

## Calvin's Commentary on the Psalter: Christian or Jewish?

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**Abstract:** This article explores John Calvin's debt to preceding Jewish exegetes on the Psalter and seeks to determine how explicitly Christian his interpretation of the Psalms was. To assist in meeting this aim, use is made of the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi as a conversation partner. A survey of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms helps to clarify his method of approach with respect to earlier Christian and Jewish exposition of the Psalter. When it came to Jewish exegesis of the Psalms, Calvin was neither uncritical nor hypercritical. Comparison with the exegetical efforts of Rashi shows that Calvin was no prisoner to Jewish opinion. Nor did he accept a view just because it was that of a Christian exegete. The detection of a messianic connection required some trigger, one trigger being apostolic use of a psalm. Calvin's focus on the historical context of the psalms was not something derived from Jewish exegetes but the result of his humanist training and inclination. His first impulse was to relate a psalm to its historical setting (usually the life experience of David) derived from clues in the psalm itself. On the other hand, Calvin saw no difficulty in a psalm having reference to David and at the same time being a prediction of Christ.

JOHN CALVIN'S COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS (*In librum Psalmorum commentarius*) was published in 1557. A French translation of this commentary was published in 1558 and an expanded and corrected French edition in 1561.<sup>1</sup> Calvin had preached regularly on the Psalms on Sunday afternoons between 1549 and 1554 and he had lectured on the Psalms during the years 1552 to 1555 (or 1556).<sup>2</sup> His commentary

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1. Wulfert de Greef (tr. Raymond A. Blacketer), "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Calvin and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 85-106; idem, *Calvijn en zijn uitleg van de Psalmen. Een onderzoek naar zijn exegetische methode* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2005).

2. T. H. L. Parker, *A Commentary on the Psalms by John Calvin* (4 vols.; London: James Clark, 1965) I:5-7; idem, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 15, 30.

on Psalms is his third on an Old Testament book (after Isaiah [1551] and Genesis [1554]), so that it was as a mature and experienced commentator that he came to the Psalter. In this paper my aim is to explore Calvin's debt to preceding Jewish exegetes on the Psalter and to determine how explicitly Christian Calvin's interpretation of the Psalms was.<sup>3</sup> To assist in meeting this aim, I will use the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi as a conversation partner. Rashi is the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (Solomon ben Isaac) (1040-1105). He was a native of Troyes, Northern France. His commentary on the Psalms belongs to the mature phase of his scholarly output.

#### CRITICISMS OF CALVIN: PAST AND PRESENT

The first half of the sixteenth century saw the rise of a Christian exegetical school that made use of the philological resources provided by the writings of Jewish exegetes Rashi (1040-1105), Ibn Ezra (1089-1165) and David Kimchi (Radak) (1160-1235). Rashi and his successors focused on interpreting the Hebrew text in its historical context.<sup>4</sup> The Strasbourg pastor, Martin Bucer, was part of that school, and the pioneering Christian Hebraist Conrad Pellican (1478-1556) found fault with his commentary on the Psalms for being too influenced by Jewish exegetes.<sup>5</sup> As might be expected, given his stay in Strasbourg, Calvin aligned himself with this approach, and the Lutheran author Aegidius Hunnius, who (like Luther before him) was keen to find references to Christ everywhere in the Old Testament, regarded Calvin as making too many interpretive concessions to the Jews and therefore as an "inveterate Judaizer" (*Calvinus judaizans* [Wittenberg, 1593]).<sup>6</sup>

In an older volume, *Sola Scriptura*, Sidney Greidanus was prepared to concede: "Christocentric preaching is as broad as theocentric preaching"<sup>7</sup> and "To hear the proclamation of the acts of God is to hear the proclamation of the acts of Christ".<sup>8</sup> He found no fault with Calvin, who in many sermons did not even mention Christ. More recently,

3. On this issue, see G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) (forthcoming).

4. Bernard Roussel, "De Strasbourg à Bâle et Zurich: une 'école Rhénane' d'exégèse (ca. 1525 – ca. 1540)", *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 68/1 (1988) 19-39.

5. R. Gerald Hobbs, "Conrad Pellican and the Psalms: The Ambivalent Legacy of a Pioneer Hebraist", *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 1 (1999) 72-99; an English translation of Pellican's letter to Bucer is provided in an appendix; idem, "Martin Bucer et les Juifs", *Martin Bucer and Sixteenth Century Europe: Actes du colloque de Strasbourg (28-31 août 1991)* (2 vols.; eds. Christian Krieger and Marc Lienhard; Leiden: Brill, 1993) 2.685-686.

6. W. McKane, "Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator", *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 25 (1984) 255; J. Baumgartner, *Calvin Hébraïsant et interprète de l'Ancient Testament* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1889) 27-28.

7. Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Kampen: Kok, 1970) 224.

8. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 225.

Greidanus appears to have hardened his attitude in this respect, viewing this as a short-coming in Calvin's preaching,<sup>9</sup> so that his evaluation now is: "from our perspective Calvin did not sufficiently focus on producing explicitly Christ-centred sermons in the context of the whole of Scripture".<sup>10</sup> He also criticises Calvin's "character-imitation preaching",<sup>11</sup> which in his commentary on the Psalms took the form of using David as a moral model for Christians. Greidanus has too much respect for Calvin to malign him as a Judaizer, but his criticisms of Calvin's exegetical method are not all that different in substance from those of his contemporary critics.

David L. Puckett writes of "The 'Jewish' Appearance of Calvin's Exegesis" (the title to ch.3),<sup>12</sup> and he notes the criticism that Calvin was subjected to in his own day that he made too many concessions to the Jews. The explanation, according to Puckett, is not Calvin's accommodation to Jewish commentators but his humanist conviction that meaning is determined by literary and historical context (see Com. Ps 27:11; Com. Ps 5:8; Com. Ps 36:6; Com. Ps 97:1).<sup>13</sup> On that basis, Calvin rejected the Christological interpretations of certain passages in the Psalter (e.g. Com. Ps 50:1). How, then, are we to evaluate Calvin as a commentator on the Psalter? Was his exegesis too influenced by Jewish commentators? Was his interpretation of Psalms insufficiently Christian in method and substance?

#### CALVIN'S NAIVETÉ ABOUT MEDIEVAL JEWISH EXEGESIS?

According to Erwin I. J. Rosenthal,<sup>14</sup> in defending Judaism against Christian attack and missionary effort, Rashi and his successors, Radak and Ibn Ezra, had as their main weapon the *peshat* interpretation (or

9. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 127-151, esp. 149-151; cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 77-82.

10. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 149.

11. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 150.

12. David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Columbia Series in Reformed Theology; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). This is balanced by the subsequent chapter (ch.4): "The 'Christian' Character of Calvin's Exegesis".

13. The references supplied by Puckett.

14. Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, "Medieval Jewish Exegesis: Its Character and Significance", *JSS* 9/2 (1964) 265-81; Esra Shereshevsky (*Rashi: The Man and his World* [Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996] 119-132) sees Rashi's work as a biblical commentator as done in response to the Vulgate and Jerome's sermons and commentaries on the Psalms. E.g. Rashi's long note on the meaning of the obscure words in the superscription of Psalm 9 (*'almūt labbēn*) is probably a refutation of the rendering in the Vulgate (*victori pro morte filii* "victory over death by the son") (idem, *Rashi: The Man and His World*, 121; *The Homilies of Saint Jerome: Volume 1 [1-59 on the Psalms]* [The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Volume 48; tr. Marie Liguori Ewald; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964] 35-37; Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007] 204).

simple meaning) of the text. Rosenthal believes he has found evidence of a connection between their literal interpretation and anti-Christian polemic, with *peshat* specifically designed as a counter-offensive to the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> Following this strategy, biblical passages deemed “messianic” by Christians had to be shown to have a simple historical reference to David. According to Rosenthal, these Jewish commentators were willing to diverge from the Targums and rabbinic homiletical tradition (*derash*) if necessary to achieve this. The argument is, then, that their methodology was not neutral, with the implication that Christian exegetes (including Calvin) were naïve in equate the medieval Jewish “simple” (*peshat*) meaning with the “literal” meaning of the Old Testament.

