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**CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE IMPRECATIONS  
OF THE PSALTER**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY**

**BY**

**PAUL MBUNGA MPINDI**

**GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN**

**MAY, 2003**



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This dissertation entitled

**CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE IMPRECATIONS  
OF THE PSALTER**

written by

**MBUNGA MPINDI**


and submitted in partial fulfillment of


the requirements for the degree of


**Doctor of Philosophy**


has been accepted by the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary

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To Charlotte

My Wonderful Wife

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*Barouch Adonay!*

Paul Mbunga Mpindi May 2003

## ABBREVIATIONS

CChr      Corpus Christianorum

CCSL      Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina

CO      Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia

JSOTSup      Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series

LXX      The Septuagint

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation rehearses the issue of Calvin's Old Testament exegesis in the light of his hermeneutical approach to the imprecatory passages of the Psalter. The imprecatory passages of the Psalms offer an ideal place to examine the thesis that Calvin's exegetical principles shared elements of the late medieval hermeneutics, but also moved him away from late medieval exegesis toward a more direct application of the literal meaning of the text to his contemporary situation.

Our analysis of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecatory passages of the Psalter reveals that the Reformer of Geneva followed a three-pronged approach: With traditional and sixteenth-century commentators, Calvin read the imprecations of the Psalter historically. Calvin acknowledges that on the historical-literal level, the imprecations of the Psalter are prayers offered to the God of the covenant by David, the chosen King, and by Israel, the elected people of God. These prayers, although harsh and gruesome, are directed against historical enemies. In the individual Psalms, the imprecations are voiced against Saul and his followers, and Absalom and his conjuration. In the communal Psalms, the imprecations are directed against the nations opposed to the existence of Israel, as the elected people of God.

On the tropological level, Calvin continues the traditional exegesis' insistence on the need for believers to refrain from self-vindication. Following traditional and sixteenth-century biblical commentators, Calvin argues that the imprecations of the Psalter are not the expression of David's vindictiveness. But they are David's expression



of faith in divine justice as expressed through his providence. Calvin encourages believers to renounce self-vengeance and entrust their cause to God's providence.

On the spiritual level, Calvin distances himself from the traditional prophetic Christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter. Calvin disagrees with the traditional understanding of the imprecations of the Psalter as prophecies forecasting the future and eschatological demise of the enemies of David and of Christ. Instead, using the biblical doctrine of divine providence as a hermeneutical key, Calvin follows a theological reading that emphasizes the continuity between the manifestation of God's providence and judgment against David's historical enemies and his providence and judgment against the enemies of believers in sixteenth-century Geneva. Calvin's use of David as a paradigm of faith for his sixteenth-century readers allows him to bypass the traditional eschatological-Christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter. Thus, Calvin's hermeneutics uses the traditional historical and tropological reading as a "springboard" for his theological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter. The doctrine of divine providence, developed in the *Institutes*, functions as the hermeneutical key for Calvin's understanding of the imprecations of the Psalter.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: CALVIN'S EXEGESIS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

#### 1. Calvin and the Imprecations of the Psalter : A Proposal

Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter offers an ideal place to examine the thesis that Calvin's exegetical principles shared elements of the late medieval hermeneutics, but also moved him away from late-medieval exegesis toward a more direct application of the literal meaning of the text to his contemporary situation. Not only does Calvin himself point toward this pattern of interpretation in several prefaces to his Old Testament commentaries,<sup>1</sup> it is also the case that the imprecations of the Psalter make heavy demands on the exegete (particularly in terms of contemporary address or application) and thereby cause him to reveal his exegetical principles.

In order to achieve its goal, the present study is both descriptive and comparative. It analyzes Calvin's exegesis of the imprecatory texts of the Psalter both in the light of medieval exegesis and in the light of sixteenth century exegesis of the text. The study is

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<sup>1</sup> See Calvin's prefaces to his Commentaries on the Psalms, the Mosaic, Joshua and Romans. John Calvin, *Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in Librum Psalmorum* (Geneva: Oliva Roberti Stephani, 1557); *Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in Librum Psalmorum*, in *Iohannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. XXXI, edited by G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss (Brunsvigae, 1887), cols. 14-36; *Commentaires de M. Iean Calvin sur le livre des Pseaumes. Ceste traduction est tellement reveue, & fidelement conferee sur le latin qu'on la peut juger estre nouvelle* (Geneva: C. Badius, 1561), pp. i-vi; *Commentaires de Jehan Calvin sur le livre des Pseaumes*, vol. I (Paris: Librairie de Ch. Meyrueis et Cie., 1859), pp. v-xij; *Mosis Libri V, cum Iohannis Calvini Commentariis. Genesis seorsum: reliqui quatuor in formam harmoniae digesti* (Geneva: Henr. Stephanus, 1563), fols. \*iir - \*iiir; \*iiiv - \*v.v; *Commentaires de M. Iean Calvin, sur les cinq liures de Moyse. Genesis est mis à part, les autre quatre liures sont disposez en forme d'Harmonie* (Geneva: François Estienne, 1564), fol. \*ir - \*ivv; *Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in Epistoli Pauli ad Romanos*, in *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, vol. XXII, ed. T. H. L. Parker (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), pp. 1-10.

divided into four chapters: the first chapter provides an overview of the state of modern scholarship on Calvin's exegesis. The purpose of the chapter is to acknowledge the contribution of scholars to the field under study, i.e. Calvin's exegesis, and the need for a more focused analysis of the text (in this case of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter) proposed by our study. The following areas are covered: 1) Modern scholarship on Calvin's exegesis; 2) Modern scholarship on Calvin's exegesis of the Old Testament; 3) Modern scholarship on Calvin's exegesis of the Psalms. The second chapter gives an overview of the exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter, in the early church, in medieval times, and in the era of the Reformation, focusing on key Jewish and Christian exegetes such as Rashi, Kimhi, Augustine, Aquinas, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Nicholas of Lyra, Lefèvre d'Etaples, Luther, Bucer and Musculus as a general background for the study of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter. The purpose of the chapter is to discover the different hermeneutical trends prior to Calvin and to develop a paradigm against which Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter will be evaluated. The third chapter analyzes Calvin's exegesis of Psalms containing imprecatory passages. The purpose of the chapter is not to offer an exhaustive study of each psalm, but to analyze Calvin's hermeneutical patterns in the light of traditional and sixteenth century exegesis. The fourth chapter concludes the study by highlighting the characteristics of Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter, indicating the elements of continuity and discontinuity between Calvin and his predecessors and contemporary, and rehearsing the broader question of modern scholarship's assessment of Calvin's Old Testament exegesis.

## 2. Calvin and the Psalter : The Broader Issue

As argued by Pitkin, “the book of Psalms is perhaps the most beloved book in the entire history of Christianity. The high regard extended toward the Psalter by Christian exegetes in all periods . . . contributed to a tradition of interpretation that is quite possibly unlike the exegetical history of any other book of the Bible.”<sup>2</sup>

Almost all the great figures of the theological and exegetical tradition of the Christian Church have preached and commented on the book of Psalms.<sup>3</sup> The student of the history of biblical interpretation in the sixteenth century finds also that the book of Psalms was one of the most preached and commented on at the time of the Reformation. One finds an important number of commentaries on the book of Psalms, coming both from Catholic and Protestant commentators.<sup>4</sup>

Calvin, especially, devoted a considerable amount of time and energy on preaching,

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<sup>2</sup> B. Pitkin, “Imitation of David: David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin’s Exegesis of the Psalms,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 4 (1993): 843.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, First Series, ed. P. Schaff (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/Eerdmans, 1989); G. Morin, ed. *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarioli in Psalmos*, CChr. Series Latina no. 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959); *Tractatus sive Homiliae in Psalmos* and *Tractatus in Psalmos Quattuordecim Novissime Reperti*, CChr. Series Latina no. 78 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958); Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, trad. J. E. Strobant de Saint-Eloy (Paris: Cerf, 1996). For an overview of the subject see W. L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousands Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). See especially chapters 10 and 11 on “The Psalms for Christians: In the West until the Reformation, and in the East,” and “The Psalms for Reformation Protestants,” pp. 161-217.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Lefèvre d’Etaples, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1513); Wolfgang Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii* (Basel, 1551); Martin Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum libri quinque* (Strasbourg, 1529); Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos: 1519-1521. Teil II Psalm 1 bis 10 (Vulgata)* (Köln: Böhleau-Verlag, 1981); Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Psalms*, in *Luther’s Works*, vols. 1, 2, 14, ed. H. C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974); Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*.

commenting and encouraging the use of the Psalter in the life and liturgy of the newly created reformed church of the city of Geneva. Pitkin writes: "The Psalms were an exceptionally important book for Calvin. Toward no other book of the Bible did he direct the full range of his theological, rhetorical, administrative, and even artistic energy."<sup>5</sup>

Calvin's preoccupation with the exposition of the book of Psalms started with his arrival in Geneva. As early as 1537, under his instigation, "the preachers of the newly reformed city . . . requested that the Little Council introduce the singing of the Psalms into the reformed worship."<sup>6</sup> In his introduction to the Genevan Psalter, Calvin argues that hymn singing is one of the three key components of the Christian worship. With the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the Sacraments, hymn singing contributes to the praise and honor of God and to the edification of the faith of believers.<sup>7</sup> And Calvin contends that the purpose of the songs put together in the Genevan Psalter is to allow believers to sing God's praises in a way that is both respectful and meaningful.<sup>8</sup> But Calvin's interest for the Psalter did not limit itself to the versification of certain Psalms,<sup>9</sup> he

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<sup>5</sup> Pitkin, "Imitation of David," p. 845.

