

Calvin's View of Angels

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INTRODUCTION

To be clear from the beginning: Calvin's view concerning angels is not really spectacular. That might be the reason that not much has been written on this subject.¹ Calvin's approach to topics like angelology is characterized by staying close to what the Bible says and by staying away from speculations in line with his warning against "vanam curiositatem."² That is the concern he expresses when he writes on the angels in his *Institutes*. It is his care "to keep within the bounds which piety prescribes, lest by indulging in speculations beyond my reach, I bewilder the reader, and lead him away from the simplicity of the faith."³ Calvin is not rooted in medieval theology as for example Martin Luther was.⁴ Calvin was not a student at one of the theological faculties where each student had to go through handbooks of scholars like Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas that all had vast material on angels based on the Bible but also on stories and theories developed by church fathers, medieval theologians and popular traditions. And from the little we know about the spirituality in which he was raised, we get the impression that angels did not play a significant role in Calvin's youth. From the passages in which he criticizes what the church taught and what people believed about angels, it becomes clear that he knew what was going on in

this field of faith, but it is just as clear that in his own views he stayed away from what people thought and just repeated what Scripture taught. In spite of all this, it is highly remarkable how much space Calvin devotes in his sermons, commentaries and other works to angelology.⁵ In this article we can only take a look at what Calvin writes about angels in his *Institutes* and in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, but it is evident that the topic would deserve a separate monograph.

ANGELS IN THE *INSTITUTES*

Calvin wrote the first edition—published in 1536—of his *Institutio* as a sort of catechism for the persecuted reformed believers in France. From the second edition—published 1539—was designed more as a handbook for theological students.⁶ In the course of theological discussions and the growth of Calvin's own insights into the Bible, this book grew into the massive, final edition of 1559 which we here take as our source. Based on the so-called loci-method, Calvin summarized in the *Institutes* what the Bible taught on various topics and thus also what Scripture says about angels. So, the best way to learn Calvin's view of angels is to read first through the paragraphs he devoted to this subject in his *Institutio*. We can find this right at the beginning of this work as he deals with angels in the first chapter of the book where he writes on God as Creator.

In chapter 14 of Book I Calvin writes that Scripture, in speaking about the creation of the world, distinguishes the true God from the false by clear signs. In order that believers should not fall into error, God has revealed himself in his Word as the Creator. At this point we should not get into the question that is sometimes mockingly asked: why God only started his creation so late. After all, he has allowed an immeasurable amount of time to pass. Yet, it is neither lawful nor useful to examine why God delayed creation for so long. God wanted to hide this from us. Augustine—Calvin's favorite theologian—warns us not to concern ourselves with questions that go beyond the bounds of the Word. He states that it is also wrong to raise the question of why God created only one world in immense space and left such a large part empty. That question, too, is foolish. Let our questions remain within the biblical fence and let our minds be restrained by God's Word so that we will not go through deliberate wanderings.

Creation

This approach also clearly leads Calvin in his description of the angels. God created the world in six days. In this order of things we should see the fatherly love of God. Before God created Adam, who represented the whole human race, God had provided the world with an abundance of goods. For God did not place Adam on a barren, empty earth without light, but created him on a complete earth that was already provided with light, water, air and all kinds of fruits. But before that God had already created the angels. Although Moses did not mention the angels when he described the great works of creation, he does mention them later on and we can also read about them elsewhere in Scripture. That Moses did not write about angels in his report on creation has, according to Calvin, as its reason that he adapted himself to the limited understanding of the people by mentioning only the things of creation that are visible to man.