It is questionable, however, whether the *peshat* method of Rashi and his school was simply the result of a desire to mount an effective anti-Christian polemic.<sup>16</sup> Rashi’s sifting and selection of midrashic material throughout his biblical commentaries reflects a desire to elucidate the plain meaning of the text (e.g. his comments on Gen 3:8) and is more often than not entirely unconnected to any possible messianic content.<sup>17</sup> A more likely explanation than that it was purely apologetic in motivation is that the *peshat* method reflected the intellectual currents of the time. Jewish interpreters were moving away from midrash at the same time as Christian interpreters were rejecting allegory.<sup>18</sup> It is reductionist to explain the interpretative methods of Rashi and his successors as nothing more than anti-Christian polemic or to say that Christian interpreters like Calvin thoughtlessly imbibed the methods of the medieval Jewish commentators.<sup>19</sup>

Rashi’s comments on psalmic texts need to be read in the context of Jewish-Christian relations around the time of the First Crusade (AD 1095-99) (e.g. Com. Gen 1:1) and are coloured by the massacres of Ashkenazi Jews in the Rhineland (where Rashi had earlier studied) in connection with that crusade. For example, in Com. Ps 97:1, he says

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15. Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, “Anti-Christian Polemic in Medieval Bible Commentaries”, *JJS* 11 (1960) 115-35, esp. 117-119. Their interpretation is not anti-messianic or anti-eschatological as such, for they fervently believe in the future redemption of Israel.

16. See Frank Talmage, “R. David Kimchi as Polemicist”, *HUCA* 38 (1967) 213-215, who complains about the recent tendency in Rashi studies to exaggerate the influence of polemic in medieval Jewish exegesis; also Michael A. Signer, “God’s Love for Israel: Apologetic and Hermeneutical Strategies in Twelfth-Century Biblical Exegesis”, in M.A. Signer and John Van Engen (eds.), *Jews and Christians in Twelfth Century Europe* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 123-49, esp. 126.

17. For a discussion of the criteria used by Rashi, see Avraham Grossman, “The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France”, in Magne Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Interpretation: Volume 1 From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300); Part 2 The Middle Ages* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) 334-336.

18. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) 149-185.

19. Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms*, 132-34.

that God's reign will be manifest when "he will take away the sovereign power from Esau and his progeny",<sup>20</sup> with Esau and Edom used by Rashi as epithets for the Christian kingdoms under which the Jews of Europe lived.<sup>21</sup> Rashi glosses Ps 102:7 ([Eng. 6] "I am like a great owl in the wilderness") with the words "So are we [the Jews] wandering continually from our own place [the land of Israel] to go about in the exile" (additions Gruber's). These words express his perception of the contemporary situation of European Jewry. Such comments do not render his exegesis invalid any more than Calvin's outbursts against the Papists require that we view his use of the psalmic text as tendentious. Rashi's response to Christian use of the Psalter was not limited to possible "messianic" passages, so that on Ps 49:6b (Heb.) he criticises "the Gentiles (= Christians) who rely on faith" (addition Gruber's), with Gruber classifying this as polemic against Pauline doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

#### CALVIN'S ACCESS TO AND USE OF JEWISH INTERPRETATION

Calvin was well acquainted with Jewish exegesis of the Psalms, but this was mainly mediated through the Hebrew Bibles of Sebastian Münster (*Hebraica Biblia Latina*, 1534-35, second, revised edition 1546) and Robert Estienne (Stephanus) (1545 Paris Latin Bible), both of which provided numerous references to Jewish interpretation,<sup>23</sup> and Münster's Hebrew Lexicon (1539), based on Kimchi's *Book of Roots*.<sup>24</sup> Other important repositories of Jewish interpretation were the commentaries on the psalms by Bucer (1529, 1532) and Wolfgang Musculus (1551). Calvin freely acknowledges the value of Bucer's commentary on Psalms on the first page of his preface, and in it Bucer makes frequent reference to Jewish commentators by name.<sup>25</sup> Calvin, by contrast, virtually never names his Jewish sources and tends to lump all rabbinic interpreters (ancient and medieval) together.<sup>26</sup> It is probably

20. Unless otherwise stated, the English translation of Rashi's commentary is that provided by Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*.

21. Max Seligsohn, "Edom, Idumea" in I. Singer (ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1925) 5:41; Com. Ps 144:4 and Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, 751 n.11.

22. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, 376 n.18.

23. de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 89.

24. McKane, "Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator", 250.

25. R. Gerald Hobbs, "Martin Bucer on Psalm 22: A Study in the Application of Rabbinic Exegesis by a Christian Hebraist", in Olivier Fatio and Pierre Fraenkel (eds.), *Histoire de l'Exégèse au XVI siècle: Textes du Colloque International tenu à Genève en 1976* (Geneva: Droz, 1978) 151 n.31.

26. E.g. Com. Ps 14:1; Com. Ps 42:2; Com. Ps 147:9. Calvin believed that the biblical commentator should strive to be brief and found fault with the verbosity of Bucer, see Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic", *WTJ* 47 (1985) 1-17. Salo Baron, "John Calvin and the Jews", in Leon A. Feldman (ed.), *Ancient and Medieval Jewish History* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers Univer-

the case that Calvin's knowledge of Jewish exegesis was due to such aids rather than directly extracted from a Rabbinic Bible.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin makes use of the Jewish expositors even when he gives no hint that he is dependent on or interacting with any previous commentator. For example, his discussion of the meaning of "Nehiloth" in the heading of Psalm 5, wherein he opts for the view that this is a musical instrument or a tune (cf. *RSV* "for the flutes"), is extremely similar to Rashi's discussion and conclusion. Calvin gives an almost identical explanation to Rashi as to why Saul is singled out from "all his enemies" in the heading of Psalm 18 (*Com. Ps 18* title). If he is dependent on Rashi or another Jewish expositor, he certainly gives no acknowledgement of the fact. Calvin connects Psalm 76 to the deliverance of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 19 and presumably knew that the Jewish exegetes (e.g. Rashi) did the same, but neither says nor implies that he has made use of their writings.

Calvin does not always identify the commentators with whom he is interacting as Jewish; for example on Psalm 7 he disagrees with the opinion of "some"<sup>28</sup> that "Cush" is Saul under a fictitious name, which is, in fact, the view of Rashi, who says that "Cush" denotes Ethiopian, which fitted Saul in that his deeds (but not his skin) were dark (Rashi is dependent on *BT Mo'ed Qatan* 16b). Calvin himself opts for the view that Cush is a Benjaminites sympathiser of Saul who falsely accused David. On Ps 11:3, in rehearsing different interpretations, Calvin refers to "some" (other interpreters not explicitly identified as Jewish) who understand "foundations" allegorically as the righteous priests of God, who are the pillars of the land, who have been put to death. This is Rashi's view, namely that it is an allusion to the murder of the priests of Nob, but Calvin views it simply as a metaphor taken from buildings. It is clear, then, that Calvin can be interacting with Jewish exegetes even when they are not specifically identified as Jewish.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin regularly disagrees with the Jewish commentators, and so, for example, on Ps 4:2 (Heb. 3) he argues that the vocative "O sons of men" is intended to humble those addressed, stating that "[he does] not agree with certain Jewish expositors [and Rashi is one of them] who think that nobles or men of rank are meant" (additions mine). Calvin notes that some Jewish commentators (as usual unidentified by name) view Psalm 5 as David's prayer due to Absalom and because of

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sity Press, 1972) 343-44; idem, "Medieval Heritage and Modern Realities in Protestant-Jewish Relations", in the same volume, p. 328.

