֵאמֹר* precedes the speech.¹⁰⁰ Given this pattern, it is very unlikely that the speech would be separated from this subject by such a lengthy parenthesis. Once this is established, there can be no doubt that the speaker is one of the angels of Zechariah 2:3.¹⁰¹ Thus the

⁹⁶ *Institutes* 1.13.10.

⁹⁷ His Latin translation of the Hebrew text reads 'Quia sic dicit Iehova exercituum, Post gloriam misit me ad gentes quae spoliant vos'.

⁹⁸ For example the ESV reads "For thus said the LORD of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye: "Behold . . ." One obvious problem here is that the word glory does not include a pronominal suffix.

⁹⁹ The phrase is found in Zech. 1:3; Zech. 1:4; Zech. 1:14; Zech. 1:16; Zech. 1:17; Zech. 2:12; Zech. 3:7; Zech. 6:12; Zech. 7:9; Zech. 8:2; Zech. 8:3; Zech. 8:4; Zech. 8:6; Zech. 8:7; Zech. 8:9; Zech. 8:14; Zech. 8:19; Zech. 8:20; Zech. 8:23.

¹⁰⁰ Zech. 6:12; Zech. 7:9.

¹⁰¹ For Calvin's position to be consistent, we must assume that he takes the speaker to be the Interpreting Angel. This may not seem to be a plain

same person is called an angel and *יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת*. Calvin's translation can be justified, though it raises a theological problem. Who can send *יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת*? Calvin explains in his commentary:

Who is the sender? Or who is he who orders or commands God? We hence conclude that Christ is here introduced, who is Jehovah, and yet the Angel or the messenger of the Father. Though then the being of God is one, expressed by the word Jehovah, it is not improper to apply it both to the Father and to the Son. Hence God is one eternal being; but God in the person of the Father commands the Son, who also is Jehovah, to restrain the nations from injuring the Jews by any unjust violence. The rabbins give this explanation – that the Prophet says that he himself was God's herald, and thus recites his words; but this is forced and unnatural. I indeed wish not on this point to contend with them; for being inclined to be contentious, they are disposed to think that we insist on proofs which are not conclusive. But there are other passages of Scripture which more clearly prove the divinity and the eternal existence of Christ, and also the distinction of persons. If however any one closely examines the words of the Prophet, he will find that this passage must be forcibly wrested, except it be understood of Christ. We then consider that Christ is here set forth as the Father's herald; and he says that he was sent to the nations.¹⁰²

Calvin has been accused of being a Judaizer and ceding too much ground to the Jewish commentators in his interpretation of the Old

reading of the English text but Meyers and Meyers argue for this from the Hebrew text: "The speaker is understood to be the Interpreting Angel, the chief angelic figure of the visions, since the closest antecedent to the subject of this verb is the object pronoun of the previous verb in verse 7 (RSV v 3)" *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, 152.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Zechariah*, 68.

Testament but here, while fulfillment that they will disagree, he states firmly that the passage must be ‘wrested’ to apply it to anyone but Christ. Calvin expounded the Old Testament with an eye to rabbinic interpretation and this may help explain his reticence at times in arguing for fulfillment conclusions. However he does in the end firmly conclude that “Christ is here set forth”.

Conclusion

Where does the nexus between Angelology and Christology lie for Calvin? Calvin makes the connection in three ways, through accommodation, in the Angel of Yahweh, and by attending closely to the voices in the text. We began with accommodation and while the incarnation was the supreme act of accommodation,¹⁰³ the work of angels is also an accommodation of God to human weakness. Balsarak explains it as part of God’s pastoral care for his people¹⁰⁴ and Calvin stresses that it is meant to lead our minds to God and Christ.¹⁰⁵ Thus for Calvin every appearance in Scripture of an angel should lead us to Christ who “because of the primacy that he holds in the person of the Mediator, is called an angel”.¹⁰⁶ We then considered מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה and saw that while Calvin does not discuss the term itself or automatically assume that every appearance of מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה is “an angel in whom full deity dwelt”,¹⁰⁷ he does (in retrospect) firmly identify מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה in Zechariah’s first vision as ‘the Mediator and the Head of the Church’.¹⁰⁸ Finally we noted that Calvin pays close attention to the voices in Zechariah 1:18-21 and Zechariah 2

¹⁰³ See the discussion and distinction made by Jon Balsarak “The accommodating act par excellence?: an inquiry into the incarnation and Calvin’s understanding of accommodation.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 408-423.

¹⁰⁴ Balsarak, *Accommodatio*, 375-376.

¹⁰⁵ *Institutes* 1.14.12.

¹⁰⁶ *Institutes* 1.14.9.

¹⁰⁷ *Institutes* 1.13.10. Notice his discussion of the first vision where he allows that the מְלַאֲכֵי־יְהוָה may simply be the angelic leader for this particular mission rather than the divine Head of the angels.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Zechariah*, 57.

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and this leads him to suggest the Interpreting Angel is also the Mediator.

