

Epiphanius of Salamis as a precursor of John Calvin's iconoclastic reformation?

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Abstract: This article examines whether the Anablatha episode, preserved in Jerome's Latin transmission of Epiphanius of Salamis' letter, may be interpreted retrospectively as a precursor to John Calvin's iconoclastic Reformation. It expressly rejects any claim of genealogical dependence and instead proposes a typological comparison governed by the formula "analogy without genealogy." Combining close reading of primary sources with historical-theological analysis, the study situates Epiphanius' removal of an image from a church within early Christian concerns about idolatry, sacred space, and the proper regulation of worship. It then considers the development of positive image theology through Basil of Caesarea's distinction between image and prototype, John of Damascus' Christological defence of material representation, the Second Council of Nicaea's differentiation between veneration and divine worship, and Gregory the Great's pastoral defence of the didactic use of images. Against this background, Calvin's criticism of devotional images is reconstructed as a systematic theology of revelation, worship,

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and ecclesiastical discipline centred on Scripture, preaching, and the sacraments. The comparison reveals a functional convergence: both Epiphanius and Calvin regard images within liturgical space as capable of acquiring a cultic force exceeding their declared purpose and therefore favour preventive removal over pedagogical regulation. Nevertheless, decisive differences remain in historical context, Christology, ecclesiology, anthropology, and systematic scope. The article concludes that Epiphanius can be described as Calvin's precursor only in a strictly retrospective and typological sense. Their similarity lies not in doctrinal continuity but in a shared pastoral logic concerning the interaction of visual media, sacred space, devotional practice, and the normative order of Christian worship.

Keywords: Epiphanius of Salamis; John Calvin; iconoclasm; veneration of images; Second Council of Nicaea; worship.

Introduction

The status of images in Christian worship cannot be reduced to a dispute over aesthetics. From late antiquity to the Reformation, the central questions concerned the law of worship, the relation between visible signs and the invisible God, and the capacity of ecclesial practice to distinguish veneration from adoration. This article asks whether the well-known intervention at Anablatha, transmitted in Jerome's Latin version of Epiphanius of Salamis' letter, may be read as a retrospective precursor of concerns later systematized by John Calvin. The claim is deliberately limited: no genealogy of influence is proposed. Rather, the comparison concerns a typological convergence in which sacred space and the regulation of worship take precedence over the presumed devotional utility of images.²

The comparison requires a diachronic framework. Early Christian unease about idolatry, the disciplinary prohibition of images in canon 36 of the Synod of Elvira, and the anti-representational argument

² Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, ed. J. T. McNeill, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1960, I.11-12; C. M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols. The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986.

attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea form one line of development. A second line culminates in the mature icon theology of Basil of Caesarea, John of Damascus, and the Second Council of Nicaea (787). In the Latin West, Gregory the Great articulated a mediating pastoral position: images were not to be adored, but neither were they to be destroyed, because they could instruct those unable to read. The Reformation reopened the practical question of whether such distinctions remained stable in actual worship.³

Methodologically, the study combines close reading of primary texts with historical-theological comparison. Greek technical terms are cited consistently in Greek characters; Latin expressions are retained where they carry a juridical or theological force. Modern critical editions form the primary textual basis, while older collections such as PG, PL, and Mansi are used only as supplementary traditional locators. The thesis is that Epiphanius and Calvin converge at the level of a practical theology of worship: both suspect that an image placed within the liturgical order can acquire a cultic force exceeding the intention assigned to it. They nevertheless differ decisively in historical context, ecclesiology, Christology, and systematic scope. The formula 'analogy without genealogy' therefore governs the comparison.

Epiphanius of Salamis and the Anablatha episode

The decisive text is Epistula 51.9, preserved among Jerome's letters. The Greek original is not extant; the episode survives in Jerome's Latin translation. Epiphanius reports that, upon entering a church at Anablatha, he saw a curtain bearing an image 'of Christ or of some saint' and tore it down because he did not wish an image of a human being to hang 'in the Church of Christ': 'imaginem aut Christi aut

³ For the principal historical trajectories see L. Brubaker – J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850. A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011; T. F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2009.

cuiuslibet sancti ... nolens imaginem hominis suspendi in ecclesia Christi ... scidi eam.⁴

Three elements deserve emphasis. First, *imago hominis* is generic: Epiphanius' objection does not depend on securely identifying the figure represented. Second, in *ecclesia Christi* makes the sacred location normatively significant. The problem is not representation in every possible context, but representation within a space ordered to worship. Third, *scidi* describes an immediate pastoral act, not a developed theory of Christian art. For that reason, the Anablatha incident should not be inflated into a complete Epiphanian doctrine of images. It is more securely read as a concrete episcopal judgment concerning what could appropriately function inside the church.⁵