<sup>6</sup> Pitkin, "Imitation of David," p. 845.

<sup>7</sup> "Et à la vérité, nous congnoissons par expérience, que le chant a grand force et vigueur d'esmouvoir et enflammer le coeur des hommes, pour invoquer et louer Dieu d'un zele plus vehement et ardent." Jean Calvin, *La forme des prières et chantz ecclesiastiques*, in Joannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta*, vol. 2, ediderunt P. Barth, G. Niesel (Kaiser, 1952), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> "Il y a tousiours à regarder, que le chant ne soit legier et volage: mais ait pois et maiesté, comme dit saint Augustin et ainsi il y ait grande différence entre la musique qu'on faict pour resiouyr les hommes à table et en leur maison: et entre les psalmes, qui se chantent en l'Eglise, en la presence de Dieu et de ses anges." Calvin, *La forme des prières et chantz ecclesiastiques*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin worked on the versification of a certain number of Psalms and later entrusted it to Clément Marot, and after Marot's death to Beza. For the discussion see H. Chaix, *Le Psautier Huguenot: sa formation et son*

also preached and lectured on the Psalter from 1552 to 1556. He lectured on the Psalms in his *Congrégations* with his fellow ministers of the reformed churches of Geneva, before he finally decided, reluctantly, to write a commentary on the Psalter in 1557 (Latin) and 1558 (French).<sup>10</sup>

In the introduction to his commentary on the book of Psalms, Calvin argues that the Psalter is the only place in Scripture where right doctrine (orthodoxy) matches right practice (orthopraxis). For the book of Psalms, according to Calvin, is “une anatomie de toutes les parties de l’âme, pour ce qu’il n’y a affection en l’homme laquelle ne soit yci représentée comme en un miroir.”<sup>11</sup> As argued by Pitkin, for Calvin, “the peculiar excellence of the Psalms lies in their instruction by way of example.”<sup>12</sup> Psalms are fundamental to Christian faith, according to Calvin, because they help Christians to face the life of faith with realism.

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*histoire dans l'Eglise Réformée* (Geneva: Imprimerie Romet, 1907); S. J. Lenselink, *Les Psaumes de Clément Marot* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969); Théodore de Bèze, *Psaumes mis en vers français* (1551-1562) (Geneva: Droz, 1984); Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze, *Les Psaumes en vers français avec leur mélodies. Fac-similé de l'édition genevoise de Michel Blanchier, 1562* (Geneva: Droz, 1986); Clément Marot, *Cinquante pseaumes de David mis en françoys selon la vérité hébraïque. Edition critique sur le texte de l'édition publiée en 1543 à Genève par Jean Gérard* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995); P. Veit, “Le chant, la Réforme et la Bible,” in *Le temps de la Réforme et la Bible*, ed. G. Bedouelle and B. Roussel (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989), pp. 662-664; J. D. Witvliet, “The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin’s Geneva,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 273-297; R. Weeda, *Le Psautier de Calvin. L’histoire d’un livre populaire au XVIe siècle (1551-1598)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> See Calvin’s remark in the introduction to his commentary. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. vj. For the discussion on the subject see R. Martin-Achard, “Calvin et les psaumes,” *Les Cahiers Calvinistes* 40 (1960): 102-112; reprinted in *Approche des psaumes, Cahiers Théologiques* 60 (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1960), p. 9; E. Mülhaupt, ed., *Der Psalter auf der Kanzel Calvins* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1959), pp. 8-24; R. Peter, “Calvin and Louis Budé’s Translation of the Psalms,” in *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 193-195; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 29-32.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. vj.

<sup>12</sup> Pitkin, “Imitation of David,” p. 847.

Like the psalmists, Calvin encourages Christians to elevate their souls, following the paradigm of David, and learn more about their own frailty and their need for God's mercy and grace.

Now, if the study of the Psalms was so fundamental to Calvin's theological and exegetical work, one would expect to find numerous resources on the subject in modern sixteenth century scholarship. But unfortunately, this is not the case. Although modern scholars have recognized Calvin's exegetical activity as one of the most important sides of his life and work, they have often focused their effort toward a more general study of the principles of sixteenth century biblical exegesis instead of dealing with specific authors and texts. One finds a score of articles and a limited number of books dealing with the general exegetical principles and hermeneutics of key figures of the sixteenth century Bible commentators like Erasmus, Luther, Lefèvre, and in our case, Calvin.<sup>13</sup> A few studies

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<sup>13</sup> See for example D. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995); I. D. Backus and F. M. Higman, eds., *Théorie et pratique de l'exégèse. Actes du troisième colloque internationale sur l'histoire de l'exégèse biblique au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Genève, 31 août - 2 septembre 1988* (Geneva: Droz, 1990); Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*; O. Fatio and P. Fraenkel, eds., *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978); M. Ahn, "Calvin's Attitude toward the Fathers and Medieval Interpretation from the Perspective of the Principles of Brevitas et Facilitas," in *Calvin in Asian Churches*, vol. 1, ed. S. Y. Lee (Seoul: Korean Calvin Society, 2002), pp. 65-90; B. G. Armstrong, "Exegetical and Theological Principles in Calvin's Preaching, with Special Attention to His Sermons on the Psalms," in *Ordenlich und Fruchtbare. Festschrift für Willem van't Spijker Anlässlich seines Abschieds als Professor der Theologische Universitat Apeldoorn*, eds. W. H. Neuser & J. Selderhuis (Leiden: J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1997), pp. 191-209; "Report on the Seminar: An Investigation of Calvin's Principles of Biblical Interpretation," *Hervormde Theologische Studies* 54, no. 1-2 (1998): 133-142; R. H. Ayers, "The View of Medieval Biblical Exegesis in Calvin's Institutes," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 7 (1980): 188-193; R. Dykstra, "A Comparison of Exegesis: John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (2002): 15-25; 36, no. 1 (2002): 12-23; K. Fullerton, "The Reformation Principle of Exegesis and the Initial Breakdown of the Theory of Predictive Prophecy," in *Prophecy and Authority: A Study in the History of the Doctrine and Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1919), pp. 133-164; "The Reformation Principle of Exegesis and the Interpretation of Prophecy," *American Journal of Theology* 12 (1908): 422-442; R. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 1-17; "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete: Is There Anything New?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 178-194.

however, have gone beyond generalization in order to pay close attention to the particular exegetical practices of actual sixteenth century bible commentators and have shown the fruitfulness of such study.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, more needs to be done in this particular field before we can have a full picture of the character and practice of Reformation era exegesis. This is particularly true in the case of Calvin's exegesis in general, and his exegesis of the book of Psalms in particular. There is still yet a need for the investigation of Calvin's approach to the Psalter and the hermeneutic underlying his exegetical effort.

### **3. Present Status of the Research on Calvin's Exegesis**

#### **3. 1. Tendencies in Research on Calvin's Exegesis**

A review of the modern scholarship reveals that Calvin's exegesis has been approached in various ways. Three tendencies can be distinguished among scholars: 1) there are those who offer a confessional reading of Calvin's exegesis; 2) there are also those who read Calvin's exegesis in an anachronistic way, trying to tie him with modern exegesis; and 3) there are those who offer a more nuanced approach to Calvin's exegesis, taking into account the broader context of the medieval and sixteenth century exegesis. The following introduces some representatives of the different tendencies outlined above.<sup>15</sup>

1) In the wake of the nineteenth century most researchers approached Calvin's exegesis within the framework of their confessions. According to R. Blacketer, this

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<sup>14</sup> See for example the works of D. Steinmetz, S. Schreiner, J. L. Thompson, C. S. Farmer, R. A. Muller, I. Backus, and A. N. S. Lane cited below.

