

Calvin on Psalms: Reading his Hermeneutic from the Preface to his Commentary

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Abstract: Calvin loved and lived the psalms. A lifetime of reflection and praying them stands behind his commentary on the Psalter. The Preface to the commentary, in which Calvin tells much of his own story, is revealing of his hermeneutic when dealing with the psalms. Parallels between his own life and that of David as psalmist functions as a major key for interpretation. This article explores Calvin's hermeneutic when dealing with the psalms and notes ways in which it correlates with principles of composition of the Psalter itself.

A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN when introducing Calvin on the Psalms is with the introduction to his commentary. This commentary only appeared relatively late in Calvin's life but it had been some time in the making. He had started preaching on the psalms on Sundays, the only Old Testament texts on which he preached on Sundays, in 1549 and began his lectures on them in 1552. He began the commentary the following year and it was published in Latin in 1557. That Latin edition became the basis for his French translations of 1558 and 1561.¹ There is no doubt, however, that a lifetime of reflection on the psalms lay behind this work. Calvin loved and lived the psalms.²

The introductory section to Calvin's commentary is not only interesting but also challenging to the modern reader. Most of us are

1. See H. J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 17, 24.

2. C. Eire, "Calvin's Geneva and the Psalms", in H. W. Attridge and M. E. Fassler (eds.), *Psalms and Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Studies, 2003) 285-91, esp. 287-8. Eire remarks that Geneva itself was a city "in which the psalms were the language of communication with God" and they "were a constant frame of reference for Calvin, in a personal and communal sense". They were a key to an understanding of how to worship God, order the life of the elect and communicate with God.

familiar with the genre of modern biblical commentary. Each volume usually begins with an introduction – short or lengthy – speaking about such matters as dating, authorship, provenance, text, structure etc. The start of Calvin’s commentary is somewhat different.³ He begins with an “Author’s Preface” addressed “to the godly and ingenious readers”. While he could have included in this some of those introductory matters familiar to the modern ingenious reader (he does so in places within the commentary) he chose another tack. His preface covers three matters.

First, he starts with a very personal note on the origin of the commentaries covering a journey from lecture notes, both his own and those of his students, through to the finished work. Next he discusses the different types of psalms in the context of prayer, personal prayer mainly. This is where we read that oft quoted remark about the psalms being “‘An Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul’; for there is not an emotion”, he says,

of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the grief, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. (1, p. xxxvii)⁴

He is convinced that “whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book”. One presumes that Calvin sees his commentary as a way of aiding that process, of aiding people not only to see within the psalms the way to God opened for them but to see there “permission and freedom” to set before God all their infirmities etc., things they would not confess before others. Nothing is wanting in the psalms for him regarding the knowledge of eternal salvation. Calvin’s comment on the psalms expressing grief, sorrows, fears etc. with little reference to joy and praise may well reflect the time when the commentary was produced. It was a period of transition in his life, and in the life of Geneva, from a time of struggle to one of peace when an orderly ecclesiastical life could be pursued.⁵

The final and longest section of the preface details some of Calvin’s own experience, including his conversion and growth in Christian

3. The edition of Calvin’s commentary which will form the basis of this essay is John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Vols 1-5; transl. J. Anderson; Calvin Translation Society: Edinburgh, 1845-9). Selderhuis remarks (*Calvin’s Theology*, p. 18) on the weaknesses of this version in that it “not only uses a more archaic type of English, but also reflects too much of the image of Calvin at that time instead of presenting the words of Calvin itself”.

4. This well known statement about the psalms goes back to an earlier form from 1551. He follows Luther in this sentiment. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology*, 23.

5. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology*, 25.

faith, his feeling of youthful inexperience early even though becoming a leader in the faith. He goes into some detail of his travels and concerns and speaks of wanting to retire to pursue study although ending up waylaid in Geneva by wars and the entreaties of “stronger” individuals. He confesses himself as “Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led (him) always to love the shade and retirement”. However, he says all his efforts at retreat were “like public schools” (1, p. xli). Elsewhere he talks of himself as “naturally of a timid, soft, and pusillanimous disposition” (1, p. xliii). At the end of his introduction Calvin stresses that he labours in his efforts for “all the people of God”, speaking in a “simple style of teaching”, not seeking ostentation and abstaining from “refuting the opinions of others” except in circumstances where silence might lead to confusion in the reader. He avoids heaping “together a great mass of materials which has great show” (1, p. xlix). He closes with a prayer seeking God’s blessing on his effort.

All of this may sound odd to the modern “ingenious” reader, a curiosity at best, self-indulgence at worst. Such a “personal” introduction as this seems out of place in modern historical critical commentary. But I would stress that this “personal” introduction is, in fact, the key to understanding Calvin’s commentary and a major aspect of his hermeneutic. He recognised, wherever possible, a connection between the life of David as psalmist and his own life as well as a connection between the church situation in Geneva and that of Israel in Old Testament times.⁶ Along with many others, he attributed a large number of psalms to David even when some are not so designated, as for example Psalm 42 designated a psalm of Korah (2, p. 127) or Psalm 73, a psalm of Asaph (3, p. 121).

