

Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language for God: God as Enemy and God as Mother.



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Jane Dempsey Douglass

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By Jane Dempsey Douglass

In light of recent interest in Calvin as a humanist rhetorician¹ and also of the broadly-shared interest today in the nature of religious language, it seems appropriate to call attention to Calvin's fascination with metaphor for God. What is striking in Calvin's writing is not that he uses metaphors for God abundantly—for theologians have always done so—but that he deliberately analyzes so often the biblical use of metaphor. Calvin himself has become attuned to biblical imagery as imagery, and he is seriously working to raise the consciousness of his audience to understand the proper use of that metaphor in theology. For example, in his commentary on Isaiah 40:18, a discussion of idolatry, Calvin writes: "In order to know God, therefore, we must not frame a likeness of him according to our fancy, but we must betake ourselves to the Word, in which his own lively image is exhibited to us. Satisfied with that communication, let us not attempt anything else of our own. Other ways and methods, such as idols and representations [*imagines*] teach us vanity and falsehood, and not truth ... When the Lord sometimes compares himself to a lion, a bear, a man, or other objects, this has nothing to do with representations [*imagines*], as the Papists imagine, but by those metaphors either the kindness and mercy of God, or his wrath and displeasure, and other things of the same nature, are expressed; for God cannot reveal himself to us in any other way than by a comparison with things which we know."²

Metaphorical speech is for Calvin a prime means by which God accommodates divine realities to human comprehension, a kind of babytalk such as adults use with children.³ All revelation depends on such accommodation by

1. See for example William J. Bouwsma: "Renaissance and Reformation: An Essay in Their Affinities and Connections," in: *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 127-149; Bouwsma: "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal* 17 (1982), pp. 190-211; E. David Willis: "Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology," in: *The Context of Contemporary Theology*, ed. Willis and Alexander J. McKelway (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), pp. 43-64.

2. Com. Isa., C.O. 37, 19. Translation by William Pringle, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah by John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, 1948) III, p. 223, slightly altered. Luther on this text deals only with idolatry; WA 31-2, 276-7.

3. Inst. I, xiii, 1.

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