27. This is the conclusion of Anthony N. S. Lane with respect to Calvin's commentary on Genesis (*John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999] 226-229).

28. Unless otherwise stated, the English translation of Calvin's commentary on Psalms that provided by the Calvin Translation Society (tr. James Anderson; Edinburgh, 1845).

29. Comparisons with Rashi suggest that other possible examples include *Com. Ps 31:1*; *Com. Ps 78:9*; *Com. Ps 78:28*.

the expression “bloody and deceitful men” (5:6 [Heb. 7]), think of Doeg and Ahithophel as the reference (Com. Ps 5:1-2). Calvin begs to differ and places it in the context of the earlier persecution of David by Saul.<sup>30</sup> Calvin shows an awareness of Jewish opinions on different psalmic texts but is not tied to them.

Calvin gives a largely negative characterisation of the Jewish commentators with regard to method and motivation. He delights in pointing out their lack of agreement on exegetical issues, so that in commenting on Ps 60:3 (Heb. 5), he says: “Even the Hebraist interpreters are not agreed among themselves as to the meaning”.<sup>31</sup> He complains about “the Jewish doctors” and accuses them of having “recourse to a very meagre subtlety” (Com Ps 11:1).<sup>32</sup> Calvin can impugn their motives; for example he notes that the “Jewish commentators” are all agreed as to what the words *bēnē ’ēlim* in Ps 29:1 signify, but rejects their explanation of what it refers to in the following terms: “but when they proceed to speak of its meaning, they pervert and obscure it by the most chilling comments”, and he rejects the view (which happens to be Rashi’s) that “the great men” referred to are the patriarchs.<sup>33</sup> Such criticism is, however, relatively tame in comparison with his invective against the Papists and the accepted mode of argumentation of his day that was often extremely vitriolic. As noted by Puckett, “the unambiguously Christian character of Calvin’s exegesis [is] seen in his criticism of Jewish exegesis”.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, Calvin at times shows respect for Jewish commentators, as in his comments on Ps 8:5 (Heb. 6). Though not condemning the Septuagint for rendering *’ēlohim* as “angels”, he translates it as “God”, with his stated motivation being, since it “seems more natural, and as it is almost universally adopted by the Jewish interpreters, I have preferred following it”. Calvin notes that “it is agreed among the Jewish expositors” that “[His ways are] *prosperous*” (Ps 10:5a) is derived from the root *hwl*, with the context supporting this interpretation.<sup>35</sup> This is typical of how Calvin often follows their expert

30. Other examples of explicit disagreement with Jewish commentators include his comments on Pss 15:4; 17:10; 18:1; 21:12; 87:1, 4; 116:10; 127:1; 132:3.

31. Other references to their lack of agreement include Calvin’s comments on the titles of Psalms 7, 16 and 120.

32. The reference is to Jewish discussion of the *Qere* (*nūdi*) and *Kethib* (*nūdū*) in verse 1b. “Flee” (the masculine plural imperative [*Kethib*]) can be used of David and his associates. Rashi notes that *Midrash Tehillim* applies it to Israel, but the feminine singular imperative form (*Qere*) suggests another understanding (“How can you say *to my soul?*”). Examples of strained interpretation (Com. Ps 27:9), inventiveness (Com. Ps 119:113) and subtlety (Com. Ps 36:7 [Heb. 8]) are noted by Calvin.

33. Calvin can accuse them of deliberately perverting the meaning of text (Com. Ps 109:8; Com. Ps 136:13).

34. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 82 (addition mine).

35. This is Rashi’s view (who refers to the use of the same verb in Job 20:21); cf. Com. Ps 23:4.

lead in matters of lexicography. Calvin interprets *dēbārīm* in Ps 112:5 as “affairs” (not “words”) (as does Rashi) and expresses agreement with the interpretation of David Kimchi, whom he mentions by name and characterises as “the most correct expositor among the Rabbins” This instance is not a little unusual, first of all because Calvin mentions one of the Jewish expositors by name,<sup>36</sup> and second, because he is in agreement with him.

Did the opinions of the Jewish commentators constrain Calvin’s interpretation of the Psalms? Calvin interprets “Sheol” in Ps 16:10 as referring to the body in the grave (not the soul in hell), and after finding fault with the Greek and Latin Fathers, he adds the comment: “it is better to adhere to the natural simplicity of the interpretation which I have given, that we may not make ourselves objects of ridicule to the Jews” and not get involved in a logical “labyrinth”.<sup>37</sup> No doubt Calvin’s critics would pounce on such a statement as an example of pandering to Jewish exegetes, but that is not fair evaluation. It rather reflects his rejection of patristic allegorising. He sought to adhere to “the simple and natural meaning of the text” (Com. Ps 45:6-7).<sup>38</sup> The appeal of a simple interpretation for Calvin at least in part explains and justifies his ready recourse to the Jewish medieval commentators. Calvin in commenting on the title to Psalm 72 rejects an interpretation that views the psalm as a prophecy *exclusively* of the kingdom of Christ, for then Christian interpreters “seem to put a construction upon the words which does violence to them”, and he adds: “we must always beware of giving the Jews occasion of making an outcry, as if it were our purpose, sophisticatedly, to apply to Christ those things which do not directly refer to him.” Richard A. Muller identifies as a key issue for understanding Calvin’s hermeneutic “how these seemingly divergent exegetical tendencies relate to one another” when Calvin interprets a psalm.<sup>39</sup>

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36. David Kimchi is also the only Jewish commentator mentioned by name in his commentary on Genesis (Com. Gen 3:1). See the listing of Jewish citations provided by Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, Appendix 5 (pp. 248-251).

37. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, Bucer states his goal is to give close attention to the historical context (*iuxta historiam*) so as to prevent the ridicule of the Jews, see R. Gerald Hobbs, “How Firm a Foundation: Martin Bucer’s Historical Exegesis of the Psalms”, *Church History* 53 (1984) 480-1. As an ex-Dominican, Bucer was influenced by Aquinas’ insistence that doctrine be based on the historical sense of Scripture.

38. For similar comments, see Com. Ps 17:6, Com. Ps 17:14 and Com. Ps 27:4.

39. Richard A. Muller, “The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom”, in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 11; ed. David Steinmetz; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990) 77.

## CALVIN'S USE OF HEBREW

In his commentary on Psalms, Calvin provided his own Latin translation of the text of the Psalter that differs substantially from the Vulgate and this is one indicator that he was working from the Hebrew text.<sup>40</sup> Another indicator is that he makes regular comments on various Hebrew words. His comments usually focus on the meaning of individual words (e.g. *bar* in Com. Ps 2:12),<sup>41</sup> but they are not limited to that. Calvin can also discuss the best way to handle the Hebrew tenses; for example in Com. Ps 7:1 [Heb. 2] he translates the Hebrew perfect verb as simple present ("In thee do I trust"), with the justification that context suggests continuous action. He can deliberate over the nuance to be given the Hebrew copulative *waw* (e.g. it is to be translated as a causal particle in Ps 7:9 [Heb. 10]: "*for* God searchest the hearts"). Calvin can rehearse the different possible meanings of the particle *kî* (Com. Ps 8:3 [Heb. 4]: "*When* I see thy heavens") and make an informed judgment on which sense best fits the context. He shows an awareness of the workings of Hebrew parallelism (Com. Ps 22:12). One thing that makes Calvin an expert commentator is his facility with the Hebrew language,<sup>42</sup> and given the paucity of language helps in his day, the Jewish medieval commentators were too important a resource to ignore in assisting the study of the Hebrew text of the book of Psalms.