Calvin constantly saw, wherever possible, parallels between his own calling and ministry and David’s life. It was in seeing such parallels that he understood the psalms and what encouragement and help they might give him in his life, and be for others. Both he and David had been called away from other tasks and in many ways felt ill equipped for their new undertaking; both had encountered enemies within and without the people of God. In his suffering at the hands of “the domestic enemies of the Church” Calvin felt he could join in David’s complaints. Likewise, in relation to his personal grief for the loss a child shortly after birth and then for his wife a few years later, and in relation to his own poor health, he felt an affinity with David in his laments.⁷ In this regard he felt David was “a mirror” for himself, one worthy of imitation even though he felt he fell far short of David. In the trials that he encountered in Geneva he saw that David “by his

6. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology*, 29.

7. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology*, 28.

footsteps showed (him) the way" (1, p. xlv). Calvin spoke of the aid of the psalms in combating his opponents and wrote (1, p. xlvi):

But since the condition of David was such, that though he had deserved well of his own people, he was nevertheless bitterly hated by many without a cause, as he complains in Ps. lxxix.4, "I restored that which I took not away," it afforded me no small consolation when I was groundlessly assailed by the hatred of those who ought to have assisted and solaced me, to conform myself to the example of so great and so excellent a person. This knowledge and experience have been of much service in enabling me to understand The Psalms, so that in my meditations upon them, I did not wander, as it were, in an unknown region.

There is, of course, another side to this identification with David. It is the degree to which Calvin projects his own experience onto that of the psalmist. Herman Selderhuis, in his study of Calvin's theology in his psalms commentary, says that: "Because he views these events from the perspective of the Psalms, Calvin's interpretation sometimes reflects more his own experience than the historical facts."⁸ We can see something of this in his comment on Ps 18:18-19 where he attributes to David, beyond anything the psalm has to say, a humility and preference to live "in obscurity, in the sheep-cotes, or in his father's hut" to a desire to take on a kingly role (1, p. 278). Selderhuis argues that: "What Calvin passes on to the readers of his commentary is so coloured by his own experience that a certain one-sidedness is apparent."⁹ However, Selderhuis also qualifies his assessment. While he admits that such a trait enables him to understand more about Calvin, he notes that Calvin's identification with David "neither leads to an idealization of David nor even to an ideological use of David".¹⁰ In places Calvin sees David in all his human frailty, e.g. in Psalm 42 (2, p. 142-3). While we need to acknowledge this point by Selderhuis, it ought not to be enough to make us wary of Calvin's hermeneutic. On the contrary, I would argue that precisely by setting the psalms not only within the life of David but also within his own life as seen through the psalms, Calvin provides a fruitful exposition for the reader. As Selderhuis remarks, Calvin is not simply one who passes on the meaning of text to the reader, but one who is attempting "to pass on the meaning as efficiently as possible".¹¹ As I understand it, that means setting the psalms not simply in David's life but in his own in a way that the readers can see themselves in the text too.

8. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology*, 27.

9. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology*, 34.

10. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology*, 33.

11. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology*, 29.

In summation, then, we see here David as an exemplar for Calvin. What makes the psalm texts “familiar” for Calvin and not foreign, is the sense of David behind them. It is a life and an experience not dissimilar to his own. He reads the psalms in terms of his own life only as he reads them in relation to David’s. This is also the way in which he finds the ability then to speak to his readers; David is their example, their “mirror” also. This is why his introduction is so personal – a life story – because it is in the context of a life that these texts are to be understood, be it David’s, Calvin’s or the reader’s.

An example of how Calvin’s commentary works may be seen in the way he treated Psalm 23. In typical fashion, Calvin began his exposition of the psalm with a brief summary of the meaning of the text noting especially the type of prayer (thanksgiving), the circumstance within which he saw David praying the psalm, and what David learnt from the experience and could pass to readers (1, p. 390). He then provided a verse-by-verse exegesis of the text with verses grouped according to content.¹² The verses were translated before each section of commentary. In Psalm 23 Calvin broke the psalm after v. 4, precisely where the imagery changes from pastoral to that of the banquet. He gave a mixture of comment on David and remarks relating the text immediately to the reader (“us, we etc.”).¹³ Calvin saw the general context of the psalm as “When David had obtained peaceable possession of the kingdom, and lived in prosperity” (1, p. 390). The psalm was both thanksgiving for the past and also for the purpose “That (David) might not...in the time of his great prosperity, be like worldly men, who, when they seem to themselves to be fortunate (French: “Lesquels ayans le vente à gré, comme on dit”, or, “Who having the wind to their mind, as we say.”) bury God in forgetfulness, and luxuriously plunge themselves into their pleasures”. He goes on:

Although God, by his benefits, gently allures us to himself, as it were by a taste of his fatherly sweetness, yet there is nothing into which we more easily fall than into forgetfulness of him, ... For this reason, we ought the more carefully to mark the example which is set before us by David,...(1, p. 391)

Calvin was not averse to discussing the Hebrew text where some debate or uncertainty over translation or meaning existed, e.g. regarding “pastures” in Ps. 23:2 (1, p. 393). He also used his knowledge or imagined understanding of the land of Israel and conditions there, in this case the lot of shepherds and sheep in such a place, to help

12. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology*, 15. Selderhuis notes that Calvin differed between commentaries and *loci*. The former consisted of a verse by verse exegesis not to be interrupted by excurses on specific topics.