The wider anti-image material attributed to Epiphanius has a complicated textual history, and the authenticity of individual testimonia has long been disputed. The present argument therefore rests on the Anablatha passage as transmitted in Jerome rather than on an attempt to reconstruct a comprehensive iconoclastic corpus under Epiphanius' name. This restriction prevents the comparison with Calvin from depending on texts whose attribution is less secure and keeps the analysis focused on a documented pastoral gesture.⁶

The biblical horizon of that gesture is the prohibition of idolatry in Exodus 20:4-5 and Deuteronomy 4:15-16. The Septuagint states: 'οὐ ποιήσεις σεαυτῷ εἰδωλον ... οὐ προσκυνήσεις αὐτοῖς οὐδὲ μὴ λατρεύσεις αὐτοῖς'. The Vulgate similarly uses the pair *adorare/colere*: 'Non facies tibi sculptile ... non adorabis ea neque coles'. These texts do not by themselves settle the later Christian theology of icons, but they

⁴ Hieronymus, *Epistulae* 1-70, ed. I. Hilberg, *editio altera supplementis aucta* curante M. Kamptner, CSEL 54, Wien 1996, Ep. 51.9, 426-427; traditional locator: PL 22, 526.

⁵ Cf. E. Kitzinger, *The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), 83-150, esp. 90-95.

⁶ On the contested Epiphanian material and its later reception see L. Brubaker – J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850*, 68-86; R. Price, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*, 2 vols., Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2018.

explain why Christian reflection on images repeatedly returned to the relation between representation and cult.⁷

A useful Western parallel is canon 36 of the Synod of Elvira: 'Placuit picturas in ecclesia esse non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur'. The canon is difficult to interpret with precision, but its wording clearly links pictorial representation to ecclesial space and to the danger of confusing what is represented with what is worshipped. The parallel with Anablatha lies not in a demonstrable line of influence but in a shared disciplinary concern.⁸ The letter attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea in response to the request of Constantia for an image of Christ belongs to the same broad field of anxiety, although its transmission and reconstruction require caution. Rather than treating Eusebius as a direct source for Epiphanius, it is more accurate to see both as witnesses to an early Christian problem: how far the biblical prohibition of images governs the representation of Christ within devotional and liturgical contexts.⁹

The maturation of icon theology: Basil, John of Damascus, and Nicaea II

The strongest theological response to iconoclastic suspicion did not consist in denying the biblical prohibition of idolatry. It redefined the relation between image, prototype, and worship. Basil of Caesarea supplied a formula that later became central to the defence of icons:

⁷ Septuaginta. Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes, ed. A. Rahlfs – R. Hanhart, 2nd rev. ed., Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2006, Ex 20:4-5; Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem, ed. R. Weber – R. Gryson, 5th ed., Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2007, Ex 20:4-5; Deut 4:15-16.

⁸ Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos, ed. J. Vives, with T. Marín Martínez – G. Martínez Díez, Instituto Enrique Flórez, CSIC, Barcelona-Madrid 1963, can. 36, 8.

⁹ C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453. Sources and Documents*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1972, 47-56; cf. L. Brubaker – J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850*, 40-68.

‘τῆς εἰκόνος ἡ τιμὴ ἐπὶ τὸ πρωτότυπον διαβαίνει’ - ‘the honor of the image passes to the prototype’.¹⁰

In its original context, Basil’s statement concerns the relation of image and prototype within a Trinitarian argument. Its later use in the icon controversy is nevertheless intelligible: honor does not terminate in the material sign but is referred to the person represented. Basil was not writing a seventh- or eighth-century treatise on icon veneration, yet his relational logic furnished later iconophile theology with a powerful conceptual instrument.¹¹

John of Damascus develops that relational logic within an explicitly Christological defence of representation. His argument turns on the Incarnation: the invisible God is not represented according to the divine essence, but the Word who truly became human may be depicted in his visible humanity. John’s famous rejection of the charge that Christians worship matter appears in the first oration against those who attack the holy images: ‘Οὐ προσκυνῶ τῇ ὕλῃ, προσκυνῶ δὲ τὸν τῆς ὕλης δημιουργόν ...’. The point is not the sacralization of wood or pigment, but the theological legitimacy of material mediation after the Incarnation.¹²

The distinction between προσκύνησις and λατρεία becomes decisive. The former can designate relative or honorific veneration; the latter, in the conciliar formulation, belongs properly to the divine nature. The Second Council of Nicaea codified this distinction and incorporated the principle of reference to the prototype into its synodal definition. The critical text is preserved in the *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*,

¹⁰ Basile de Césarée, *Sur le Saint-Esprit*, 2e éd., éd. et trad. B. Pruche, Sources Chrétiennes 17bis, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1968, 18.45; traditional locator: PG 32, 149C.