## THE PREFACE TO CALVIN'S COMMENTARY

What Calvin sees as the purpose of a commentary shapes his production. It is not for showy display by means of criticising opponents or contrary opinions (see the final section of his preface). Calvin almost never mentions other exegetes by name, whether Christian or Jewish, though he constantly consults and makes use of them.

As stated by Calvin in his preface to the commentary, the book of Psalms chiefly teaches God's people how to pray, and the commentary that follows reflects that evaluation. Even before coming to the

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40. Peter Opitz, "Calvin as Bible Translator: From the Model of the Hebrew Psalter", in Herman J. Selderhuis (ed.), *Calvinus sacrarum literarum interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research* (Reformed Historical Theology 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 9-26; John D. Currid, "Calvin as Hebraist: Guarding the Sacred Deposit", *RTR* 63 (2004) 61-71; idem, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2006).

41. A further example is Psalm 7 in which particular Hebrew words are discussed in verses 4, 5, 6, 9, 13 (Heb. 5, 6, 7, 10, 14).

42. See the recent study by Darryl Phillips, *An Inquiry into the Extent of the Abilities of John Calvin as a Hebraist* (Oxford DPhil thesis 1998). For Calvin's attempt to appoint Tremellius, a Jewish convert and leading Hebraist, to the Academy in Geneva, see Kenneth Austin, *From Judaism to Calvinism: The Life and Writings of Immanuel Tremellius (c. 1510-1580)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 92-96.

commentary proper, therefore, we can anticipate that Calvin's emphasis will be upon David as a model of piety for God's people (cf. Com. Ps 25:17; Com. Ps 26:1; Com. Ps 34:5). In the words of James Luther Mays:<sup>43</sup> "[Calvin] expounds the psalms as texts that were written to teach the church how to pray, how to praise, and how to live".

In the preface, he explains that his own sufferings assisted him in understanding the complaints of David, for he sees David's experiences as paralleling his own,<sup>44</sup> so that "whatever that most illustrious king and prophet suffered was exhibited to me by God as an example for imitation" (p. xl). The idea of the imitation of David was no innovation by Calvin but continued a trend found in earlier commentators.<sup>45</sup> David can be a paradigm for believers since (for Calvin) the covenant in the Old Testament is the same as in the New (with similarities between the two dispensations outweighing differences).<sup>46</sup> In an extended section of autobiographical character, Calvin provides a potted history of his ministry and its troubles, especially the difficulties caused by those who opposed and slandered him, so that he can say, like David, "[he has] been assailed on all sides" (p. xliv). This perspective profoundly influences Calvin's treatment of the psalms, so that "it is the correspondence between David, Calvin, and Christian that lies at the center of Calvin's hermeneutic, especially when he deals with the psalms composed in the first person".<sup>47</sup> All this suggests to the reader of the preface that Calvin in his exposition will not simply mine the Psalter for messianic prophecies.

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43. This is discussed in a most interesting way by James L. Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: The Preface as Introduction", in Patrick D. Miller and Gene M. Tucker (eds.), *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 85-93, esp. p.89 (addition mine); first published in Timothy George (ed.), *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).

44. Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) 194: "[Calvin considered David] his own nearest counterpart in the Bible."

45. See Edward A. Gosselin, *The King's Progress to Jerusalem: Some Interpretations of David during the Reformation Period and Their Patristic and Medieval Background* (Malibu CA: Undena, 1976) 5-6, 69-70.

46. For the relation between the Testaments, see *Inst.* II.ix-xi.

47. Mays, "The Preface as Introduction", 91. A considerable amount of autobiography can be extracted from Calvin's exposition of the Psalms, see Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought; Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 30-34. For the parallel between David and believers, see Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 36-37; Barbara Pitkin, "Imitation of David: David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24/4 (1993) 843-63.

## DIRECT APPLICATION TO BELIEVERS

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Calvin makes application to believers without any mention of Christ in his exposition of many psalms (e.g. Psalms 3-7). Ps 2:7b (Heb. 8b; "thy blessing be upon thy people") assists Calvin in applying the lesson of God's safe-keeping to "his Church" (Com. Ps.2:8). In his commentary on Psalm 4, David's example of quiet trust is directly applied to believers. Likewise, when dealing with Psalm 5, he views a wider application to believers generally as implicit in verse 11b (Heb. 12b), with the wording of verse 12 (Heb. 13) confirming "that all the servants of God in common will take support to their faith from what [David] had experienced" (Com. Ps 5:12 addition mine). God's support of David illustrates his unchanging grace toward all the godly.<sup>48</sup> Calvin can move across the change in dispensation from the Jewish "Church" (as he routinely calls Old Testament worshipping community of Israel<sup>49</sup>) to application to the Christian Church without mentioning Christ.

At different points in his commentary, however, Calvin makes explicit what is always implicit in his discussion in which both David and Christ are exemplars for the believer. Commenting on Ps 31:5a (Heb. 6a) ("Into thy hand I commit my spirit"), after noting that Christ used it, he can say: "This is a general prayer, therefore, in which the faithful commit their lives to God". On verse 19 (Heb. 20), he writes: "By his [David's] example, therefore, he enjoins believers to..." (suspension points and addition mine). For Calvin, David was not merely "a private person" (Com. Ps 63:11; Com. Ps 41:9) but spoke "in the name of the whole Church" (Com. Ps 69:34). The underlying assumption behind these connections is "that under the person of David, there is here described to us the church, both in the person of Christ, who is the head, and his members" (Com. Ps 5:9), so that Calvin's exposition proceeds on Christian assumptions, even when these are not openly expressed. Calvin sees David's experience as pointing forward to what Christ and all believers (as members of Christ) will experience.<sup>50</sup> He explains that David's sufferings are relevant to believers since "in his own person, he represented Christ, and the whole body of his Church" (Com. Ps 109:1).<sup>51</sup> The principle

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48 Parker makes the important point that for Calvin, "God" means "the Father who is known only in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit", so that Calvin is never speaking of a generalised idea of God separate from his revelation in Christ (*A Commentary on the Psalms by John Calvin*, 13). There is no incipient Judaism here!

49 See de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 95-97.

50 Note the discussion by de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 103.

51 Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms*, 58: "David is a type of Christ and therefore a type of the church as a whole."

behind his argument is that David was a type of Christ (the head) and the Church (his members joined to the head).<sup>52</sup>

#### DAVID THE PSALMIST AS PROPHET AND TYPE OF CHRIST

Calvin does not assign all 150 Psalms to David (see for example his prefaces to Psalms 44 and 74), though mostly he does.<sup>53</sup> At times he does so, even when the psalmic title does not, see for example Com. Psalm 2 preface, Com. Ps 72:1 and Com. Psalm 84 preface. The first is an untitled psalm, the second mentions Asaph in the title and the third the Sons of Korah. This gives greater prominence to the figure of David in his commentary on Psalms than might otherwise be the case.

