

Israel in the Theology of Calvin — Towards a New Approach to the Old Testament and Judaism

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A paper adopted for study and reflection by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews" (1987), has led some to ask if Presbyterian Christians may have distinctive approaches to the subject, based upon their particular heritage. In tracing their theological roots, Presbyterians return directly to John Calvin, among others.

This reprinted speech asks, What impetus to a new approach to the Old Testament and Judaism stems from Calvin. The address was given on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Neukirchener Verlag, a publisher notable for making available Calvin's works, Old Testament biblical commentaries, and materials on the Church and Israel (related to Christian-Jewish dialogue).

Calvin as Interpreter of the Old Testament

The great commentaries are the evidence. During his lifetime Calvin devoted himself to Old Testament research. The interpretations, which show a breadth of philological and historical scholarship which can only be guessed at in translation, are distinguished by a strict exegetical study of the original Hebrew text, carried out in the spirit of Humanism. We know today that Calvin was not content, as for instance Luther had been, to study the great Jewish commentators, Ibn Ezra (1092-1167), Kimchi (1160-1232) and Rashi (1040-1105) in the compendia of Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1340), but read them in the original and referred to them constantly. *Ad foitem*, to the source, was the watchword of the Humanists. Calvin searched for the source of the understanding of the Hebrew language among the Jews. They were for him the authentic language-teachers. So it is that the words "The Jews say here . . ." appear frequently in the Commentaries. One can say that the foundations of modern biblical study are laid in Calvin's adoption of the works of medieval Jewish scholars. I shall return to the specifics of Jewish learning.

It is in accordance with Humanist historical understanding that Israel is seen in its historical existence and explained in the context of its history. I shall need to revise this statement later, but for the moment hold to the tenet that Calvin, in fundamental and crucial stages of his explanation of the Hebrew Bible, shows himself to be a historian. This puts an obstacle in the way of the Christian custom and desire to annex the Old Testament to the preaching of the Church. The message of Moses and the Prophets is addressed to the historical Israel. Of Isaiah 6:10, Calvin writes that Isaiah was not sent to just anyone but to the Jews. The prevailing historical situation is determined exactly Calvin never loses sight of the fact that in the Hebrew Bible Israel's special destiny and mission shine forth everywhere and point the way to the people. The Genevan reformer explains in John 4:22: "The Israelites were singled out from the other peoples only because it was through them that the true knowledge of God should be spread throughout the world." It is in this sense that John 4:22 is to be understood: "Salvation is from the Jews."

At the center stands the Torah, the Law. In the river of traditional ecclesiastical interpretation Calvin stands out like a solitary rock. Time and time again there were attempts to follow Marcion's separation and antithesis of "Law" and "Gospel", to explain the Law as Jewish and untenable and, in contrast, to celebrate the Gospel as fulfillment. It cannot be discussed in detail here how far Luther succumbed to this approach. Calvin exposed himself to the message of the Old Testament and accepted Israel's understanding of the Torah. Through choice and covenant Israel is deemed worthy to receive God's Torah, to hear and to obey. To live under this Torah is no hardship, no slave labor, but a privilege and the embodiment of happiness. The name of God in all his manifest mercy and might is proclaimed to Israel. It says in *Institutes II*, 11:11 that it is upon this people alone that he has bestowed the knowledge of his name, so that among all peoples it belongs to them alone. He has, so to speak, laid his covenant in their bosom, he has revealed his divine majesty to them. In such words Calvin extols the unique privileges of the chosen people. For Israel was God's beloved "Son" (Exodus 4:22)-the others were strangers; Israel was hallowed by God-the others were apart from him.