<sup>15</sup> For a recent overview of modern scholarship on Calvin's exegesis of the Old Testament see R. Blacketer, "L'Ecole de Dieu: Pedagogy and Method in Calvin's Interpretation of Deuteronomy" (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 1998), pp. 2-28.



approach resulted in the “vilifying or canonizing of the Reformer in accordance with the particular confessional stance of the scholar.”<sup>16</sup> This is particularly true in the case of the studies proposed by Ludwig Diestel<sup>17</sup> and E. G. Kraeling,<sup>18</sup> on the one hand, and by Eduard Reuss<sup>19</sup> and A. Tholuck,<sup>20</sup> on the other hand.

In his *Geschichte des Alten Testaments in der christlichen Kirche*, Diestel offers a re-reading of the history of the Old Testament in the Christian church. He analyzes both the exegetical and theological motifs found in the reformers’ works and offers some comparative elements. As to his analysis of Calvin’s exegesis, Diestel offers a fairly good assessment of Calvin’s approach to the Old Testament. But he does not hesitate, for example, to criticize Calvin’s positive understanding of the law. According to Diestel, Calvin’s understanding of the law represents a flawed hermeneutics of the Old Testament, thus, dangerous for the church.<sup>21</sup> But it is important to notice that Diestel’s criticism of Calvin results from a Lutheran confessional stance that objects to Calvin’s conception of the

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<sup>16</sup> Blacketer, “L’école de Dieu,” p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> L. Diestel, *Geschichte des Alten Testaments in der christlichen Kirche* (Jena: Mauke’s Verlag, 1869; repr., Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> E. G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> E. Reuss, “Calvin considéré comme exégète,” *Revue de Théologie* 6 (1853): 223-248.

<sup>20</sup> A. Tholuck, “Die Verdienste Calvin’s als Ausleger der heiligen Schrift,” in *Vermischte Schriften, grostentheils apologetischen Inhalts*, vol 2 (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1839), pp. 330-360. See the English translation of Tholuck’s article in *Calvin’s Commentary on Joshua*, tr. Henry Beveridge (Edinburg, 1854), pp. 345-375.

<sup>21</sup> Diestel, *Geschichte des Alten Testaments*, p. 242.

unity of the covenant of grace and the third use of the law.<sup>22</sup>

Diestel's limited criticism of Calvin's exegesis is taken to an extreme in Kraeling's study of *The Old Testament since the Reformation*. Kraeling analyzes Calvin's work with the presupposition that the reformer of Geneva was a pure biblicist exegete and theologian who "had little use for secular wisdom, but looked exclusively to the Bible as the source of all religious insight."<sup>23</sup> According to Kraeling, Calvin was so committed to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures as the only source of faith and religion, that he did not refrain from twisting the meaning of different biblical texts in order to suit his position.<sup>24</sup> He writes: "Calvin, while elevating the Bible to the rank of sole principle, was actually governed by a second principle—a doctrinal slant that grew out of a subjective choice of biblical material which suited his type of mind and his interest."<sup>25</sup> According to Kraeling, Calvin's exegetical and theological presupposition which biased his approach of the Scripture was "the idea of a God bent on his own 'glory'."<sup>26</sup> Kraeling accuses Calvin of Christianizing the Old Testament law. He argues that "Calvin Christianizes the Old Testament law to an extent that we would not consider historically permissible."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See the discussion on Calvin and the Law in F. Wendel, *Calvin. Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. P. Mairet (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), pp. 196-208; P. M. Hoyer, "Law and Gospel: With Particular Attention to the Third Use of the Law," *Concordia Journal* 6 (1980): 189-201.

<sup>23</sup> Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>26</sup> Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, p. 24.

According to him, Calvin “closes his eyes to the new moral values in the preaching of Jesus and reduces Him to the level of a correct interpreter of Moses.”<sup>28</sup>

As correctly pointed out by Blacketer however, Kraeling’s negative evaluation of Calvin’s exegetical and theological work is flawed because he himself ignores Calvin’s primary sources and grounds his attacks on incorrect secondary sources.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Kraeling’s attacks fail to take into account the sixteenth century critique of Calvin, namely that he Judaized in his exegesis of the Old Testament. Kraeling, in effect, assumes a Christianizing of the Old Testament and a Judaizing of the New Testament.

On the other hand, Reuss offers a more supportive analysis of Calvin’s exegesis. According to Reuss, Calvin is “certainly the greatest exegete of the sixteenth century.”<sup>30</sup> Reuss’s study of Calvin exegesis uses other sixteenth century reformers as foils to assert Calvin’s excellence. Against Luther, Reuss argues that his exegesis lacks both analytical and theological discipline and consistency. According to Reuss, Luther is inclined to let himself be carried away from the immediate meaning of the text. He mostly preaches rather than exegetes the text.<sup>31</sup> On Melancthon, Reuss writes that he likes to “dogmatize” and spends considerable time on key words (*loci*) and forgets to carry his exegetical task to

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<sup>28</sup> Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Blacketer, “L’école de Dieu,” pp. 6-7

<sup>30</sup> “Calvin est bien certainement le plus grand exégète du seizième siècle.” Reuss, “Calvin considéré comme exégète,” p. 236.

<sup>31</sup> “Luther est trop enclin à se laisser entraîner par sa plume facile; il est toujours en face du peuple, il sermone, il délaie ses propres idées plutôt qu’il ne précise celles du texte.” Reuss, “Calvin considéré comme exégète,” p. 237.

completion.<sup>32</sup> Bucer, Bullinger and Pellicanus are more verbose than precise and fail to present an objective study of the text.<sup>33</sup> Even though Reuss acknowledges the contribution of the rest of the Reformers for the progress of biblical exegesis in the sixteenth century, he still argues that they all ultimately fail to offer an objective analysis of the text. On the contrary, Reuss's Calvin is the exegete *par excellence*. He writes: "In general, Calvin knows how to observe right measure, and although his style captures the reader, he does not abuse his patience and strives to present the 'véritable sens' of the text and its immediate application."<sup>34</sup>

Like Reuss, Tholuck presents a positive analysis of Calvin's interpretation of Scripture. He argues that Calvin's exegesis distinguishes itself from that of other Reformers by its doctrinal impartiality, its tact, its diverse learning, and Christian insight.<sup>35</sup> Tholuck argues that Calvin did not follow traditional exegesis in its effort to defend certain doctrines through incorrect proof texts. Calvin offers a more judicious evaluation of biblical sources

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<sup>32</sup> "Mélanchton aime à dogmatiser sur des points spéciaux, il s'attache à une phrase, à un mot, les expose à fond et puis passe à d'autres pour en faire de même; il a moins en vue la détermination de l'enseignement donné que l'usage qu'en pourra faire le dogmatiste ou le controversiste." Reuss, "Calvin considéré comme exégète," p. 237.

<sup>33</sup> "Bucer, Bullinger, Pellicanus, sont en général plus prolixes que précis; tous enfin parviennent moins facilement à s'élever à une étude objective, la qualité la plus essentielle de l'exégète." Reuss, "Calvin considéré comme exégète," p. 237.

<sup>34</sup> The English translation is mine. The French reads: "Calvin, en thèse générale, sait observer une juste mesure, et, quoique son style captive le lecteur, il n'abuse pas de la patience de ce dernier et se contente le plus souvent d'avoir montré le véritable sens du texte et son application pratique la plus prochaine." Reuss, "Calvin considéré comme exégète," pp. 237-238. One wonders if Reuss' negative reading of the rest of sixteenth century Bible commentators is not a result of his effort to single out Calvin as the only "excellent" commentator according to him. Reuss fails to acknowledge Calvin's appreciation of the Psalm commentary by Musculus which offers a more balanced reading of Old Testament material both in their historical-literal and Christological contexts.