Before presenting what the Scriptures say about the angels, Calvin gives a rather extensive warning against vain speculations that seem attractive but are fruitless.⁷ Let's not go beyond what God has revealed to us in his Word. That the angels are heavenly spirits that God has in his service to carry out his counsel is found everywhere in Scripture. They are also called an army because they surround their Sovereign like bodyguards. As warriors they always pay attention to the sign of their captain to carry out his commands. To our consolation, Scripture teaches that the angels are in the service of God working for our benefit.⁸ They watch over our salvation and take care of our protection. The angels protect the Church as the body of Christ: "The angel of the LORD hath set himself round about those who fear him" (Ps 34:8). But they also stood by Christ, the Head of the Church, in all his afflictions (Luke 22:43). The angels are fighting against our enemies. Thus it was the angel of the LORD who killed 185,000 men of the army of Assyria in one night (2 Kgs 19:35). In response to the popular belief that every Christian has a personal guardian angel, Calvin states that he does not dare to say this with certainty.⁹ It may however be said that not just one but all angels guard our salvation, which Calvin concludes for example from Luke 15:7 where it is said of all the angels that they rejoice when one sinner repents. Luke 16:23 teaches that it was angels—so more than just one—that brought the soul of Lazarus into the womb of Abraham.

Order and Hierarchy

Regarding the order of the angels and the number of angels Calvin says that we have to be careful because the Bible does not say much about it. Michael is called the great prince in Daniel (12:1), and Gabriel is also an angel that is mentioned by name. Christ speaks of many legions of angels (Matt 26:53), but that's about all the information we have. Nor do we know what the angels look like, since they are spirits. The Scriptures describe them in accordance with what our minds can grasp so it is said that they have wings. Calvin concludes from this that this is said, "to assure us that when occasion requires, they will hasten to our aid with incredible swiftness, winging their way to us with the speed of lightning." This conclusion is remarkable as the Bible does not give such an explanation of the angels' wings and Calvin here seems to bring in some speculative theology. That the angels are real persons, albeit with a nature of their own, is also clear from Scripture.¹⁰ The Sadducees at the time denied this and saw them as powers of God, but there is no basis for this in Scripture. Angels are real persons, because they are happy when a sinner repents. According to Stephen and Paul, angels have given people the law of God (Acts 7:53 and Gal 3:19). In the letter to the Hebrews we read that Christ is more glorious than the angels (Heb 1:4; 2:16). From this one can conclude that they have their own separate nature. In order to appear to the holy fathers, they have shrouded themselves in human forms. Already it is evident that Calvin does not want to go beyond what the Bible says about angels. Carefully referring to the various Bible texts, he just repeats, summarizes and describes the content of these texts but does not go into more systematic reflections of what these scriptural data mean or to what further insights or conclusions they could lead.

Angels and the Believer

In paragraph 10, Calvin continues with how believers should deal with angels. We must counter superstition when we say that the angels serve us and are the givers of all good things. It is easy to think that because of this we should give them some honor, but Scripture forbids this. Paul contradicts any honoring of angels by stating that Christ is exalted above all angels and that he is the origin of all good for them (Col 1:16-20). John also wanted to honor an angel, but this was forbidden to him by the angel himself (Rev 19:10; 22:8-9). We can easily ignore this danger if we realize that without

them God can also prove his omnipotence and care. So he does not need the angels; but the consolation of the believers may be that whatever danger may threaten us, God has innumerable possibilities and servants who can help us out of danger. And yet we must place our hope in God who is our only Helper. Although the angels descend from heaven and return to heaven in the face that Jacob saw (Gen 28:12), according to the Lord, they do not do this without the intervention of Christ. Calvin refers to John 1:51 where the Lord Jesus states that the angels descend and ascend upon the Son of Man. For this reason Calvin warns against the presumed wisdom of Plato who states that we only have access to God through the angels.