On Ps 2:8, Calvin remarks: "That David prophesied concerning Christ is clearly manifest from this: he knew his own kingdom to be merely as shadow",<sup>54</sup> so that this verse is viewed as a conscious prophecy, with David being aware of his position as a type. Another such example is Ps 110:1: "In this psalm David sets forth the perpetuity of Christ's reign and the eternity of his priesthood" (Com. Ps 110:1). Calvin often refers to David as a "prophet",<sup>55</sup> following the lead of New Testament itself,<sup>56</sup> and Rashi does the same (but not for that reason!). Rashi refers to the Psalmist as "the prophet" (Com. Ps 48:10) when speaking of the future fulfilment of the prophecies of consolation in Ps 48:4-9 (Heb.). When commenting on the phrase "the joy of all the earth" (Ps 48:2), Calvin notes that "[the prophet] has foretold that which was at length fulfilled in the last time by the coming of Christ" (addition mine). He alternatively speaks of the writer of Psalm 48 as "David", "the prophet" and "the Psalmist", with this being stylistic variation rather than necessarily due to the contents of any verse of this particular psalm being futuristic in orientation. Usually when Calvin assigns David a prophetic designation it means no more than that the psalm is inspired Scripture.

Given the Davidic superscription of Psalm 63, Calvin (like Rashi) applies the clause "But the king shall rejoice in God" (Ps 63:11 [Heb. 12]) to David, but he makes the point that the welfare of the whole Church was wrapped up in his personal safety, with this being "a figure by which it was the divine intention to teach us, that our

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52 According to S.H. Russell, "the master-key of Calvin's exegesis of the messianic elements in the psalms is the solidarity of Christ and His members both before and after the incarnation" ("Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms", *SJT* 21 [1968] 42); see also Com. Ps 41:9 and Com. Psalm 109 preface.

53. de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 90-91.

54. Cf. Com. Ps 84:9. The metaphor of the shadow or sketch (noun *umbra*, verb *adumbrare*) is a key one in Calvin's view of the relationship between the Testaments; see the long discussion provided in Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, 56-62.

55. See also his comments on Pss 9:17; 10:4, 12; 14:4, 5.

56. Suggests de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 91.

happiness and glory depend entirely upon Christ". This argument depends on a typological connection between David and Christ as type and antitype.<sup>57</sup> Another example is Calvin's comments on David's humble origins (Ps 78:70), wherein he makes a connection between David and Christ: "it was requisite that the commencement of the kingdom of Christ should be lowly and contemptible, that it might correspond with its type". So too, their typological relation is noted in his comments on Ps 140:1, another Davidic psalm: "Being as he was a figure of Christ, we need not wonder that the agents of the devil directed so much of their rage against him."

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PSALMS

Calvin (like Rashi) finds in the psalmic titles clues to the context of the psalms for interpretation<sup>58</sup> and makes an effort to situate a psalm in its historical setting, most often in the life and experience of David. In doing so, Calvin is not aping Jewish exegetes (though their attention to historical context must have been part of their attraction for him),<sup>59</sup> rather it reflects his sensitivity to historical context when interpreting an ancient document, a sensitivity that was part and parcel of his humanist training and orientation.<sup>60</sup> A comparison of his biblical commentaries with his earlier commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* (1532) will quickly demonstrate that this is the true explanation.<sup>61</sup> For example, Calvin interprets Psalm 3 according to its title and therefore sees it as a prayer of David set in the time of Absalom's rebellion (as does Rashi). David's opponents are saying: "There is no deliverance for him through God" (v.2b [Heb. 3b]) because (as explained by Rashi) David had intercourse with another man's wife (a reference to Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah). Calvin conjectures that Psalm 4 refers to the time when David was persecuted by Saul, and in line with this,

57. Cf. Com. Ps 27:12; Com. Ps 28:8-9. Typology is fundamental to Calvin's understanding of the relation between the Testaments: "the gospel points out with the finger what the law foreshadowed [*adumbravit* = sketched, outlined] under types" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [2 vols; ed. John T. McNeil; tr. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960] 1.426 [= *Inst.* II.ix.3; OS 3,401<sup>21</sup>] addition mine). For Calvin's extensive use of typology, see Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 113-124 and Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, 202-205.

58. de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 91-92.

59. As it was for Bucer, see Hobbs, "Martin Bucer on Psalm 22", 152.

60. Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 1983); idem, "Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica: Scripture and the Renaissance Myth of the Past", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11/4 (1980) 69-85; R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation: Calvin's First Commentaries* (Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 127; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 98-108, and on p.102 Holder makes reference to Calvin's contextual interpretation of Psalm 2.

61. Note the evaluation of T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 49.

Rashi relates the allusion to mockery directed at David in verse 2a (Heb. 3a) to way in which Saul repeatedly referred in pejorative terms to David as “Jesse’s son” (1 Sam 22:8, 9; 20:30) (based on *Midrash Tehillim*). Both commentators view Ps 52:1-5 (Heb. 3-7) as words addressed by David to Doeg on the basis of what is said in the psalmic superscription.

In the case of Psalm 55, which is designated a Davidic composition (“A Maskil of David”) but provides no details as to when in David’s career it may have been composed, Rashi interprets the words of verse 4b ([Heb.] “for they bring evil upon me”) as alluding to Doeg and Ahithophel, and refers the words in verse 21 ([Heb.] “he sent forth his hands”) to “the villain, Ahithophel”. Calvin, on the other hand, having in his introduction rejected a setting during the conspiracy of Absalom, connects the words of verses 4 and 21 to the earlier persecution of David by Saul and his courtiers. The heading of Psalm 142 (verse 1 in Hebrew) suggests to Rashi that the psalm comes from the occasion “when [David] cut off ‘the corner of Saul’s cloak’” (1 Sam 24:4-5), so that verse 5 (Eng. 4) “I have no friend” is glossed “there is no one among all of Saul’s servants, who might prevent him [from injuring me]” (addition Gruber’s). The historical setting likewise shapes Calvin’s exposition of Psalm 142. A spiritualised Christological mode of interpretation that ignored the fact that the psalms were rooted in the events and circumstances of David’s life is foreign to Calvin’s method of approach.

#### HOW TO DETECT A MESSIANIC CONNECTION?

By no means does Calvin relate every psalm to Jesus Christ and his kingdom, but only when he sees a convincing reason for doing so. Therefore, he dismisses the almost unanimous view of “Christian doctors” that Ps 87:4 refers to Christ, for this exposition is “at first sight plausible from its ingenuity; but it is destitute of solidity”. In Com. Ps 88:5, he rejects “the refined interpretation of Augustine” (one of Calvin’s mentors when it comes to theology) because it has “no connection with the meaning of the passage”. A number of things may trigger a connection to Christ in his exposition of the Psalter.

The first trigger is the use of a psalmic passage in the New Testament (see the section below). In commenting upon Ps 68:18 (used in Eph 4:8) Calvin says that it is “an incontrovertible truth” (*principium illud everti nullo modo potest*) that David’s reign typified the eternal kingdom of Christ.<sup>62</sup> This is an exegetical axiom because of Christ’s own teaching on the matter (Calvin’s preface to Psalm 110; cf. Mark 12:36) and the fact that this type of exegesis is demonstrated in the use

62. Russell, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms”, 39.

of the Psalter by apostolic writers (Com. Ps 2:1-2, cf. Acts 4:24; Com. Ps 16:10, cf. Acts 2:30; 13:33; Com. Ps 109:8, cf. Acts 1:20). But Calvin did not simply rely on dominical and apostolic use in making connections to Christ,<sup>63</sup> and indeed some psalmic passages are viewed by him as messianic that are not so indicated in the New Testament.