<sup>35</sup> Tholuck, "Die Verdienste Calvin's," p. 341-343.

in his exegetical and theological work than Luther, argues Tholuck.<sup>36</sup> He indicates also that Calvin's tactical approach to the Scripture caused him, contrary to the Lutherans, to refrain from harmonizing the gospel of John with the rest of the Synoptics and to write a commentary on the book of Revelation. Tholuck is impressed by Calvin's learning and his exceptional grammatical and rhetorical capacities.<sup>37</sup>

2) The second tendency in Calvin's modern scholarship is represented by those who try to read modern hermeneutical concerns into Calvin's exegesis. Two trends can be distinguished in this category; the first is represented by those who defend an anachronistic positivistic reading of Calvin and consider him as the forerunner of the modern scientific exegesis of Scripture. The second trend is represented by those who consider Calvin's exegesis as pre-critical, thus primitive and inadequate. Scholars like, K. Fullerton, H. Clavier, and H. J. Kraus, represent the first trend, and F. W. Farrar, and H. J. Forstman the second.

In his *Prophecy and Authority*,<sup>38</sup> Fullerton argues that Calvin should be "acknowledged chief among the reformers."<sup>39</sup> Although Fullerton acknowledges the contribution of other reformers in the field of biblical exegesis, he still argues that Calvin is

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<sup>36</sup> Tholuck, "Die Verdienste Calvin's," p. 341-343.

<sup>37</sup> Tholuck, "Die Verdienste Calvin's," p. 345-348. But as many of his contemporary, Tholuck couldn't discern in Calvin's exegesis important hermeneutical continuity with traditional exegesis as this study will subsequently show.

<sup>38</sup> K. Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority: A Study in the History of the Doctrine and Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority*, p. 133.

the only one, among the reformers, who actually applies the new discovered grammatico-historical hermeneutics.<sup>40</sup> Luther, according to Fullerton, agrees with Calvin on the historical interpretation of Scripture, but his exegesis is more christocentric than historical. Calvin, on the other hand, is totally committed to the historical interpretation of Scripture, which he described as the effort to discover the mind of the sacred writer.<sup>41</sup> Thus, for Fullerton, Calvin's commitment to historical exegesis qualifies him as "the" forerunner of modern scientific exegesis. He argues: "Calvin may not unfittingly be called the first scientific interpreter in the history of the Christian church."<sup>42</sup>

H. Clavier presents a highly laudatory analysis of Calvin's exegesis in his *Etudes sur le Calvinisme*.<sup>43</sup> Clavier's study is a reappraisal of Calvin and Calvinism in the context of modern secularism. In three sections, Clavier presents: 1) Calvin's thought (his understanding of revelation and its relation to the visible and invisible church); 2) his exegetical activity; and 3) the impact of the "Réveil du calvinisme" on the church and the modern society.

As to Clavier's analysis of Calvin's exegesis, he argues that Calvin's exegesis is characterized by its biblicism. According to Clavier, Calvin's exegetical activity is totally

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<sup>40</sup> Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority*, p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority*, p. 135.

<sup>42</sup> Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority*, p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> H. Clavier, *Etudes sur le Calvinisme: La parole de Dieu et l'Unité de l'Eglise d'après Calvin. Calvin commentateur de la Bible. Le réveil du Calvinisme* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1936).

embedded in the Word of God, the Word of the God who speaks to man.<sup>44</sup> And God speaks to man not in an abstract way, but through creation and especially through revelation (Scripture). But God speaks so that man may listen and answer with faith.

Clavier indicates that for Calvin, God has spoken and speaks to man through the Scriptures. That God has spoken means for Calvin that the process of revelation is completed.<sup>45</sup> From that point on, to hear God's message, man has to turn to the Scripture and listen to its preaching and teaching. And according to Clavier, Calvin insisted that the correct preaching and teaching of Scripture is done only if the text is interpreted historically, according to the mind of its author (God), and their human authors (the sacred writers).<sup>46</sup> To achieve his historical approach to the Scripture, Clavier indicates that Calvin received an adequate training in biblical languages, and used expertly all the linguistic and philological tools available at his time.<sup>47</sup> Because of his commitment to the historical reading of the biblical text, Calvin did not hesitate to diverge from many traditional interpretations of Scripture. Calvin insisted on the "autonomy of the texts and of facts, (texts and facts) that have their own historical dimensions and their own historical language, and the historical lessons they intend to give us."<sup>48</sup> Because of Calvin's commitment to the historical aspect

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<sup>44</sup> "Le point de départ théologique de Calvin, c'est la Parole de Dieu, c'est-à-dire Dieu s'exprimant et se communiquant à l'homme." Clavier, *Etudes sur le calvinisme*, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Clavier, *Etudes sur le calvinisme*, p. 109.

<sup>46</sup> Clavier, *Etudes sur le calvinisme*, pp. 115-140.

<sup>47</sup> Clavier, *Etudes sur le calvinisme*, pp. 119-130.

<sup>48</sup> "Mais il maintient ici, comme ailleurs, l'autonomie des textes et des faits, qui ont leurs circonstances historiques, leur langage historique, et leur leçon historique à nous donner." Clavier, *Etudes sur le calvinisme*,

of Scripture, Clavier suggests that he should be counted among the forerunners of modern critical exegesis.<sup>49</sup>

H. J. Kraus also gives a positive reading of Calvin's exegesis. In his "Calvin's Exegetical Principles,"<sup>50</sup> Kraus argues that Calvin's interpretation is guided by "the constant search for the intention of the author ... and has consequences for his methodology."<sup>51</sup> According to Kraus, Calvin's methodology is characterized by eight elements: 1) brevity and clarity; 2) intention of the author; 3) circumstances; 4) real meaning; 5) context; 6) going beyond the literal biblical wording; 7) uses of metaphor; and 8) the understanding of the scope of Christ.<sup>52</sup> Kraus indicates that these different elements helped Calvin retrieve the historical meaning of the text, not for the sake of historicism, but for the sake of the edification of the church.<sup>53</sup> Kraus insists also on the continuity between Calvin's exegesis and the exegesis of the Middle Ages. However, he argues for more elements of discontinuity between Calvin and his predecessors, because of his commitment to a more critical interpretation of Scripture.<sup>54</sup>

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p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> "Il paraîtrait fantaisiste de faire de Calvin un précurseur des méthodes, je ne dis pas des résultats de l'école historique-religieuse, mais on constate, cependant, que le souci des faits et de leur contexte historique, comme de leur contexte littéraire, a été aussi grand chez Calvin." Clavier, *Etudes sur le calvinisme*, p. 127.

<sup>50</sup> H. J. Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 8-18.

<sup>51</sup> Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," pp. 12-17.

<sup>53</sup> Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," p. 9, 16-17. See the criticism of Kraus's position in R. A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages," in *Biblical*



Against a positive reading of Calvin's exegesis stand the studies by Farrar and Forstman. In his *History of Interpretation*, Farrar presents a negative evaluation of Calvin's exegesis.<sup>55</sup> He argues against Calvin's biases, his vague view of inspiration, his intolerance, ruthlessness, and false view of the Old Testament.<sup>56</sup>

Although Farrar acknowledges that Calvin was the greatest exegete and theologian of the Reformation, and anticipated modern criticism, he still argues against his hermeneutical assumptions.<sup>57</sup> According to Farrar, Calvin's exegesis was biased because of his dogmatic rigidity concerning the authority of Scripture and his doctrine of divine providence. This, according to Farrar, caused him to bend the Scripture where it did not fit his presuppositions.<sup>58</sup>

Forstman also accuses Calvin of seeing in the text what is not there. According to him: "Calvin was free to read into a passage whatever might be necessary to arrive at a foregone conclusion."<sup>59</sup> But closer examination of Forstman's work reveals that his remarks against Calvin's exegesis are unsubstantiated. Forstman reads Calvin not directly from his commentaries, but through his own presupposition of Calvin's notion of authority.

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*Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz*, ed. R. A. Muller and J. L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 3-22.

<sup>55</sup> F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886).

<sup>56</sup> Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, pp. 347-352.

<sup>57</sup> Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, pp. 342, 346.

<sup>58</sup> Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, pp. 347-351.

<sup>59</sup> H. J. Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 106.

Blacketer is correct to conclude that: “since Forstman does not know the exegetical background or context, his judgment about Calvin’s supposed acts of eisegesis have little merit.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, a general criticism against the second tendency in Calvin’s modern scholarship is its repeated effort to approach both Calvin and other sixteenth century commentators with modern epistemological questions concerning history and religion. Calvin is judged favorably or unfavorably by these scholars, not because of the content and scope of his work, but because of the particular epistemological and hermeneutical preoccupation of his critics.