In contrast to Luther, Calvin adhered to the Old Testament understanding of the Torah. This is most evident in his explanation of the Decalogue. Exodus 20:2, runs: "I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of *bondage*." *Institutes II*, 8:15 interprets this as God having freed his people from miserable bondage so that they may joyfully honor their liberator. Exodus is the setting free. The Commandments come under this heading. Calvin can say that, by his word and his commandments, the God of the Covenant leads the way to the *regnum libertatis*, kingdom of freedom. So it is that Karl Barth and Kornelis Heiko Miskotte, following in Calvin's footsteps, understand the Commandments as being pervaded by the cry: "Cleave to thy liberator, Israel!" When Paul, in Romans 8:2, speaks of the "law of the Spirit", it must be said that Calvin sees this "law of the Spirit" as being at work in Israel. The distinction between the letter and the spirit is not to be understood as if the Lord had given the Jews the Torah without fruit. It is, above all, in Psalm 119 that Calvin recognizes Israel's "law of the Spirit". Calvin has often been reproached for having, with his praising of the "law", brought about a new (Reformed) "legalism". But here a radical new approach is necessary. We all know the reproach of judgement that the Christians level against the Jews when they speak of the system of religious law. Calvin teaches us, however, that such judgements are not upheld by a true understanding of the Old Testament Torah. Calvin's theology of the Torah, in my opinion, opens up to the Christian a better understanding of the Jewish piety of the Torah. It breaks down the barriers erected by a traditional prejudice. I consider it worthy of note that in the Reformed congregations of the Netherlands, which are stamped with Calvinistic theology, there is a much greater openness and lack of prejudice towards the Jews than there is amongst us. But here it is not a matter of denominational characteristics but of faithfulness to the biblical word and an understanding of the Torah freed from prejudice, as is accepted today in Old Testament scholarship, especially in the work of Gerhard von Rad.

Church and Israel

I have tried to show that Calvin's historical understanding, stamped with the imprint of Humanism, rejects the "pocketing" of the Old Testament so that Israel is distanced from the Church. However, this immediately poses questions. What connects the Church with Israel? What motivates the interest of the New Testament community in the Old Testament? Above all ecclesiological attempts to answer

these questions, consideration must be given to the messianic-Christological argument. Jesus as Christ links the Church to Israel. More precisely, Calvin tells us that the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, as the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of the Church, established the community of the Church with Israel, God's people of the Old Testament. The dual emphasis on Jesus as "true" Jew and as Messiah of Israel is defined more sharply than is usual in the Christian tradition. Calvin's Christology is determined by the Old Testament messianic learning, above all in the *triplex-munus* teaching to be found in Question 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism: as Messiah, Lord's anointed, Jesus is the ultimate prophet, priest and king, who spreads his charisma to the Christians and permits them to participate in his messianic gifts. In Christ is the confirmation and fulfillment of the prophecies and promise of the Old Testament. Augustine teaches: "*Christus universae scripturae scopus est.*" Christ is the glass through which we view the whole of scripture. The Reformers, including Calvin, subscribed to this thesis though with varying exegetical explanations.

In his interpretations of the Old Testament, the Genevan reformer is extremely cautious in the matter of the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. In crucial passages he deviates from the traditional Christian interpretation. I will quote two examples. First, Psalm 72 is traditionally given a Christian interpretation. Calvin, however, tells us that to relate the psalm without further ado to the kingdom of Christ is a violation. We should give the Jews no justification to reproach us for thoughtless misrepresentation in relating every detail to Christ, even those which have nothing to do with him. When and where in the Church has a Christian theologian in his explanation of the Hebrew Bible, ever acknowledged responsibility to the Jews or considered Jewish reactions? The reason for such consideration is the fact that Calvin constantly studied the Jewish commentaries I have mentioned. Second, the result of such intensive study of Jewish interpretations is the denial and repudiation of the so-called *protoevangelium*. In the Christian tradition of interpretation, Genesis 3:15 is seen as the first proclamation of the power of Christ overcoming Satan: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel."