¹¹ Cf. H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.

¹² Ioannes Damascenus, *Contra imaginum calumniatores* I.16, In: *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, III*, ed. B. Kotter, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 17, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1975, 89-90; cf. A. Louth, *St John Damascene. Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002.

series secunda, volume III, part III, which contains the sixth and seventh sessions, the synodal letters, canons, and related material.¹³ The mature iconophile position can therefore be summarized without multiplying quotations: representation is justified Christologically by the Incarnation; veneration is directed relationally to the prototype; and the Church regulates the gestures of devotion by distinguishing honorific veneration from the worship owed to God alone. This is the theological structure against which both Epiphanius' earlier intervention and Calvin's later criticism must be measured.¹⁴

The Latin pastoral alternative: Gregory the Great

Gregory the Great provides a useful Latin counterpoint because his correspondence with Serenus of Marseille refuses both adoration of images and their destruction. In *Registrum epistularum* IX.105 and XI.10, Gregory rebukes the bishop for breaking images while approving his zeal against their worship. Gregory's position is frequently summarized as a didactic theory of images: what writing provides to readers, painting can provide to those who cannot read. The formula must not be confused with the later Byzantine theology of icon veneration. Gregory seeks a pastoral middle course in which images may instruct and memorialize without becoming objects of adoration.¹⁵¹⁶

The Carolingian *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum*, conventionally known as the *Libri Carolini*, demonstrates a further Western possibility: the legitimacy of images could be affirmed while the cultic conclusions attributed to the Greek council were rejected. The work is

¹³ Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum, ed. E. Lamberz, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, Series Secunda, vol. III, pars III: *Concilii actiones VI-VII*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2016, actio VII, definitio; cf. R. Price, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*, vol. 2, Liverpool 2018.

¹⁴ For the doctrinal synthesis see A. Louth, *St John Damascene*, especially Part III; R. Price, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*, vol. 2.

¹⁵ Cf. T. F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, 15-95.

¹⁶ Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum epistularum*, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL 140-140A, Brepols, Turnhout 1982, IX.105; XI.10.

relevant here not because it provides a direct bridge from Epiphanius to Calvin, but because it shows that Western criticism of image-veneration developed within its own theological and political settings.¹⁷

John Calvin: revelation, worship, and the problem of images

Calvin's criticism of images in the final Latin edition of the *Institutio christianae religionis* (1559) belongs especially to Book I, chapters 11-12. His argument begins with the glory and incomprehensibility of God: 'impio mendacio corrumpi Dei gloriam quoties ei forma ulla affingitur' - God's glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever a form is fashioned for him (Inst. I.11.1). The governing biblical texts are Exodus 20:4-5 and Deuteronomy 4:15-16. Calvin's point is not a general condemnation of visual art. The issue is the theological and cultic use of images as media of divine knowledge and devotion.¹⁸

Habakkuk 2:18 supplies another key element: the image is a 'teacher of lies'. Calvin's critique is therefore epistemological as well as disciplinary. God has appointed the Word as the normative medium of proclamation and the sacraments as visible signs instituted by Christ; devotional images, by contrast, are humanly devised media whose sensory force can displace the divinely instituted order of revelation. This logic explains why Calvin's polemic cannot be reduced to aesthetic austerity.¹⁹

The anthropological dimension is equally important. Calvin describes the human mind as a 'perpetual factory of idols' (Inst. I.11.8). The practical question is therefore whether a distinction such as προσκύνησις/λατρεία can be preserved in ordinary devotional

¹⁷ *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum* (Libri Carolini), ed. A. Freeman, MGH, Concilia 2, Supplementum 1, Hannover 1998; cf. T. F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*.

¹⁸ J. Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. J. W. Baum – A. E. Cunitz – E. Reuss, *Corpus Reformatorum* 29-87, Brunsvigae-Berolini 1863-1900, *Institutio* I.11.1; English trans.: *J. Calvin, Institutes*, trans. F. L. Battles, ed. J. T. McNeill, Philadelphia 1960.