3) The third tendency in modern Calvin scholarship focuses on elements of continuity and discontinuity between the Reformers’ exegesis and the exegesis of their predecessors. H. Oberman’s work on *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*,<sup>61</sup> represents a first step in the effort to present sixteenth century exegesis and theology in the light of traditional theology (in this case the positive influence of nominalism on the theology of Luther). J. Preuss has also contributed to the positive evaluation of traditional material and their use in sixteenth century theologies with his work on *From Shadow to Promise*.<sup>62</sup> Preus’s study presents a well documented re-reading of traditional exegesis and its latent and patent influences on the exegesis of Luther. Preus presents both a “medieval” Luther,

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<sup>60</sup> Blacketer, “L’école de Dieu,” p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> H. A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1963); *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986); *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>62</sup> J. S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969).

who continues with the tradition of the *quadriga*, and a “progressive” Luther who evolves from medieval exegesis towards a more prophetic-literal understanding of the text. He argues: “With Luther, something different has now appeared: promise, or testimony, as Scripture’s normative, theological-literal meaning, together with faith as the goal of interpretation.”<sup>63</sup>

Steinmetz’s work on Luther and Calvin,<sup>64</sup> continues the trend of a positive re-reading of the reformers’ exegesis and offers a balanced evaluation of their contribution in the large context of medieval exegesis and theology. His “Ten Theses” on “Theology and Exegesis,” cut through the modern tendency to “fossilize” the meaning of the text in its original setting. Steinmetz argues for a more dynamic reading of the original text that takes into account the progressive aspect of divine revelation. He contends: “The importance of the Old Testament for the church is predicated upon continuity of the people of God in history, a continuity which persists in spite of discontinuity between Israel and the church.”<sup>65</sup> Scholars like J. L. Thompson,<sup>66</sup> R. A. Muller,<sup>67</sup> S. E. Schreiner,<sup>68</sup> and A. N. S.

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<sup>63</sup> Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, p. 189.

<sup>64</sup> D. C. Steinmetz, “Divided by a Common Past: The Reshaping of the Christian Exegetical Tradition in the Sixteenth Century,” *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 2 (1997): 245-264; *Calvin in Context* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); “John Calvin on Isaiah 6: A Problem in the History of Exegesis,” *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 156-170; “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27-38; “Theology and Exegesis: Ten Theses,” in *Histoire de l’exégèse au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Textes du Colloque International tenu à Genève en 1976, ed. O. Fatio and P. Fraenkel (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978); *Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in Its Late Medieval Setting*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968).

<sup>65</sup> Steinmetz, “Theology and Exegesis: Ten Theses,” p. 382.

<sup>66</sup> J. L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs. Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); “Patriarchs, Polygamy, and Private

Lane,<sup>69</sup> have all been working on this new direction trying to provide a balanced rereading of sixteenth century exegesis in the light of the broader context of medieval exegesis and theology. The contribution of these scholars is decisive, because their analysis is based on the actual study of the primary sources related to the exegesis and theology of the reformers.

This is especially the case of Schreiner's study on *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, that presents a holistic approach that analyzes Calvin's exegesis of Job (his sermons), in the context of the traditional (Jewish and Christian) and modern Joban exegesis. Schreiner argues that Calvin's exegesis of Job is related to the Thomistic tradition, and that his theological preoccupations are shared by modern exegetes. The theme of the perceptual *Götterdämmerung* in relation to human perception in general, runs through traditional, Calvin's, and modern exegesis of Job. Schreiner points out that while human perception in Calvin

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Resistance: John Calvin and Others on Breaking God's Rules," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no. 1 (1994): 3-27; *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, his Predecessors, and his Contemporaries* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1992); "The Immoralities of the Patriarchs in the History of Exegesis: A Reappraisal of Calvin's Position," *Calvin Theological Journal* 26, no. 1 (1991): 9-46.

<sup>67</sup> R. A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*; "The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*; "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament," in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. D. Steinmetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> S. E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); "Exegesis and Double Justice in Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Church History* 58 (1989): 322-338; "Through a Mirror Dimly: Calvin's Sermons on Job," *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 175-193. See also the contributions of I. Backus, "L'Exode 20, 3-4 et l'interdiction des images. L'emploi de la tradition patristique par Zwingli et par Calvin," *Nos Monuments d'Art et d'Histoire* 3 (1984): 319-322; C. S. Farmer, "Musculus and the Reformed Commentators on the Raising of Lazarus," in *The Gospel of John in the Sixteenth Century: The Johannine Exegesis of Wolfgang Musculus*, ed. C. S. Farmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 148-177; 223-229; Blacketer, "L'école de Dieu."

<sup>69</sup> A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

and in traditional exegesis of Job was based on God, modern exegesis of Job is characterized by “the increasing remoteness, absence, or inaccessibility of the transcendent. As a result of this remoteness of God, human perception turns in on itself and finally collapses.”<sup>70</sup>

### **3. 2. An Overview of Scholarship on Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament**

Few studies have been devoted to Calvin’s exegesis of the Old Testament. The following offers a sample of key studies that have contributed to the discussion of Calvin’s Old Testament exegesis.

In a chronological order, Baumgartner’s study on *Calvin hébraïsant*,<sup>71</sup> is the first and still the most detailed study of Calvin’s formal training in biblical languages and actual practice of exegesis. Baumgartner’s work is based on a careful analysis of Calvin’s commentaries, and provides a fair evaluation of both his methodology and exegesis. He lists six dominant characteristics of Calvin’s exegesis: 1) Elegance, clarity and simplicity of form. Baumgartner points out that Calvin refused to be polemical in his commentaries, and abhorred rhetorical fanciness. 2) Freedom to differ from both Jewish and Christian traditional exegesis. Baumgartner contends that Calvin refused to acknowledge unwarranted traditional proof texts from the Old Testament, used to defend Christian doctrines (in this case Calvin’s refusal of Old Testaments proof texts on the Trinity, and the virginal birth of Christ). 3) Explication of the text from its Old Testament historical setting

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<sup>70</sup> Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, p. 156.

<sup>71</sup> Antoine J. Baumgartner, *Calvin hébraïsant et interprète de l’Ancien Testament* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1889).

and from its theological scope. To achieve this, Baumgartner points out that Calvin paid special attention to the historical condition and milieu of the Old Testament writers and the political and moral situation within which their work was composed. But he also understood the Old Testament as pointing to Christ. For Calvin, Christ is certainly the end of the law (Old Testament), but one has, in exegesis, to travel the road that goes from the law to Christ.<sup>72</sup> 4) A careful and limited use of the messianic texts. Baumgartner indicates that Calvin abhorred any interpretation that pressured the Old Testament text in order to read Christ into it.<sup>73</sup> 5) Freedom to disagree with the New Testament authors' citations of the Old Testament. In the case of Matthew 1:23; 2:15, and John 2:17, for example Baumgartner argues that Calvin understood the citations not as predictive prophecies, but only as analogical.<sup>74</sup> 6) The research and preoccupation for an intelligent spirituality. Calvin did not only promote an intellectual understanding of the text, but also its spiritual and responsible reception.

As to Calvin's actual exegesis, Baumgartner indicates that in his public lectures, Calvin paraphrased the original text from which he preached and lectured. Commentaries were more elaborate. He provided a careful translation of the text followed by its literal

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<sup>72</sup> "Christ est la fin de la loi: c'est bien là le grand principe qui domine, pour lui, sa conception de l'Ancien Testament. Mais ce principe est continuellement réglé, dirigé par l'interprétation rigoureuse et précise de la lettre même du texte compris dans son contexte historique; il repose sans cesse sur une base assurée et il est rare que, pour le faire prévaloir, Calvin use de fantaisie ou de violence." Baumgartner, *Calvin hébraïsant*, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> "Calvin, nous l'avons vu, n'aimait pas les arguments de mauvais aloi, les passages dont on tordait le sens pour en tirer une preuve dogmatique qu'ils ne renfermaient pas en eux-mêmes." Baumgartner, *Calvin hébraïsant*, p. 41.

<sup>74</sup> Baumgartner, *Calvin hébraïsant*, p. 43.

(word by word) explication. And Baumgartner concludes that Calvin's exegesis is characterized by its tendency to "sermonize in the commentary and to comment in sermons."<sup>75</sup>

As argued by Engammare, although remarkable, Baumgartner's analysis often overstates Calvin's linguistic ability and exegetical independence vis-à-vis his predecessors and contemporaries.<sup>76</sup> For example, Baumgartner's position is inaccurate concerning Calvin's assessment of the citations of the Old Testament in the New. Calvin never disagrees with the authors of the New Testament, as argued by Baumgartner. Instead, he acknowledges their rereadings, but adds the theological aspect, which he finds important for a better understanding of the text. This is the case in Calvin's exegesis of Psalm 109 where he acknowledges Peter's christological rereading of the Psalm and its application to Judas in Acts 2.