The second trigger is when the nations are referred to or mentioned as praising God. The joyous praise of the nations shows that Ps 47:1 refers not to the hegemony of David and Solomon, and "it follows that this language is applicable only to the Kingdom of Christ" (Com. Ps 47:1). In the same psalm, verse 8 is a prophecy fulfilled in Christ, Calvin's logic being that the foreign nations ruled by David did not accept true religion. On Ps 57:9 (Heb. 10) ("I will praise thee, O Lord, among the peoples") Calvin says that given the international auditors, "we must infer that David, in the sufferings spoken of throughout the psalm, represented Christ". Calvin sees the words "To thee all flesh shall come" (Ps 65:2 [Heb. 3]) as "a prediction of Christ's future kingdom", with the universal dimensions of the homage being decisive for a messianic interpretation. Calvin views Psalm 67 as predicting Christ's kingdom extending to the nations, as he usually does when the nations are in view in this way.<sup>64</sup>

The third trigger is when the figure of David as king is featured, whom Calvin regularly designates a type of Christ (see above), but Calvin makes the connection of the words of the Psalter to Christ without refusing an original application to David. Virtually all the Davidic psalms are first of all applied to David; for example it would be wrong to interpret Psalm 72 as exclusively referring to Christ.<sup>65</sup> Muller calls this "a hermeneutic of multiple fulfillment",<sup>66</sup> wherein the one literal sense could have more than one referent. The psalmic text applies to David in a limited way, but the highest fulfilment of its literal sense is found in Christ.

The fourth trigger is the hyperbolic language of the Psalms that suggests that it was only fulfilled by Christ. For example, in commenting on the extreme suffering depicted in Ps 22:15 (Heb. 16), Calvin declares: "David here speaks of himself in hyperbolic language, but he does this in order to lead us beyond himself to Christ". So too, the hyperbolic language of Ps 22:27 (Heb. 26) ("All the ends of the earth shall remember") "beyond all doubt, shows that David stops not at his

63. For what follows, see Russell, "Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation", 39.

64. Other passages that can be placed in this category are Pss 66:1 (Heb. 2); 72:11; 85:10-11 (Heb. 9-10); preface to Psalm 96; 96:7; preface to Psalm 97; 100:1; 101:8; 102:22.

65. de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 99-102, 104; Russell, "Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms", 41. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is when Calvin applies Psalm 110 exclusively to Christ.

66. Muller, "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment", 77. This analysis is preferable to that of McKane, who views Calvin as positing two senses and moving toward allegorical interpretation ("Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator", 257).

own person, but that under himself, as a type, he describes the promised Messiah" (Com. Ps 22:27).

The fifth trigger is when the strict fulfilment of the wording of the text cannot apply to David or Solomon, for example "I will establish thy throne for ever" received only a partial fulfilment in the long Davidic line (Com. Ps 89:3; Com. Ps 72:7, 17; Com. Ps 89:28). The universality of the dominion promised David could only find strict fulfilment in the reign of Christ (Com. Ps 2:8). Likewise the language of Ps 89:27 ("I will make him my first-born") places David above the angels in rank, "in so far as for a time he represented the person of Christ (Com. Ps 89:27). Another example is the warlike phraseology of Ps 45:3 that does not particularly suit Solomon. On Ps 45:17, Calvin says: "This also is equally inapplicable to Solomon", for his reputation was tarnished by his moral failings, which is taken as an indication that it refers instead to Christ.<sup>67</sup>

Puckett views Calvin's typological approach as an "exegetical *via media*" or "mediating position"<sup>68</sup> between the Jewish approach that denied and obscured the fulfilment of Old Testament ceremonies and events in Jesus Christ and an overeager Christian approach that found Christ in every passage. Calvin disagrees with Christian interpreters who fail to pay attention to the historical context, and Jewish interpreters who fail to make a connection to fulfilment in Jesus in the total biblical presentation (which for Calvin includes the New Testament). Puckett sees tension in Calvin's exegesis of the Old Testament in relation to New Testament,<sup>69</sup> for he acknowledges both the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament which emphasises the literal, historical context, and Christian interpretation of the Old Testament which is oriented toward Christ. It is not clear, however, that Calvin felt it as a tension, for his focus on the literal sense is not something appropriated from the Jewish exegetes and in finding a connection to Christ in the Psalter Calvin did not see himself as diverging from the literal sense.

#### THE USE OF THE PSALTER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Calvin views the apostolic use of the Psalter as a reliable guide to its meaning,<sup>70</sup> and so he explains and defends Paul's universal application

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67. Russell sees this as an example of Calvin arguing for a typological connection using *both* the similarities and dissimilarities of type and antitype, with the danger being that the method becomes unfalsifiable and therefore invalid ("Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms", 43).

68. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 120

69. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 140.

70. See the general survey provided by Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 88-91.

in Rom 3:13 of David's negative description of his opponents in Ps 5:9, stating "he does not give to it a meaning of greater latitude than the Holy Spirit intended to give.... Paul, therefore, does not wrest these words from their genuine meaning (*a genuino sensu*) when he applies them to all mankind, but asserts, with truth, that David showed in them what is the character of the whole human family by nature" (Com. Ps 5:9). Calvin insists that Paul's use of Ps 19:4 in Rom 10:18 does not support an allegorical interpretation of the psalm,<sup>71</sup> and in commenting on verse 8 of the same psalm ("the statues of Jehovah are right") Calvin seeks to reconcile David's eulogising of the law with Paul.<sup>72</sup> In the words of Puckett, "Calvin believes he is able to preserve the historical meaning of the Old Testament while guarding the New Testament writer from any accusation of erroneous interpretation".<sup>73</sup>

Calvin knows that the New Testament uses citations of the Psalter in different ways, so the exegete is not to be limited by New Testament usage; rather he must interpret the psalm in its original context. Calvin shows that his interpretation of Ps 8:2 (Heb. 3) as referring to *speechless* infants is consistent with Christ's use of the verse in Matt 21:16, where he applies it to children who can speak. Calvin sees Jesus using an *a fortiori* style argument: "If God has appointed children even in infancy the vindicators of his glory, there is no absurdity in his making them the instruments of showing forth his praise by their tongues after they have arrived at the age of seven years and upwards" (Com. Ps 8:2). Calvin also seeks to prove that his application of verse 5 (Heb. 6) of the same psalm to all mankind is consistent with the christological interpretation provided in Hebrews 2 (Com. Ps 8:5) and likewise the application of verse 6 (Heb. 7) by the apostle to Christ in 1 Cor 15:27 (Com. Ps 8:6), which Calvin classifies as an examples of "accommodation". Calvin's judicious handling of this psalm is typical of his exegesis that regularly looks in *two* directions. He does not impose a New Testament approach on the psalmic text, but at the same time he defends its use by the apostles.

The use made of a psalmic text in the New Testament does not mean that it had no application in the life of the psalmist. Noting that the apostle applies Ps 14:3 (quoted in Rom 3:10) to those who live under the law (Rom 3:19), Calvin understands this verse as a description of the degenerate state of the nation under Saul, but then also defends Paul reapplication of verse 3 to cover all mankind (Com.

71. For the sixteenth-century discussion of this text, see R. Gerald Hobbs, "*Hebraica Veritas and Traditio Apostolica: Saint Paul and the Interpretation of the Psalms in the Sixteenth Century*", in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, 95-97.