Calvin learned from the medieval Jewish scholars that the Hebrew word *zera*, seed or descendant, can never refer to a particular descendant, but has a collective meaning and so foretells the boundless enmity between snake and man. I refer here to Calvin's commentary on Genesis, in which he says that, in his opinion, a real snake is meant and that this is not an allegory. Genesis 3:15 means that there will always be a state of conflict between man and snake. The collective term *zera* cannot be used to indicate an individual. The passage implies a permanent enmity. It follows, therefore, that the so-called proto-Gospel is invalid and that the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism are not, in this respect, observant students of Calvin, for they have resurrected the old theory that God himself revealed the Holy Gospel in Paradise (Question 19: the margin note refers to Genesis 3:15).

It can be said that through Calvin taboos were broken, since the Church had rendered Christologically taboo certain promises and prophecies of the Old Testament in order to bind together the Old and New Testaments. Where Calvin himself introduces Christological explanations into his interpretations of the Old Testament, then this is done with a messianic perspective; conclusions are factual and there is a deliberate exclusion of every allegorical or typological device.

It remains, first, to establish the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, as the Messiah proclaimed in the Old Testament, who unites the Church with Israel. But now the Christological arguments must be put into firm ecclesiological terms. In the history of the Church one finds repeatedly and right from the beginning the theory of disinheritance or substitution. This theory, which carries the weight of dogma, implies that Israel has broken the Covenant and is cast out by God. The chosen heir of the Covenant and all promises is the Church. From now on the Old Testament belongs to her. A substitution theory is formulated: the Church replaces Israel, since God has cast out his people Israel. That this explanation and the consequent actions of the Church had a far-reaching effect upon the relationship to the Jews is increasingly apparent to us.

Calvin's position in this matter is one of solitary and energetic dissent, for he maintains that God's Covenant with Israel is eternal and enduring. He who has listened and compared carefully must be aware that it is a solitary voice in the Church which ventures to speak out against a deep-rooted and established dogma. How does Calvin arrive at this unusual conclusion? In the first place, the interpretation of the Old Testament points out that in the promise of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-4) there is no mention of a rejection of Israel. Rather, it states specifically that the New Covenant will be with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. Second, Calvin refers to the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 9:11: "God did not cast off his people which he foreknew [chose]." Calvin, following Paul, in no way ignores the fact that Israel had broken the Covenant. But in his commentary on Romans he points out a quite different problem. It must be questioned if the Covenant which God entered into with the patriarchs could really have been rescinded. Even if the punishment of a people was well deserved, it would still be an absurdity if man's unfaithfulness could shake the Covenant. For the principle stands fast, that the assumption of filiation is an act of unrestrained mercy, not built upon man but upon God alone, so that it must stand fast and immovable even if man's disloyalty revolts against it. This knot must be unraveled if it is not to appear that God's truth and his singling-out depend upon the worthiness of mankind. Calvin states repeatedly that God's faithfulness to the Covenant is without end. Israel is and remains chosen by God. To contradict this destroys the foundations of salvation, which rest upon God's mercy and cannot be destroyed. The reformatory *sola gmtia*, by mercy alone, is rooted and established in Israel. That is, Israel is not simply, as the Church has sometimes claimed, a visual demonstration for the Church of God's faithfulness to the Covenant. Rather God's faithfulness to the Covenant remains for Israel historically real and concrete-to the last. This 'last' is defined by the Apostle Paul as being when all the heathens have entered into the Kingdom of God: "All Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). Certainly, Calvin does not properly understand under "all Israel" God's people of Jews and heathens. But his comments are relevant and significant. When the heathens enter into the Kingdom of God and "together with the Jews" meet in obedience to the faith, then God's salvation of all Israel will have achieved its end, and the Jews, as the firstborn of the family of God, will take the foremost place. Until the very consummation of "the four last things", Israel's prerogative as the first-chosen will endure.