W. Vischer's article on "Calvin exégète de l'Ancien Testament,"<sup>77</sup> continues the discussion on Calvin's exegetical principles and activity. Vischer insists on the

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<sup>75</sup> Baumgartner, *Calvin hébraïsant*, p. 43.

<sup>76</sup> For a reevaluation of Baumgartner see M. Engammare, "Johannes Calvinus Trium Linguarum Peritus? La question de l'hébreu," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance; Travaux et Documents*, 58, no. 1 (1996): 35-60. And in his introduction to Peter Martyr Vermigli's commentary on Lamentations, Shute argues that although Vermigli was not the best Christian Hebraist of his time, his knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Jewish sources was far better than that of his fellow Reformers. He contends that "Martyr was certainly a better Hebraist than Martin Luther, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples . . . and Martyr was unquestionably a more able Hebraist than his fellow Reformers Zwingli and Calvin." Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentary on the Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah*, trans. D. Shute (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2002), p. xl. See also J. Y. Kim, "The Exegetical Method and Message of Peter Martyr Vermigli's Commentary on Judges" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), pp. 20-79.

<sup>77</sup> W. Vischer, "Calvin, exégète de l'Ancien Testament," *Revue Réformée* 18, no. 3 (1967): 1-20.

Christological character of Calvin's exegesis, even though this was shared by his predecessors. Vischer argues that Calvin's Christocentrism was an important hermeneutical principle which allowed him to argue for the strong continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. Vischer contends that Calvin argued for the discontinuity between the two testaments only in form, not in content. Divine revelation is one in both testaments. According to Vischer, God used Israel, a visible nation as a preparation for the introduction of the church, the invisible nation of God. Because of his insistence on continuity between the testaments, Calvin resorted to the grammatical reading of the Old Testament so that he could read in it the mind of its human authors, and discover both its immediate and broad meaning. Using the original language (Hebrew) which he probably studied with Grynaeus, Capito and Münster, Calvin offered a careful philological analysis of the text before searching for its literal and theological meaning. In Vischer's view, this made him acquainted with Jewish commentators, whom he used quite frequently, to substantiate or defend his textual decisions. Vischer argues that in practice, Calvin's exegesis is characterized by its constant dialogue both with Jewish and traditional sources. His interaction with Jewish exegesis helped him philologically, even though he criticizes their blindness toward Christ. Vischer indicates that Calvin's reading of the Fathers is both positive and negative. He sharply criticizes their excessive christocentrism. But Vischer argues that Calvin himself avoided the pitfall of excessive christocentrism by refusing both excessive literalism and allegorism. He paid attention to the literary, psychological, theological and practical movements of the text, and found from it what it meant for the Old



Testament church, i.e., Israel, and for the New Testament church, i.e., Christians. Because of Calvin's commitment to the grammatico-historical reading of the text, Vischer does not hesitate to consider him as the forerunner of modern critical exegesis. He affirms: "Calvin . . . a bien ouvert la voie à la méthode moderne qui essaie de retracer l'histoire des traditions dans les livres de l'Ancien Testament."<sup>78</sup> But against Vischer, one has to contend that probably Calvin did not have a direct access to Jewish commentators, but learned of them via other medieval and sixteenth century commentators (probably through the commentaries of Nicholas of Lyra, Martin Luther or Martin Bucer).<sup>79</sup>

L. Floor's article on "The Hermeneutics of Calvin"<sup>80</sup> highlights both the spiritual

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<sup>78</sup> Vischer, "Calvin, exégète de l'Ancien Testament," p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> For the discussion on this subject see F. Cassuto, *L'Utilisation de l'exégèse juive dans la Postille de Nicolas de Lyre* (Mémoire de DEA. Paris: Ecole pratique des hautes études, Sciences Religieuses, 1997); W. Bunte, *Rabbinische Traditionen bei Nikolaus von Lyra. Ein Beitrag zur Schriftauslegung des Spätmittelalters* (Frankfurt/Berlin, 1994); B. Roussel, "De Jean Oecolompade et Martin Bucer à Andreas Masius et Jean Mercier. Statut et fonction des références à Rashi dans les travaux d'exégètes chrétiens du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Rashi et la culture juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age*, eds., Dahan, Nahon, et Nicolas (Louvain/Paris, 1997), pp. 361-379; W. Neumann, "Influence de Raschi et d'autres commentateurs juifs sur les Postillae de Nicolas de Lyre," *Revue des études juives* 26 (1893): 172-182; 27 (1893): 250-262; A. Graboïs, "The *Hebraica veritas* and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century," *Speculum* 50 (1975): 613-634; R. G. Hobbs, "Martin Bucer on Psalm 22: A Study in the Application of Rabbinic Exegesis by a Christian Hebraist," in *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 144-163; "Hebraica Veritas and Traditio Apostolica. Saint Paul and the Interpretation of the Psalms in the Sixteenth Century," in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Steinmetz (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 83-99; G. Dahan, *Les Intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1990), pp. 475-487; *La Polémique chrétienne contre le judaïsme au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1991), pp. 129-134; "Juifs et chrétiens en Occident médiéval. La rencontre autour de la Bible (XII-XIV s.)," *Revue de synthèse* 110 (1989): 3-31; "La Connaissance de l'exégèse juive par les chrétiens du XII au XIV siècle," in *Rashi et la culture juive en France*, pp. 343-359; "L'Enseignement de l'hébreu en Occident médiéval (XII-XIV s.)," *Histoire de l'éducation* 57 (1993): 3-22; H. Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh, 1963); "The Hebrew Heritage of Medieval Christian Biblical Scholarship," *Historia Judaica* 5 (1943): 133-154; R. Loewe, "The Jewish *Midrashim* and Patristic and Scholastic Exegesis of the Bible," *Studia Patristica* 1 (1957): 492-514; J. W. M. Van Zwieten, "Jewish Exegesis within Christian Bounds: Richard of St. Victor's *De Emmanuele* and Victorine Hermeneutics," *Bijdragen* 48 (1987): 327-335.

<sup>80</sup> L. Floor, "The Hermeneutics of Calvin," in *Calvinus Reformator: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society*, Institute for Reformation Studies, Series F, no. 17, ed. W. H. Neuser (Potchefstroom University, 1982), pp. 181-191.

and historical aspects of Calvin's exegesis. Floor argues that modern exegesis emphasizes language over the Spirit. According to Floor, what is expected of a modern exegete is the capacity to understand and apply exegetical methods in order to communicate the message of the Scripture in our time. But Floor contends that Calvin regarded "the ability to explicate the Scriptures as a gift, something conferred by our highest and only Teacher, Christ."<sup>81</sup> Floor indicates that Calvin stressed the spiritual aspect of the exegetical activity not because of the darkness of Scripture, but because of humans' spiritual blindness.<sup>82</sup> Calvin's emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the interpretation of Scripture does not, however, mean the neglect of its methodical and technical study. Floor argues that for Calvin, a good exegete of the sacred text must both pray (*orare*) and work hard (*laborare*) to unlock the grammatico-historical and theological meaning of the text.

Floor argues that Calvin adopted a historical interpretation of Scripture that emphasized clarity and brevity (*perspicua brevitatis*)<sup>83</sup> in the exposition of the text. Calvin understood the task of the Christian exegete to be the search for the intention of the author. And this could be possible only if the grammatical, historical, stylistic, geographical, cultural and theological context of the text was uncovered. The uncovering of the historical meaning of the text opens it to its theological meaning, which goes beyond its immediate literal sense. Floor affirms that Calvin understood the Scripture as pointing toward Christ.

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<sup>81</sup> Floor, *The Hermeneutics of Calvin*, p. 181.

<sup>82</sup> Floor, *The Hermeneutics of Calvin*, p. 187.

<sup>83</sup> On brevity and simplicity in Calvin's exegesis see the article by R. C. Gamble, "*Brevitas et facilitas*: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 1-17.

Thus, his exegesis was both historical, theological and homiletical (oriented toward preaching). It is important to notice that although insightful, Floor's analysis suffers from his preoccupation to explain Calvin's exegesis in the light of modern historical critical exegesis. This presses him to make Calvin's exegesis fit into the mold of modern historicism.