72. Other examples of the justification and explanation of apostolic reuse of Psalm texts include his comments on Pss 22:22 (Heb. 21) (Heb 2:12); 24:1 (1 Cor 10:26); 34:16 (1 Pet 3:10-12); 51:4 (Heb. 6) (Rom 3:3-4); Ps 41:9 (Heb. 10) (John 13:18); Ps 68:18 (Eph 4:8); 69:9 (Rom 15:3, 5-6); 82:6 (John 10:34); 90:4 (1 Pet 3:8).

73. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 94.

Psalms 14:2-3). Calvin notes that from Ps 16:10 “Peter justly concludes (Acts ii. 30) that David could not have gloried in this manner but by the spirit of prophecy” (Com. Ps 16:10) and so he anticipated the work of Christ. Though concurring with Peter (Acts 2:30) and Paul (13:33) that the verse applies fully to Christ alone, Calvin sees David as “assuring himself of exemption from the dominion of death by right, seeing Christ, by rising from the dead, obtained immortality not for himself individually, but for us all”.

Calvin’s pattern is to expound a psalm in its Old Testament context, but then to argue for the essential compatibility of the Old Testament and New Testament usage. So for example, he first of all expounds Ps 40:7 (Heb. 8) without reference to apostolic reuse, but goes on to note that “[t]he Apostle, in Heb. x. 5, seems to wrest [*torquere*] this place, when he restricts what is spoken of all the elect to Christ alone, . . . he infers from them more than David intended to teach” (Com. Ps 40:7). Paul uses the Psalm text to abrogate sacrifices and he quotes and uses the Septuagintal version that differs from the Hebrew in significant ways. Calvin takes up each of these three issues in turn: (1) David does inevitably speak of Christ, who is the head of the whole body of the Church; (2) the abolition of sacrifices is something that can validly be inferred from what David says;<sup>74</sup> (3) the Greek text that has “body” simply extends the apostle’s argument already made in the epistle.

Calvin does not, however, read back New Testament application and usage into the psalm itself. Calvin comments on the apostolic use of Ps 95:8-11 in Hebrews 3 and 4, saying that the apostle does not pretend to expound the whole passage but dwells on two words: “today” and “rest”. It is no problem that the apostle quotes from Greek text (cf. Com Ps 8:5). “The Apostle next reasons from the *rest*, to an extent which we are not to suppose that the words of the Psalmist themselves warrant” (Com. Ps 95:11). That is, Paul extends the argument further, though Calvin’s exposition assumes and implies that this is a valid extension and reapplication.

#### COMMENTS ON REPRESENTATIVE MESSIANIC PSALMS<sup>75</sup>

##### 1. Psalm 2

Calvin ascribes the untitled second Psalm to David and first of all applies it to David’s own situation. That having been insisted on, however, Calvin goes on to claim that in all this David was a type of Christ and prophesied concerning Christ. Psalm 2 is an actual prophecy of Christ, as evidenced by Acts 4:25-26. In Ps 2:7 (“You are

74. Rashi on verse 6a (Heb. 7a) takes quite a different line of argumentation, seeing it as a matter of timing, namely that instructions about sacrifices post-date the giving of the law (Exod 19:5).

75. For reasons of space, I will limit my analysis to just three psalms.

my son, today I have begotten you”), David under the spirit of prophecy has special reference to Christ. Calvin notes that David could with propriety be called the son of God on account of his royal dignity, but then provides an extensive discussion on the sense of the words “Son” and “I have begotten you” as applied to Christ (assisted by Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5 and Rom 1:4). Psalm 2:8 (“the nations...the ends of the earth”) cannot apply to David’s tiny kingdom. With regard to 2:9, Calvin writes: “[o]f this unconquerable power in war God exhibited a specimen, primarily in the person of David who, as we know, vanquished and overthrew many enemies by force of arms. But the prediction is more fully verified in Christ”. Calvin opts for the view that *bar* (2:12) is the Aramaic word “son”, seeing the interpretation that it refers to “pure doctrine” as forced. Calvin does not have Jewish interpreters in his sights at this point,<sup>76</sup> and in contrast, say to Nicholas de Lyra, he does not specifically combat the arguments of Rashi on Psalm 2.<sup>77</sup>

In all this, Calvin is no prisoner of the medieval Jewish exegetes, as a comparison and contrast with Rashi’s exposition demonstrates. Rashi explicitly rejects traditional rabbinic interpretation (*derash*) (*BT Berakot* 7b) that saw Psalm 2 as referring to the King Messiah, and he states that according to its literal meaning and as a challenge to the Christians (*minim*)<sup>78</sup> the correct interpretation is that it is a reference to David himself and fits within the narrative of 2 Samuel 5, a text that refers to David’s anointing as king (v.17: “When the Philistines heard that Israel had anointed David as king over them”).<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, the designation “his anointed” (2:2) is merely a synonym for *melek* (“king”), and the nations concerned are the Philistines alluded to in 2 Samuel 5 and 1 Sam 2:4.<sup>80</sup> The first-person references in the psalm are to David (2:7), with the divine pronouncement of 2:7 coming through the prophetic agency of Nathan, Gad and Samuel, who are also featured in 2 Samuel. In this verse, “son” means “the head of Israel”,

76. Rashi interprets verse 12 as “Arm yourselves with purity (*bar*) of heart”, deriving the key word from the Hebrew root *brr* (“to purify”), but there is no stated anti-Christian intent behind this view.

77. Cf. Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963) 176-179.

78. According to Mayer I. Gruber, Rashi attempts to neutralise Christian teaching in Com. Pss 2:1; 9:1; 21:2; 40:7-8; 80:16; 88:1; 98:8; 105:1 [sic 15]; 110 (*Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms 1-89 (Books I-III) with English Translation, Introduction and Notes* [South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism, 161; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998] 10). We can add Ps 49:6 (Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms*, 371, 376 n.18). This anti-Christian motivation is explicit only in Com. Ps 2:1 and Com. Ps 21:2. The alternate spelling *minin* is also found.

79. See Michael A. Signer, “King/Messiah: Rashi’s Exegesis of Psalm 2”, *Prooftexts* 3 (1983) 273-284, summarised in idem, “God’s Love for Israel”, 130-131.

80. “The Philistines gathered (*qbs*) their troops”, about whom David asked (in Ps 2:1): “Why do the nations assemble (*rgs*), so that all of them are gathered together?” Rashi views the two Hebrews roots as synonyms.

for the Israelites were called sons (e.g. Exod 4:22), as was Solomon also (1 Chron 17:13). The term “son” can be applied to Israel (collectively) as well as to David and Solomon, the unstated implication presumably being that it does not uniquely apply to Jesus of Nazareth. Whereas Rashi argues that Psalm 2 applies exclusively to David, Calvin’s view is that it both refers to David and is a prophecy of Jesus as the Messiah.

## 2. Psalm 21

On verse 1 (Heb. 2) Rashi rejects the rabbinic view that “the king” is a reference to “king Messiah” and instead finds a reference to David himself “as a retort to the Christians (*minin*) who found in it support for their erroneous beliefs”. It needs to be noted, however, that is not only in “messianic” passages that Rashi begs to differ from rabbinic midrash.<sup>81</sup> Rashi paraphrases the psalm in the first person (since it is a Davidic composition). He interprets verse 3a (Heb. 4a) as the blessings announced through Nathan the prophet (2 Sam 7:12-13), and the “crown” in verse 3b (Heb. 4b) is that mentioned in 2 Sam 12:30, the crown of the Ammonite king. The phrase “long life” in verse 4c (Heb. 5c) is glossed “for my (David’s) kingship”, namely, it is a promise to David’s dynasty on the basis of 2 Sam 7:14 (“for you said, I will establish his kingship for ever”). Rashi again notes that “our rabbis” interpreted verse 6 (Heb. 7) as a reference to king Messiah but does not explicitly dispute the interpretation, for he has already done so in his comments on verse 1.