Unceasingly, Calvin proclaims the dignity and privilege of the Jews, the first-chosen. He makes use here of a most important ecclesiological representation. God's people of the New and Old Testaments together fashion a unity, the *familia Dei*, the family of God, in which the Jews are the elder brethren. Had the Church, instructed by Calvin, so seen the Jews as the elder brethren in the same family of God

the Father-then all the horrors inflicted by the Christians upon the Jews might well never have come to pass: the hatred, persecution and denial of support and help in the murderous pogroms.

Calvin is well aware of the pain and sorrow of the divided paths walked by Church and Synagogue But he points out the new path and longs for it. In his commentary to Psalms Calvin makes evident the painful truth that Israel and the Church, Jews and Christians divided, praise God with the same songs and prayers. He longs for the ultimate consummation when Jews and Christians together praise and worship God with the psalms of Israel.

When it is a case of describing the bond between the Church and Israel, then the ecclesiological formulation *familia Dei* cannot be of assistance. But Calvin, especially in the *Institutes*, attempts another classification. We must discuss the implications of this. I began with the theological statement of the *ecclesia aeterna*, eternal Church, which indisputably belongs to the inventory of Church dogma. The Church exists in eternity. The great avowals of faith running through Old Testament exegesis read thus: the Church existed from the beginning of creation. The early fathers and patriarchs are the prototypes of the *ecclesia aeterna*. Israel is an integral part of the eternal Church. It is not difficult to understand that according to the dogma *ecclesia aeterna*, the entire Old Testament, including the patriarchs, Israelites and prophets, is collected up by the Church and classified under the heading "eternal Church." In the course of Church and theological history this has often been done clumsily, but always, as is self-evident, so that in the history of revelation, everything revolves around the Church alone.

Even Calvin could not escape the spell of the idea of *ecclesia aeterna*. But he adopted this idea in a singular and distinctive fashion, and certainly with reference to New Testament texts whose exact interpretation can be disputed. In a combination of Galatians 3:24 ("the law hath been our tutor to bring us unto Christ") and Ephesians 4:13 ("Till we all attain unto the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, unto a full-grown man, into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ") Calvin depicts the picture of man growing to full estate under the tutelage of God. The full-grown man of the New Testament exists in the Old Testament in *aetas puerilis*, in the simple, childlike age. He needs to be educated by the Torah or, as the Humanist concept has it, *eruditio*. *Institutes II*, 11:2 says that the peoples of the Old Testament have the same inheritance as we do, but in their age they were not yet competent to enter into or administrate this inheritance. The-same Church (*eadem ecclesia*) was among them, but they were still children, so the Lord kept them under his tutelage. Thus his spiritual promises to them are not made openly but are to some extent concealed beneath earthly promises.

Arising from Calvin also are the doctrines of salvation and tutelage which run through the Church. In contrast to the discourse on the *familia Dei*, emphasis is now on the identity and continuity of the Church (*eadem ecclesia*). To be sure, for the Christian Church the tutelary phase of the Old Testament is not simply outmoded; it must remain in operation so that the Church can acquire a better knowledge of Christ and an ever-new approach to the fulfilment of the Messiah. This is one of the arguments communicated through the New Testament. The other recurs in Colossians 2:17, Hebrews 8:5 and Hebrews 10:1. In these texts the institutions of the Old Testament are understood as *skia*, shadows of the future that is, of heaven. The Old Testament is interpreted in the light of this distinction

between eschatological or heavenly reality and the "shadows" cast before. It cannot be overlooked that here Calvin admits the Platonic "idea", if the New Testament distinction is replaced by the schema of Platonic philosophy of the original "idea" in relation to its subsequent image. And always there stands in the background, even in these variations, the "idea" of the *ecclesia aeterna*. In this way the approach to the Old Testament is regulated and made easier, and it is possible to appropriate the texts of Israel.