¹⁹ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11.5-10; C. M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 188-214.

behavior. Bowing, kissing, incense, light, and the material presence of a sacred image may be theologically interpreted as relative veneration, but Calvin doubts that this distinction remains stable in practice. His objection is thus not simply semantic; it is pastoral and anthropological.²⁰ Reformed changes to church interiors must be read within this framework. Studies of Swiss and Genevan iconoclasm show that the removal of images belonged to a larger reordering of worship around preaching, Scripture, discipline, and the sacraments rather than to an isolated hostility toward art. This institutional dimension marks a decisive difference from Epiphanius: Calvin turns a concern about images into a systematic program of ecclesiastical reform.²¹

Epiphanius and Calvin: analogy without genealogy

The comparison can now be stated more precisely. The strongest resemblance lies in the priority assigned to the regulation of worship. Epiphanius' phrase in *ecclesia Christi* makes the church a normative setting: an image that might be unobjectionable in another context becomes problematic when placed within the cultic space. Calvin likewise treats the liturgical function of the image, rather than artistic production as such, as the decisive issue. In both cases, the concern is that visual mediation can acquire a religious force not controlled by its declared intention.

A second resemblance concerns pastoral realism. Epiphanius does not offer a theory of the distinction between relative and absolute worship; he removes the object whose presence he judges inappropriate. Calvin, writing after the full development of Byzantine icon theology, knows that a sophisticated distinction is possible in theory but disputes its reliability in popular practice. The parallel is therefore functional rather than doctrinal: both respond to what they

²⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11.8-12; W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin. A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1988, 186-197.

²¹ C. M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols*; L. P. Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands. Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1995.

perceive as a risk generated by the interaction of image, sacred space, and devotional gesture.²²

The differences are at least as important as the similarities. Epiphanius precedes the iconoclastic controversy by centuries and cannot be made into a proto-Reformer in any genealogical sense. He does not possess Calvin's doctrine of Scripture, sacrament, ecclesiastical discipline, or Reformation critique of late medieval devotion. Conversely, Calvin works after Nicaea II and therefore confronts a developed theological account of images that did not yet exist in Epiphanius' context. The historical asymmetry is constitutive, not incidental.

A third difference is Christological. John of Damascus and Nicaea II ground Christian representation in the Incarnation and distinguish the prototype from the material image. Calvin does not deny that Christ was truly visible as man; his objection concerns the ecclesial use of representations as devotional media. Epiphanius' brief report from Anablatha does not supply enough evidence to reconstruct an equally developed Christological theory of images. Any comparison that treats the two men as teaching the same doctrine would therefore exceed the sources.²³

The category 'retrospective precursor' can nevertheless be retained if it is defined strictly. It denotes neither direct influence nor identity of doctrine. It identifies an earlier pastoral configuration that becomes newly intelligible when placed beside a later systematic argument. Epiphanius' *scidi eam* and Calvin's reordering of worship share a logic of preventive discipline: when a medium is judged liable to compromise the clarity of divine worship, the safer course is removal rather than pedagogical regulation.

This reading also clarifies why Gregory the Great and Nicaea II are indispensable to the comparison. Gregory represents the possibility of regulated didactic use without adoration; Nicaea II represents a full

²² Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11-12; E. Kitzinger, *The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm*, 83-150.

²³ A. Louth, *St John Damascene*, Part III; *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum*, ACO II.3.3, actio VII, definitio.

theology of relative veneration grounded in prototype and Incarnation. Epiphanius and Calvin occupy different historical positions on the more restrictive side of the spectrum. The comparison becomes analytically meaningful only when these mediating traditions are kept in view.²⁴

Conclusion

The evidence does not support a genealogy running from Epiphanius of Salamis to John Calvin. It does support a carefully delimited analogy. The Anablatha episode shows a late-antique bishop treating sacred space and the avoidance of idolatrous ambiguity as sufficient grounds for removing an image. Calvin transforms a comparable concern into a systematic Reformation theology in which the Word and the sacraments define the proper media of revelation and worship. Between the two stand decisive developments that prevent any simple identification: Basil's relational language of image and prototype, John of Damascus' Christological defence of material representation, the conciliar distinction between honorific veneration and divine worship at Nicaea II, and Gregory the Great's Latin pastoral defence of didactic images. These traditions establish conceptual possibilities that Epiphanius did not formulate and that Calvin later judged inadequate in practice.

Epiphanius may therefore be called a precursor only retrospectively and typologically. His importance for the comparison lies in the structure of the pastoral act - an image, a sacred place, a perceived danger to worship, and immediate removal - rather than in a demonstrable doctrinal continuity. Calvin's contribution is the systematic articulation of that preventive logic within a theology of revelation, anthropology, and ecclesiastical order.

The resulting formula is 'analogy without genealogy'. It preserves the genuinely suggestive comparison while avoiding anachronism. It also locates the enduring Christian dispute over images where the sources

²⁴ Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum epistularum* IX.105; XI.10; *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum*, ACO II.3.3, actio VII, definitio.

themselves place it most sharply: at the intersection of Christology, the theology of signs, pastoral practice, and the law of worship.

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