Fallen Angels

Calvin devotes almost as much space to describing what the Bible says about the fallen angels, the devils, for whom believers must be on guard according to Scripture.¹¹ Satan is called a roaring lion and the god and prince of this age (Matt 12:29; John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2 and 1 Pet 5:8). Peter depicts the devil as a roaring and blustering lion that we must vigorously resist by faith. The power of the fallen angels is reason to call upon the help of God, especially in our weakness, as it is his work to give weapons to counter the tricks of Satan. The fact that believers must actively fight this enemy is emphasized in Scripture, for it can be read that the devils form a mighty army. Mary Magdalene is said to have been delivered from seven devils (Mark 16:9). Elsewhere Scripture speaks of a man who was possessed by a legion of devils (Luke 8:30). From this we learn that we are dealing with countless enemies. Sometimes Scripture speaks of Satan in the singular but according to Calvin this means the head of all the fallen angels so there is not just one enemy but a multitude of them. That is why we read in Scripture (Matt 25:41): "Go away, you cursed people, into the eternal fire which the devils and angels are prepared to give you." All this must lead believers into a constant battle against the devil. Because the honor of God should be close to our hearts, we must banish and resist everything that comes against it (including the devil). The devil wants to distort and obscure the truth of God's Word at all times. For this reason he is called "the murderer of man from the beginning" (John 8:44). Calvin states that the devil was not made like this, but that he is a fallen angel. The origin of his wrongdoing therefore does not lie with God, but with the devil himself. For this reason Christ (John 8:44) declares that Satan, when he speaks a lie,

speaks of himself, and adds this: “because he did not stand in the truth.” This, according to Calvin, shows that Satan was in the truth when he was created by God. The fall of Satan is also taught by Peter and Jude (2 Pet 2:4 and Jude 6). When Paul speaks of chosen angels (1 Tim 5:21), he opposes them tacitly to the rejected angels. Whatever the power of Satan may be, he is still under God, as is clear from the history of Job. God must give him freedom to act, otherwise he can do nothing (Job 1:6; 2:1). For this reason the evil spirit that tormented Saul is called a spirit of the Lord. God thus punishes the evil king for his sins (1 Sam 16:14; 18:10). So it is certain that Satan falls under God. Of course Satan only wants to resist God and thus do only bad things. However, God restrains evil and uses it to carry out punishment. God uses him in his service, and God uses Satan even in his reign over believers. Satan fights them but he fights them in such a way that they may learn to practice their faith. The believers respond to the admonition: “Give the devil no place” (Eph 4:27). Paul recounts that Satan was the medicine given him to subdue his pride (2 Cor 12:7). All children of God receive this medicine, but since Christ, as the Head of his Church, crushed Satan’s head (Gen 3:15), the believer can never be overcome by Satan. Calvin then comes to speak about those who see the angels only as good impulses or movements and not as real persons. He writes that this thought needs to be rejected. This also counts for the idea that devils are merely evil disorders or disturbances. John mentions that the devil sinned from the beginning (1 John 3:8) and Judas mentions that the devil fought the archangel Michael. Peter notes, of the devils (2 Pet 2:4): “For if God hath not spared the angels that sinned, but cast them into hell, they have been surrendered to the chains of darkness to be preserved unto judgment.” This shows that they are real personalities and not just ideas.

ANGELS IN COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS

For many decades Calvin research was mainly based on studying his *Institutes*. Behind that was the idea that here we would find his whole theology nicely brought together and that his other works like sermons, commentaries, lectures and treatises would only confirm what was already in the *Institutes*. In the meantime Calvin scholars have discovered that the just now mentioned works and in addition to that Calvin’s vast correspondence, contain a lot that is not in the *Institutes* and that it is extremely worthwhile to dig into his “other”

works to get a more complete and more balanced view of his theology. I'm convinced this also counts for his view concerning angels, which already has been proven by Richard Stauffer in his wonderful analysis of Calvin's sermons on Genesis.¹² In this second part of my paper I want to describe what Calvin wrote on the position and function of angels throughout his commentary on the Psalms.¹³ Close reading of this book, which was published in the same year as the final edition of the *Institutes*, demonstrates that there is so much more in Calvin than often thought and that also counts for his view of angels.