Clearly, this systematic dogmatic categorization differs from the Humanist historical approach to exegesis that I outlined in the first section of this paper. But the differences must not be dramatized or overestimated. Always, both in Humanist-oriented historical research and when following the pattern of "tutelage" and "shadows", Calvin seeks the "Word of God", as testified in the Holy Scriptures. He seeks the word of God in the Old Testament texts-the God who for him' the Christian, is always the God of Israel-in the unmistakableness of his holy name.

We must today distance ourselves critically from the manner in which the Church seeks to appropriate the Old Testament. For the most part this is nothing other than an often latent, frequently manifest "disinheritance of Israel." If in this matter it cannot be denied that there exists a conflict of impressions between the cognizance of Calvin's theology and the idea of the *ecclesia aeterna*, the positive and dominant trend towards the founding of a new Christian-Jewish relationship is unmistakable. And this is valid too, as regards the attitude of the Church towards the Old Testament. Time and time again, Calvin identifies the boundary of the historical and inherent existence of Israel, singled out as the Chosen One, to which the Church is opposed. If one were to ask him by what right the Church relates to the Old Testament, then it is not only the messianic perspective that would be valid for him but-as has often been stressed-the Covenant with Abraham which promises to share the blessing of Israel with all peoples.

If we want to clarify more precisely how the Church shares the path with Israel, as defined by Calvin in his commentaries to the Old Testament, then we can quote from Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*:

Forgetting and losing ourselves, we, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God's help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie, but holy, godly reality.

First, there is the question of linguistic usage in the context of representation. One needs to distinguish between a biblical and a post-biblical concept of "Jews" in Calvin's theology. Only after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 13 CE, when just the southern kingdom of "Judah" remained, did it become reasonable to call the Judaeans, the natives of this southern kingdom, Jews. This is what Calvin does, so that there is no distinction, and the designation "Jews" means Israel. This is all the more remarkable as Calvin also calls his early medieval teachers and sources, from Rashi to Ibn Ezra, *Judaei*, Jews, without introducing a distinguishing explanation. So often the biblical and the post-biblical designations stand side by side. This naturally presupposes, as has already been mentioned, that the Covenant with Israel is unbroken and is as valid for the Jews of the post-biblical era as for Old Testament Israel. They belong together: Israel and the Jews form a unity. This is, in the tradition of the Church, a novelty, a solidarity venture with an important outcome.

To understand the Israel of the Old Testament, to understand the Hebrew scriptures at all, Christians must learn from the Jews. They need to take comprehensive and deep-reaching "language lessons." For who but the Jews can teach the idiom of the Hebrew language? Christians are always tempted to explain the Old Testament in the light of their ethnic Greek concepts, and to interpret those unfamiliar opinions they have adopted by allegory, so as to raise them to a New Testament level. Calvin strongly repudiates such attempts and temptations. Referring to the Hebrew teachers, he complains bitterly of the foolishness of allegorical exegesis, to which even Luther was prone.

Let us take as an example the literal translation of a heading to Psalm 22: "A psalm of David to be sung in the style of 'the hind which is hunted at break of day'." Luther's version is "hind of the dawn." Calvin asks "the Jews" (the exact source is not given) what this heading could mean and is told that what is meant is that Psalm 22 is to be sung to the melody of a secular folk-song-a hunting song. One must compare this simple and factual explanation with all the allegorical mystery which the Christian interpreters have read into this heading, especially since this psalm contains the words of Jesus on the Cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." Luther takes "dawn" as referring to the forthcoming dawn of salvation.

What in contemporary historical research is no longer a problem was, at the time of the Reformation, an amazing provocation: the escape from the clericalist understanding of the world and language. Calvin, living in the first half of the sixteenth century, had scarcely any opportunity to meet Jews. There was no Jewish community or synagogue in Geneva. Dialogue between Church and Synagogue, Christians and Jews lay, after centuries of separation, beyond the bounds of possibility. Far more typical of the period was accusation from afar, like Luther's tractate "Concerning the Jews and Their Lies" (1543). It is, therefore, all the more remarkable to find in the writings left by Calvin and published in CR XXXVII, 653-74, a document entitled *A quaestiones et objects Judaei cuiusdam*-that is, a dialogue between the Genevan reformer and an unnamed and unknown Jew.