From these three connections we can discern that for Calvin Angelology and Christology meet via the theological concepts of mediation and accommodation. Recent studies of Calvin's Christology have shown that the idea of Christ as Mediator encompasses his person and his work and is helpful for 143ulfillme Calvin's 143ulfillment¹⁰⁹ formulations. As Mediator Christ is our prophet, priest and king and all of these roles can be dimly discerned as the angels ministered to Zechariah and through him to the restored community. Accommodation is very closely connected. In fact Edmondson describes the appearances of the mediator in the form of a man or an angel in the Old Testament as "God's accommodated presence".¹¹⁰

Wallace summarises Calvin's view that Christ is the Mediator of all revelation¹¹¹ from God to men and 143ulfillmen that this is true not only of that time since the Word was made flesh but also when he temporarily took the likeness of a man or an angel in the Old Testament. Mediating divine revelation is a prophetic role of Christ. Calvin writes elsewhere,

We are thus to understand, that, since the beginning of the world, God has held no intercourse with men, but through the agency of his eternal Wisdom or Son. Hence Peter says, that the holy prophets spake by the "Spirit of Christ," (1 Pet. 1:12) and Paul makes him the leader of the people in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4). And certainly the Angel who appeared to Moses, (Exod. 3:2) can be no other person; for

¹⁰⁹ See Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Mark D. Thompson "Calvin on the Mediator" in *Engaging with Calvin* (ed. Mark D. Thompson; Nottingham: Apollon, 2009), 106-135.

¹¹⁰ Edmondson, *Christology*, 195.

¹¹¹ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), 8-10.

he claims to himself the peculiar and essential name of God, which is never applied to creatures. . . . He has always been the Mediator of all doctrine, because by him God has always revealed himself to men.¹¹²

So the mention of an angel who explained visions to a prophet would draw Calvin's mind to Christ.

When Calvin writes in the *Institutes* of Christ's work as priest, he focuses on the activities of reconciliation and intercession.¹¹³ He says Christ is "an everlasting intercessor: through his pleading we obtain favour".¹¹⁴ He connects the work of intercession with Christ's role as Mediator in his comment on Isaiah 19:20, "God assists us through Christ, by whose agency he gave deliverance to his own people from the beginning. He has always been the Mediator, by whose intercession all blessings were obtained from God the Father".¹¹⁵ He argues from John 1:51 that it is "only through Christ's intercession . . . that the angels' ministrations come to us".¹¹⁶ In Zechariah 1:12 surely the very fact that the prophet is allowed to eavesdrop on the prayer of the angel to Yahweh (then hear the answer) is itself an accommodating act of God. When Calvin reads of an angel who intercedes for Jerusalem it is not surprising that he should think of Christ who as Mediator has ever cared for his church.

Calvin's commentary on Zechariah is one of the most fruitful places to look for his teaching on angels. His main emphasis in these opening visions is that Christ is the head of the angels both in terms

¹¹² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (trans. William Pringle; Michigan: Baker, 2009), 102.

¹¹³ Curiously Edmondson omits any consideration of this in his extensive treatment of the priestly role of Christ. See Edmondson, *Christology*, 89-114.

¹¹⁴ *Institutes* 2.15.6.

¹¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Vol. 2, trans. William Pringle; Michigan: Baker, 2009), 74.

¹¹⁶ *Institutes* 1.14.12.

of ruling over them as their King and taking the lead in this mission to the prophet Zechariah. He even suggests that when Yahweh showed Zechariah this leader of the angelic forces it was to cause him to think of the Redeemer. More often than not though he simply refers to the angels Zechariah sees and hears as angels, not as Christ. Calvin does not seek to establish fulfillment doctrines out of a reflection on these passages, that work is done in the *Institutes* where his teaching is derived from all of Scripture. He comes closest to doing this in his exposition of Zechariah 2:8 where he mentions the divinity and eternal existence of Christ and the distinction of persons, but he does this only to assure the reader that there are other passages of Scripture which more clearly establish these truths.

Calvin did exercise restraint in his exposition of the work of angels arising from the opening vision. He was also restrained in his fulfillment conclusions, though he did state them firmly on occasion. It seems that sometimes his restraint was an accommodation to his exegetical opponents. While his conviction that the Old Testament should be read with the aim of finding Christ is undeniable, he is equally aware of differences between the Old and New Testaments.¹¹⁷ He says of the patriarchs “those mysteries which they but glimpsed in shadowed outline are manifest to us.”¹¹⁸ In his interpretation he was mindful of the historical circumstances of the prophecy but occasionally he allowed the thing signified, the fulfillment, to shed light back on the sign, the vision or promise. This was especially true of the incarnation.¹¹⁹ This led him to speak in terms of Christ the Mediator rather than God being present in the form of an angel in the visions of Zechariah because Christ was at last to come not just in the form of a man or an angel, but taking the very nature of a man.

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¹¹⁷ See *Institutes* 2.11 for his full discussion of this.

¹¹⁸ *Institutes* 2.9.1.

¹¹⁹ Compare Calvin’s commentary on John 9:5.