The article by McKane on "Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator,"<sup>84</sup> is similar to that by Vischer. As Vischer, McKane highlights Calvin's linguistic and philological abilities and his relationship with both Jewish and traditional Christian sources. McKane insists that Calvin approached the Old Testament through analogy, and argued for the continuity between Israel, the church of the Old Testament and Christians, the church of the New Testament. According to McKane, Calvin understood Old Testament faith to be regulated by the law of Moses. The centrality given to the law by Calvin caused him to understand prophetic literature not as revelatory, but as kerygmatic. The prophets, according to Calvin were not mainly visionaries, but teachers of the law. This same balance between Law and prophecy is also found in Calvin's approach to the New Testament. The law accomplished in Jesus Christ still serves as the will of God for his new people, the church. The prophets who explained the law in the Old Testament are now replaced by the teachers and ministers of the Word, who are responsible for the growth of believers. To arrive to this analogy between Israel and the church, McKane argues that Calvin opted for a literal interpretation of the Old Testament. He first looked for the plain sense of the

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<sup>84</sup> W. McKane, "Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator," *Nederduistse gereformeerde teologiese tydskrif* 25 (1984): 250-259.

Scripture, and then tried to determine its christological *scopus*; since, for Calvin the Old Testament message (mostly the prophetic books) was directed toward the messianic hope (David and his dynasty). Thus, when exegeting prophetic books, Calvin first looked for the relation of the text to the Davidic dynasty, and finally the relation of the text to Christ, who is the actual Messiah. But as argued previously, McKane's study overstates both Calvin's use of Jewish sources and his christological reading of the Old Testament. Our study will show that in the case of his exegesis of the Psalter and specifically of the imprecations of the Psalter, Calvin's exegesis was purposely unchristological.

T. H. L. Parker's contribution to Calvin's exegesis has been significant.<sup>85</sup> His book on *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, offers invaluable background information on the theological and exegetical activity of Calvin. Importantly, Parker distinguishes between the genres that characterize Calvin's writings. Parker argues that although the form and content of sermons, lectures and commentaries are similar, they do present minor differences that deserve to be taken into account when analyzing Calvin's assertions or positions on theological and exegetical issues.<sup>86</sup>

Parker contends that Calvin's exegesis starts with the original text, translated in the sermon (in French), printed in the commentary (in Latin or French), or explained a little

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<sup>85</sup> See his book on *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (London, 1971); T. H. L. Parker, "Calvin the Biblical Expositor," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids, 1966); "Calvin the Exegete: Change and Development," in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*, ed. W. E. Neuser (Kampen: Kok, 1980); *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*.

<sup>86</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 36.

more in the lecture (in Hebrew and Latin).<sup>87</sup> The reading of the text is followed by a brief philological analysis of the text before its original meaning is given. Calvin's exegesis often concludes by the practical application of the text. This is more developed in the sermon.<sup>88</sup>

Parker explains that the immediate and practical application of the Old Testament to the church is possible in Calvin because of his understanding of the continuity between the two testaments. According to Parker, Calvin understands the two testaments as composed of one substance, but in different forms.<sup>89</sup> Parker indicates that Calvin's position on the strong continuity between the testaments was done in the context of the legalistic application of the Old Testament or its depreciation by certain factions of the Christian church (see the three existing tendencies defended by Catholics, free-thinkers, and the Anabaptists).<sup>90</sup> Calvin explains these two deviations (of a proper understanding of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New), on the account of the lack of a proper understanding of the progressive nature of divine revelation. According to Parker, Calvin understands the Old Testament as the shade, the shadow of the real image. Thus, the Old Testament ought to be interpreted analogically.<sup>91</sup> Calvin's analogical interpretation of the Old Testament stands in contrast with the allegorical interpretation that dominated

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<sup>87</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 36-37.

<sup>88</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 36-37.

<sup>89</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 42.

<sup>90</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 73.

traditional exegesis. The analogical interpretation of the Old Testament defended by Calvin does not, however deny the spiritual sense of the Scripture. Parker argues that Calvin's analogical interpretation of the Old Testament is rooted both in the historical and theological dimensions of Scripture. According to Parker, Calvin was faithful to the immediate meaning (historical) of the text for its first readers, and to its theological meaning, which goes beyond its scope and reaches its full meaning in Christ.<sup>92</sup> The analogical nature of the relation between the two testaments is also visible in Calvin in the way he handles Old Testament narratives. According to Parker, Calvin understood the Old Testament as "the book that recounts and describes the childhood and growing up of the church."<sup>93</sup> But it is important to indicate that the flaw in Parker's reading is that he does not examine predecessors or contemporaries of Calvin and uses modern terms (e.g. "analogical" reading) to describe interpretive sensibilities shared by Calvin with much of the pre-critical tradition.

A. G. Baxter continues the discussion on Calvin's christological reading of the Old Testament in his study, "Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament."<sup>94</sup> Baxter discusses Calvin's exegesis in the context of his struggle against the Jewish, the Catholic, and the Anapabtist understanding of the Old Testament. According to Baxter, Calvin considered these groups as Judaizers, because they failed to correctly see Christ in the Old

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<sup>92</sup> On the subject of the literal meaning of the text in Calvin see the article by R. A. Muller, "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament."

<sup>93</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 83.

<sup>94</sup> A. G. Baxter, "John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1987).

Testament.<sup>95</sup> Baxter argues that Calvin's hermeneutics is mainly christocentric. Christ is the *scopus* of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is the mirror of the church, the mirror of the Christian life, and the mirror of the political realm.<sup>96</sup> Baxter indicates that Calvin's christocentric reading of the Old Testament was different from traditional exegesis because it was rooted in the grammatico-historical reading of the text. Calvin used the hermeneutics of accommodation and typology to express the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and between Israel and the church. Baxter argues that Calvin's hermeneutics of accommodation was possible because of his progressive understanding of divine revelation.<sup>97</sup> But Baxter's emphasis on Calvin's christological reading of the Old Testament runs counter to typical understanding of Calvin's hermeneutics of the Old Testament. As this study will show, Calvin's exegesis of the Psalter was relatively unchristological when compared to the exegesis of his predecessors. Baxter's conclusions concerning Calvin's Old Testament exegesis suffers from broad generalizations and fails to take into account the particularity encountered in Calvin's treatment of different sections of the Old Testament. Baxter's conclusions result from his application of a twentieth-century grid to sixteenth century materials.

Puckett's book on *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*<sup>98</sup> furthers the discussion on the theological presuppositions of Calvin's exegesis and its relationship with

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<sup>95</sup> Baxter, "John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," pp. 72-85; 100-109; 110-122.

<sup>96</sup> Baxter, "John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," pp. 2-65; 123-142.

<sup>97</sup> Baxter, "John Calvin's Use and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," pp. 285-304.

<sup>98</sup> Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*.

both Jewish and Christian traditional exegesis. Puckett gives a fairly good account of Calvin's linguistic abilities and its influence on his grammatico-historical exegesis. Although Puckett's book offers significant information concerning Calvin's exegetical principles and practice, one regrets the absence of detailed study of specific instances of Calvin's exegesis as exemplified in his commentaries. This remark applies also to most studies mentioned above related to Calvin's exegesis of the Old Testament. Most of the preceding studies fail to provide an actual account of Calvin's exegesis as found in his commentaries.<sup>99</sup>

### 3. 3. An Overview of the Scholarship on Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms

We have mentioned previously that although the book of Psalms was one of the most read, sung, and commented on by Calvin, one finds that fewer studies have been devoted to the subject in modern sixteenth century scholarship. One finds but few articles devoted to Calvin's exegesis of the Psalms.<sup>100</sup> The following offers a chronological overview of modern scholarship on Calvin's exegesis of the Psalms.

Martin-Achard's article on "Calvin et les psaumes,"<sup>101</sup> despite its age, provides useful information on Calvin's interest in the book of Psalms as a liturgical aide to faith and on his commitment to its historical interpretation. Achard indicates that Calvin's interest in

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<sup>99</sup> Exception must be made for the work of Steinmetz, Muller, Thompson, Schreiner and a few others mentioned previously.

<sup>100</sup> For bibliographical sources see the article by B. G. Armstrong, "Exegetical and Theological Principles in Calvin's Preaching, with Special Attention to His Sermons on the Psalms," in *Ordenlich und Fruchtbare: Festschrift für Willem van't Spijker*, eds., W. H. Neuser and H. J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Uitgeverij, 1997), pp. 191-206.