13. Selderhuis (*ibid.*, 29-30) says that it is because Calvin knew his audience in Geneva and France faced the same problems as the psalmist and himself, he spoke of “we” and “us”.

expound on the text. The majority of the comment, however, related the text closely to the life of the reader in the presence of God. When discussing v. 3 and its "he restoreth my soul", Calvin worked closely again with the Hebrew offering an alternative sense of a "conversion of the soul", presumably based on the use of the Hebrew verb *shub*, "to return, restore", in certain Old Testament passages in the sense of "repent, return (to the Lord)". In v. 3 he understood "paths of righteousness" in the sense of "easy and plain paths", eschewing both a reference to the direction of the Holy Spirit and, with others, any sense of a moral figure of speech (1, p. 394). He saw this as God averting his people "from whatever is hurtful, that they may walk at ease in plain and straight paths". The variously interpreted phrase "the valley of the shadow of death" Calvin understood not in terms of death itself as many do but rather in terms of everyday troubles and dangers (1, p. 394-5). Finally, we should note that at the end of the psalm he translated the Hebrew phrase as "length of days" taking a more literal understanding of life-long rather than as "forever" implying possibly a notion of eternity.

Calvin's preface with so much of his personal story in it is far from self-indulgence. It is a key to his interpretation of the psalms. But it is also something that the modern "ingenious" reader can relate to easily. This is particularly noticeable when we compare his work with close contemporaries. Calvin's preface and the implied hermeneutic are far from what we encounter at the start of Luther's lectures on psalms. The interpretation of the latter reformer followed the fourfold pattern of scholastic hermeneutics – literal (historical), allegorical, tropological (spiritual reference) and anagogical.¹⁴ Luther announced that all prophecy and every prophet (including the psalmists) should be interpreted as speaking of Jesus Christ. For him Psalm 23 was about God's Word, which nourishes, gives comfort, guides and protects the Christian.¹⁵ The house of God in the last verse was the "holy Christian Church" in which the Christian seeks to reside life long. The enemies in the psalms were variously the Turks, the Jews or the Pope. The Table became the Holy Sacraments, the oil that of anointing, and the people getting drunk with joy at the gifts of the Word and Spirit. "May Christ, our only Shepherd and Saviour, grant us this", Luther said.¹⁶ In general, Calvin resisted more general excursions on specific topics within his exegesis although on occasion the rule was broken. Where he ventured into relating the psalms to Christ it was in relation to the application of the psalm to the life of the reader, as we see in psalm 2

14. H. C. Oswald (ed.), *Luther's Works. Volume 10: First Lectures on Psalms I. Psalms 1-75* (St Louis: Concordia, 1974) 1-10.

15. *Works*, Vol 10, 150.

16. *Works*, Vol 10, 179.

where he discussed at modest length issues of fear and temptation in Christian life (1, pp. 9-27).

In several respects Calvin stands closer to modern exegetical ways in what he did, particularly in his attention to philology, his eschewing of the allegorical approach, and his less overt Christological reading. But I also think Calvin goes beyond what many modern commentaries have become. In taking seriously the idea of David as psalmist and as an example for the reader, Calvin has (inadvertently?) picked up on something inherent to the Book of Psalms itself – reading the text in the context of a life. Such an approach has often been avoided in modern biblical commentaries, especially those of the “scholarly” variety, where both the psalmist and the readers of the commentary remain anonymous and what is discussed is more often determined by what is problematic and hypothetical.¹⁷ As James Luther Mays comments: “Calvin from his side raises the question whether critical scholarship is so boring because it either will not admit to an audience or will admit to no audience beyond itself.”¹⁸ There are some inroads into this emerging in modern biblical commentary (not least in some Old Testament commentaries), but devotional, spiritual, and theological issues, such as what the psalms have to say about prayer, are more often confined to the “popular commentaries” than to “serious” study. In this, Calvin’s commentary on Psalms has more than a little to offer us. It calls us back to examine the purpose of biblical commentary, even “serious” ones, and to ask regarding the place of the reader in the interpretation of the text, and not just in relation to psalms.

17. J. L. Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary on Psalms: The Preface as Introduction”, in P. D. Miller and G. M. Tucker (eds.), *Preaching and Teaching The Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 85-93, esp. 87.

18. Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary”, 92-93