Servants

In brief, Calvin describes angels as servants of the King and executors of his decisions. They dwell around God like satellites around the sun and are continuously prepared to obey his commands.¹⁴ Angels, therefore, are "heavenly spirits endowed with divine glory."¹⁵ To the extent that they are heavenly powers, they can be called divine.¹⁶ In them, Calvin says, something divine is shining.¹⁷ They are the conveyors of God's glory in the sense that God, through the angels, shines upon the world with his glory.¹⁸ Calvin's high estimation of the position of the angels is evident when he speaks, for instance, about maintaining a good conscience in the face of God and in the face of the angels who, as heavenly spectators, are viewing our activities.¹⁹ However, God gave them such a place that they do not interfere with his glory.²⁰ They do not have a share in God's being. Although their glory is more magnificent than the splendor of the other creatures, it is not so great that it could obscure the splendor of God in any way. Calvin warns against the diabolical superstition which seeks to disproportionately raise the status of angels in relation to God. For such a promotion in status there is no good reason, Calvin suggests, since the Bible says that angels tremble before God's majesty.²¹ We would do the angels wrong if we were to grant them the same majesty as God.²² On the contrary, there is an immense distance between God's majesty and the angels; God would have the right (*suo iure*) to condemn them just like condemned humans if he had not also shown the angels his fatherly care and descended to them in order to take care of them.²³

Tasks

It is the task of the angels to praise God. This is the highest end of their existence.²⁴ They also have other tasks, though. Calvin says that God uses angels, for example, to show the wind the way.²⁵ Even though God has established a certain

order in nature, sometimes he uses angels to ensure that particular commands are accomplished.²⁶ God also involves his angels to carry out his judgments about the rejected. Calvin remarks that there are some who find it inappropriate that angels, being mere servants of grace and salvation, are mustered to punish unbelievers. Calvin, however, is not astonished about this because angels can only guard over believers when they are prepared to fight for them, and angels can only help believers by resisting their enemies according to God's purposes.²⁷ In speaking about the deployment of angels God is most obliging towards us. Calvin points out that it ought to greatly strengthen our faith to know that God has innumerable angels to his disposal who can hasten to help at any desired moment.²⁸ By the mention of his angelic servants God accommodates our weak faith in his promises, for it would be sufficient only to know that God cares for his church, but he mentions the angels for our benefit.²⁹

Guardian Angels

Angels are deployed by God particularly for the rescue and protection of believers. Calvin has no problem in admitting this, but he cautions against the danger of angels receiving so much attention that justice is not done to the fact that God is the one who saves.³⁰ The angels are given to us as servants and protectors,³¹ and they are keen on guarding our lives because they know it is the task God has assigned to them.³² Furthermore, they are consciously involved with events on earth and pleased about the salvation of the church.³³ Angels keep a watchful eye on every moment of our lives, but anyone who lives frivolously or walks down another path than the one which God wills need not expect help from them.³⁴ Yet this does not mean that Calvin likes the notion of individual persons having a guardian angel to watch over them; Calvin thinks this is too *limited* a picture of our angelic help. God does not appoint *one* angel, says Calvin, but he orders a whole *army* of angels to watch over the salvation of every single believer.³⁵ The Bible says that angels (he draws attention to the plural form) encircle the believer. This is indeed a consolation, for in like manner as we have countless enemies, we also have countless more guardians. Calvin's critics on this concept of a guardian angel therefore encounter both a biblical and a pastoral argument: why be satisfied with either none or perhaps only one angel when man needs much more help from God and he indeed receives it through this army of heavenly servants? At the same time, though, Calvin points out that we should not

try to investigate how precisely angels do their work. It is sufficient to know that they are appointed to serve us.³⁶ Incidentally, Calvin points out that we indebted to the work of Christ for the fact that they serve us, for because of the fall angels did not have anything to do with us,³⁷ but it is Christ who reconciled the angels to us.³⁸ The evidence from his *Commentary on the Psalms* therefore confirms the opinion that Calvin grants a more important place to the angels than is often noticed by Calvin scholars.³⁹ The *Commentary* also makes clear that in essence Calvin says the same as in the *Institutes*, but in line with his audience he makes it all more practical.