Calvin in his preface sees Psalm 21 as carrying on the same subject as Psalm 20, namely a prayer for the people to pray for the king: “But above all, it was the design of the Holy Spirit here to direct the minds of the faithful to Christ, who was the end and perfection of this kingdom, and to teach them that they could not be saved except under the head which God himself had appointed over them”, so there is a legitimate Christian appropriation of this psalm. Calvin applies verse 2 to the intercession of Christ for his Church: “But as by the Spirit of prophecy the Psalmist has principally an eye to Christ”. He translates verse 3 (Heb. 4) in the future tense and rejects the view of “[t]hose who limit the psalm” to David’s last victory (i.e. 2 Samuel 12). Jewish interpreters are presumably in mind because the arguments refuted are so similar to those of Rashi. Calvin specifically states that the reference is not to the crown of the king of the Ammonites and that 2 Sam 7:14 is

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81. For example, in his comments on Ps 16:7b, Rashi notes that “our rabbis” interpreted it as referring to Abraham, “we [Bible scholars], however, must reconcile Bible verses with their contexts” as opposed to creative rabbinic midrash (Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms*, 230 n. 28 addition Gruber’s). Rashi goes on to apply 16:10a to David, who, since God announced his pardon over the affair with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:13), can be confident that God will not abandon him to Sheol.

not to be limited to Solomon but extends to Christ (Com. Ps 21:3), so this must be God's crowning of Christ. Calvin applies verse 4 (Heb. 5) to Christ, "the eternal King". Likewise of verse 7 (Heb. 8), he claims that "here it is promised, that the kingdom of Judah, and the kingdom of Christ of which it is a type, will be exempted from such vicissitude". Of verse 8 (Heb. 9), he says: "This particularly applies to the kingdom of Christ, which is never without enemies in this world". Without disputing its application to David, what is stated in v.13 (Heb. 14) is "only fully accomplished in Christ [as King]" (addition mine). On the other hand, the fact that David's kingdom was a type or shadow means that what is said must have partial application to David's historical kingdom.

### 3. Psalm 22

Perhaps as part of his anti-Christian polemic, Rashi interprets "why have you abandoned me?" (v.1b [Heb. 2b]) as composed by David with reference to Israel's future exile (and Kimchi and Ibn Ezra follow Rashi).<sup>82</sup> According to Rashi, verse 6a (Heb. 7a) ("But I am a worm") refers metaphorically to Israel as one person. In verse 12a (Heb. 13a) "many bulls" is a metaphor for many kingdoms, and the "tearing lion" of verse 13 (Heb. 14) is a figure for Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 16c (Heb. 17c) "like lions...my hands of feet" is explained "(i.e., my enemies hurt my hands and feet) as though they had been crushed in the mouth of a lion" (addition Gruber's) and Rashi compares this expression to Hezekiah's words in Isa 38:15 ("...like a lion, thus did he shatter all my bones").

Calvin in his preface to the psalm says that "[David] sets before us, in his own person, a type of Christ, who he knew by the Spirit of prophecy behoved to be abased in marvellous and unusual ways previous to his exaltation by the Father". That does not mean, however, that the psalm does not first apply to David, so Calvin says that in this psalm David "comprehends all the persecutions which he suffered under Saul" (Com. Ps 22 preface), which is the context of the psalm according to Kimchi and Ibn Ezra. Verse 1 (Heb. 2) is taken up by Christ and "shows, that although David here bewails his own distresses, this psalm was composed under the influence of the Spirit of prophecy concerning David's King and Lord" (Com. Ps 22:1). On verse 16 (Heb. 17) Calvin sees the scope of the discourse and the Septuagintal reading ("they pierced" [*kā'ārū*]) as "strong grounds for conjecturing that this passage ("like a lion" [*kā'ārī*]) has been fraudulently corrupted by the Jews (*locum a Iudaeis fraude esse corruptum*)" (Com. Ps 22:16) to deliberately suppress a Messianic

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82. See Rosenthal, "Anti-Christian Polemic in Medieval Bible Commentaries", 125.

allusion and, partially following the Septuagint, he restores what he regards as the original Hebrew text: "They have pierced my hands and feet".<sup>83</sup> Calvin uses strong language,<sup>84</sup> though nothing he says is specifically directed at the medieval Jewish interpreters. Rashi, for his part, makes no mention of Christian views on this verse and may only be explaining what is on any reckoning a cryptic verse in the Masoretic Text. Even with regard to verse 16, however, Calvin explains how it can apply to David, with the piercing of hands and feet being a striking "similitude" (*metaphorice*) used by David of the oppression he suffered from his enemies. The New Testament use of verse 18 (Heb. 19) was to "teach us the more certainly that in this psalm Christ is described to us by the Spirit of prophecy, the heavenly Father intended that in the person of his Son those things should be visibly accomplished which were shadowed forth [*adumbrata*] in David". On verse 22, Calvin reiterates "under the figure [*typo*] of David, Christ has been here shadowed forth [*adumbratum*] to us".

#### CONCLUSIONS

This survey of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms has helped to clarify his method of approach with respect to earlier Christian and Jewish exposition of the Psalter. As far as we can tell, his knowledge of the writings of the medieval Jewish interpreters was largely second-hand, through the mediation of earlier Christian exegetes (notably Bucer), who had already interacted with Jewish views, so that Calvin cannot be accused of bypassing Christian scholarship. He viewed Rashi and his successors as a valuable resource for understanding the Hebrew text because of their expertise in lexicography. When it comes to Jewish exegesis of the Psalms, Calvin was neither uncritical nor hypercritical. Comparison with the exegetical efforts of Rashi shows that Calvin was no prisoner to Jewish opinion. He was ready to disagree with the methods, motives and conclusions of Jewish exegetes, but he did not reject a view just because it was put forward by a Jewish commentator. Nor did he accept a view just because it was that of a Christian exegete, too many of whom simply mined the Psalter for messianic prophecies. The detection of a messianic connection required some trigger, one such trigger being the apostolic use of a psalm. As stated by de Greef, "in his method of interpreting

83. McKane, "Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator", 252.

84. He reflected contemporary belief that the Jews had tampered with the Hebrew text to undermine Christian apologetic use of key texts, see William McKane, *Selected Christian Hebraists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 94 on this text; also Werner Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation: Some Reformation Controversies and Their Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955) 63-64. Calvin's response is much stronger than Bucer's, see Hobbs, "Martin Bucer on Psalm 22", 157-59.

the Psalms, [Calvin] seeks as much as possible to rise above the antithesis of Jewish and Christian exegetes".<sup>85</sup> It is unhelpful, therefore, to classify his approach as a "via media" or to say that there was "tension" in his method. Most often, Calvin made direct application of the psalmic text to the Christian and to the Christian Church, and he did so because of an underlying theology of the union of Christ with his members (both before and since the incarnation). Calvin gave the figure of David special prominence in his exposition: as the author of many of the psalms, as a type of Christ, and because David wrote in his capacity as a prophet (who made conscious predictions of Christ). Calvin's focus on the historical context of the psalms was not something derived from Jewish exegetes but was the result of humanist training and inclination. His first impulse was to relate a psalm to its historical setting (usually the life experience of David) derived from clues in the psalm itself, and he saw no difficulty in a psalm having reference to David and at the same time being a prediction of Christ.

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85. "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms", 105 (addition mine).