Unlike the famous *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*, written by the apologist Justin in the second century, Calvin does not conduct a fictitious dialogue, demonstrating the truth of Christianity by a distorted picture of Judaism. Rather, theological questions are put to Calvin which are highly relevant to the right understanding of Old Testament interpretation and the place of Jesus as Messiah. I cannot now discuss in detail the wide implications of this dialogue, but only comment on a few points. The questions put by the Jew and answered here deal with the well-known differences and conflicts between Jew and Christian and are obviously compiled by Calvin. I want first to point out two positive characteristics of this dialogue: first, Calvin emerges as an attentive and receptive listener, painstakingly repeating the point of the question, posing counter-questions and wanting to be fair to his "opponent"; second, the questions are dealt with on the common ground of the Hebrew Bible in exegetical comment and explanation. Both are, seen within the framework of the traditional methods, unusual and even, perhaps, exemplary. To be sure, the final passage of every "answer" is not to be judged positively. In the end, it is easy for Calvin, as he always stresses, to refute the objections to Christianity contained in the Jew's questions. Calvin will not concede that for the Jew (as Bonhoeffer once put it) the question of Christ remains undecided. For him, ultimately, all is enclosed and sealed within the context of Church dogma. Calvin also knows himself to be in the camp of the *ecclesia triumphans* versus the Jews.

There is no sign of a withdrawal from this position. He too, as was usual in the Church, charges the Jews with their "violation", instead of discussing with them the eternal faithfulness to the Covenant of the God of Israel, as he had in fact done in his theological theory.

But this statement still requires clarification. While in the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic messages of condemnation and judgement, the guilt of Israel is laid bare, and when in the New Testament the subject is the guilt of the Jews, the Pharisees and the scribes, Calvin does not attempt to establish the guilt of Israel and the Jews, to "fix" it upon them. Rather, he emerges as one who listens to the word of God in the Old and New Testaments; he knows himself to be involved in every disclosure of guilt; and he recognizes the urgent message to the Christian Church. This position is explained by the apostolic admonition "be not high minded, but fear" (Romans 11:20).

One cannot accuse Calvin of being guilty of that ecclesiastical arrogance and pride towards Judaism which has everywhere been characteristic of the history of the Church. Deep-rooted in Calvin's entire theology is the word of Paul: "It is not thou that bearest the root, but the root thee" (Romans 11:18). Israel is the historical foundation of the Church. On this ground is built the Church. This foundation determines every detail of the structure. The New Testament is to be interpreted thus, not as the perpetual antithesis to Judaism as preached by Marcion and his many followers, but by turning always to Israel, the foundation stone.

Here there should really follow a chapter on Calvin as a New Testament interpreter, which could show how Calvin's philological and historical learning demonstrates that the concepts and testimony of the New Testament are to be found rooted in Israel and explained in the light of the Old Testament. Calvin is "in modern times" the first exponent of an Israel theology of the Church as it is today fought for and defended by those who have entered into dialogue with the Jews and so begun to question critically the development of ecclesiastical dogma. I would mention here the new book by Friedrich Wilhelm Marquandt, *Vom Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie*, where he says that the basis of theology is the biblical evidence and continuing history of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Father of Jesus Christ with Israel and all other peoples. Theology acknowledges its roots if it acknowledges its part in this history.

Finally, I would like to consider the consequences of the encounter and the dialogue between Christians and Jews, arising from the certainty that the Covenant with Israel is binding. "For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance", says the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:29. Israel lives, to the present day. This reality determines the approach to the Old Testament and Judaism; it leads the Church into repentance and change and theology into a radical reappraisal of thought and study.

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