CONCLUSION

I started by saying that Calvin's view concerning angels is not spectacular and I remain convinced of that conclusion, but "spectacular" is a subjective qualification and in essence doesn't say much. Calvin's view about angels is indeed not spectacular in the sense that it offers new and unexpected insights into the world of angels or presents an impressive and new, reformed angelology. But on the other hand it can be called spectacular in the sense that for Calvin, angels play a greater role in the life of the believer than could be drawn from the spirituality of the average Reformed believer. So, continued research on his works and especially his commentaries and sermons will add substantially to our knowledge of Calvin's theological thoughts about angels, but it will also add substantially to a healthy reformed spirituality of the church and of the individual believer.

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1. On the historical and theological background to Calvin's reflection on angels, see especially Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature & Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 39-53.
 2. See: Heiko A. Oberman, *Contra Vanam Curiositatem: Ein Kapitel der Theologie zwischen Seelenwinkel und Weltall* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974).
 3. *Inst.* I.14.3 (quotations are from Beveridge).
 4. And yet, Luther rejects all medieval speculations on angels and is more occupied with the devil. On Luther and his relation to medieval angelology see: Samuel, Christopher J., "'Heavenly Theologians': The Place of Angels in the Theology of Martin Luther" (2014). Dissertations (2009-). Paper 359. http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/359.
 5. The famous Calvin scholar Francois Wendel for example writes that, "la longueur de ses développements ne manque pas de surprendre," *Calvin: sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (Paris, 1950), 127.
 6. Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 199-205.
 7. *Inst.* I.14.4

8. Ibid., I.14.6
9. Ibid., I.14.7
10. Ibid., I.14.9.
11. Ibid., I.14.13-19.
12. R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978).
13. This part is largely based on my *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 136-138.
14. Ps 89:7 (CO 31, 814).
15. Ibid.
16. Ps 135:5 (CO 32, 358-9).
17. "...in quibus relucet aliqua deitatis particular..." Ps 97:7 (CO 32, 45).
18. "...quia Deus per angelos irradiat totum mundum...", Ps 96:4 (CO 32, 38).
19. "...quia sibi probe consci sunt coram Deo et angelis, et coelestii theatro abunde sunt contenti...", Ps 119:5 (CO 32, 217).
20. Ps 135:5 (CO 32, 358-9).
21. Ps 89:7 (CO 31, 814).
22. Ps 96:4 (CO 32, 38).
23. Ps 113:5 (CO 32, 178).
24. Ps 103:19 (CO 32, 83).
25. Ps 18:11 (CO 31, 176).
26. Ps 78:44 (CO 31, 737).
27. Ps 35:4 (CO 31, 348).
28. Ps 34:8 (CO 31, 339).
29. "...pro modulo ruditatis nostrae...", Ps 34:8 (CO 31, 339).
30. Ps 18:17 (CO 31, 178).
31. "...sed quam nobis dati sunt ministri et custodes, ad opus esse paratos," Ps 103:21 (CO 32, 83).
32. Ps 34:8 (CO 31, 339).
33. "...angelos...quibus in salute ecclesiae communis est laetitia et gratulatio," Ps. 89:6 (CO 31, 814).
34. Ps 91:11 (CO 32, 6).
35. "...nec modo singulis assignat unum angelum, sed coelestes suos exercitus de salute cuiusque fidelium iubet esse sollicitos," Ps 91:11 (CO 32, 5).
36. Ps 91:11 (CO 32, 5-6).
37. "...et illi nobiscum nihil habent negoti," Ps. 91:11 (CO 32, 6)
38. "Solutus ergo Christus est, qui sublato dissidio angelos nobis conciliat...", Ps 91:11 (CO 32, 6).
39. "Certainly, angels appear in his writing far more frequently than much of the secondary literature indicates," Schreiner, *Theater*, 52.