<sup>101</sup> R. Martin-Achard, "Calvin et les psaumes," *Cahiers Protestant* 44 (1960): 102-112.



the Psalter grew out of his liturgical preoccupations. Piety, according to Calvin could not grow effectively if not nourished with the Word of God; Word not only heard and believed, but also sung. According to Calvin, “when we sing, we are certain that God puts his Word in our mouth, as if he himself was singing through us for his personal glory.”<sup>102</sup> And Achard argues that according to Calvin, “seuls les chants inspirés par Dieu sont dignes de lui êtres adressés.”<sup>103</sup>

But Calvin did not only encourage Psalm singing in Geneva, he also worked extensively on their interpretation. In 1557, Calvin asked Robert Estienne to publish his Latin commentary on the book of Psalms. The French translation followed in 1558, and both commentaries would be reedited later.<sup>104</sup> Achard indicates that Calvin used both his humanist and biblical training to unlock the meaning of the Psalter. In his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin often quotes the fathers, rabbinical sources (often indirectly), and secular philosophers such as Aristotle (Ps. 107:43) and Caesar (Ps. 46:4). But Achard insists that Calvin did not let his humanist training take over his preoccupation for the edification of the body of Christ. Achard argues that “Calvin inaugurates a new chapter in the history of biblical exegesis. Instead of being lost in unnecessary details, he goes straight for the immediate meaning of the text.”<sup>105</sup> And according to Achard, Calvin’s commentary on the

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<sup>102</sup> “Quand nous chantons, nous sommes certains que Dieu nous met en la bouche les paroles, comme si Lui même chantait en nous pour exalter sa gloire.” Achard, “Calvin et les psaumes,” p. 104.

<sup>103</sup> Achard, “Calvin et les psaumes,” p. 104.

<sup>104</sup> The Latin edition will be reedited in 1564, 1578, 1610, and in 1736. The French translation will be reedited in 1561, 1563, and 1859.

<sup>105</sup> “Calvin inaugure un nouveau chapitre de l’histoire de l’exégèse de l’Ecriture. Au lieu de s’égarer dans

Psalter represents the best place where his commitment to historical and philological exegesis can be seen. Achard contends that Calvin is conscious of the fact that each text comes from a specific historical and theological context and should be interpreted accordingly. Calvin links the prayers formulated in the Psalter both to the history of Israel as a nation, and to the history of David its representative. Achard points out that Calvin's commitment to the historical reading of the Psalter causes him very often to disagree with traditional exegesis on the christological interpretation on certain key Psalms. For example, Calvin refused to see Christ in Psalm 2 as argued in traditional exegesis. Instead he argues that David is the one who is speaking of his universal kingdom and that the psalm is to be prophetically and typologically (not literally) applied to Christ. Psalm 22, quoted by Christ on the cross, describes first of all the suffering of the king of Israel and can only be applied to Christ secondly.

Despite its clear presentation of Calvin's commitment to the historical reading of the Old Testament, Achard's article fails to qualify the meaning of "historical" when used in the context of sixteenth century exegesis. Should Calvin's historical reading of the Old Testament be equated to "historical" as understood by modern critical historians, or to a more text-oriented reading of the Old Testament?<sup>106</sup>

The article by S. H. Russell "examines the principles behind Calvin's exegesis of

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un fatras de considérations, il va droit au texte et cherche à l'expliquer d'une façon aussi précise que possible." Achard, "Calvin et les psaumes," p. 106.

<sup>106</sup> For a better understanding of the literal meaning of Scripture in traditional exegesis see the article by B. Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie*, eds. Donner, Hanhart, and Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 80-93.

the messianic elements in the Psalms.”<sup>107</sup> According to Russell, the first principle that governs Calvin’s interpretation of the messianic Psalms is his commitment to the historical understanding of the text that takes into account the whole context of the Scriptures.

Russell writes: “For Calvin, the exact historical meaning of a particular psalm is but the prelude for its real interpretation in the light of the totality of doctrine taught by Scripture.”<sup>108</sup> Russell argues that Calvin’s hermeneutics of the Psalms is both historical and theological. For Calvin, historical Israel and David are types representing Christ and the church. Therefore, Calvin assigned most Psalms to David, and tried to explain them in the context of the history of Israel. Russell acknowledges that typological interpretation of the messianic Psalms is common to traditional exegesis, but he argues that in many instances Calvin distanced himself from the tradition.

Russell contends that contrary to traditional exegesis which based its christological reading of the Psalms on a spiritual interpretation, Calvin based his christological exegesis of the Psalms on the hyperbolic language of the Psalter. He argues: “Because on occasion the Psalms speak in hyperbolic language, which in no strict sense can be applied to David, they must assuredly have a deeper meaning, a significance which was only fulfilled by Christ.”<sup>109</sup> This, however does not mean that Calvin by-passed “the historical meaning in

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<sup>107</sup> S. H. Russell, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21 (1968): 37-47; especially p. 37.

<sup>108</sup> Russell, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms,” p. 38.

<sup>109</sup> Russell, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms,” p. 39.

order to proceed to the christological interpretation of the Psalms.”<sup>110</sup> Russell indicates that in many cases, Calvin distanced himself from the traditional christological interpretation of some key Psalms in order to emphasize their immediate relationship to the historical David. In his exegesis of Psalm 74, for example, Calvin rejects the traditional application of the Psalm to Christ because this denies its historical meaning. Calvin notes that although the Psalm does fit the Davidic monarchy, it should however, first be explained in the context of the historical events that happened in the history of Israel around 586 B.C. However, Russell notes that in general, Calvin accepted the general *scopus* of Christ for most Psalms. Explaining Psalm 22:16, Calvin argues that the extreme nature of David’s suffering and the universal dimension of his dominion could only actually be realized through the reign of Christ.

G. Vincent’s article on “Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII,”<sup>111</sup> asks again the question of Calvin’s interpretation of the messianic Psalms. Vincent argues that the Reformation represents a new stage in the history of biblical exegesis because it introduced a new way of reading the text. Instead of following traditional exegesis with its emphasis on the spiritual meaning of the text, which exists beyond the literal text, the reformers, in general, focused their attention on the immediate meaning of the literal sense of Scripture.<sup>112</sup> In the case of Calvin’s exegesis, Vincent argues that he vigorously opposed

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<sup>110</sup> Russell, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretation of the Psalms,” p. 41.

<sup>111</sup> G. Vincent, “Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII,” *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d’Etudes et de Documentation* 293 (1984): 32-52.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Childs, “*Sensus literalis*,” pp. 80-93.

the allegorical interpretation of the text. According to Vincent, Calvin considered allegory to be theologically contemptuous, because its ambition, or logical secret was to “se donner Dieu autrement qu’il ne se donne.”<sup>113</sup>

Vincent contends that Calvin’s exegesis is characterized by historicism. For Calvin, the text must be taken seriously on its literal level. The text means what it says, and what it says is expressed through its own language, style, vocabulary and rhetoric.<sup>114</sup>

According to Vincent, Calvin’s interpretation of the Psalms represents the best place where one sees Calvin wrestle with the text historically in order to understand its meaning and teaching for the body of Christ. Calvin’s interpretation of Psalm 22 with its messianic tune is particularly important for Calvin’s historical commitment. Vincent acknowledges that Calvin did follow a christological reading of the Psalms, but this did not deter him from a full historization of the Psalms. Vincent argues that Calvin’s accent on the historical interpretation of the Psalter is visible through his acknowledgement of David as the author of most Psalms and of Psalm 22 especially. For Calvin, David is the pious person who experiences suffering in Psalm 22, even though he could not expressly indicate the historical occasion of the Psalm. Vincent indicates also that Calvin’s insistence on the literal interpretation of this Psalm should not be confused with literalism. According to Vincent, Calvin read David’s suffering both historically and correlatively. David’s suffering was not only his, but also the suffering of all pious souls. Calvin’s correlative

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<sup>113</sup> Vincent, “Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII,” p. 35.

<sup>114</sup> Vincent, “Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII,” p. 35.

reading of the text provided a broader space for the interaction of the text with the reader.<sup>115</sup>

This interaction was possible through the prophetic scope of the text exegeted. The historical sense of the text reveals its meaning for its first audience, and the prophetic sense of the text expands the original meaning of the text for its contemporary use in the context of the body of Christ.<sup>116</sup> According to Vincent, Calvin understood the suffering described in Psalm 22 as pointing to David its first author, but also as ultimately pointing to Christ its referent.<sup>117</sup>

As argued previously, Vincent's analysis fails to differentiate between the preoccupation of modern historicism as to the literal meaning of the text from sixteenth century and Calvin's historical understanding of the text. As correctly argued by Childs, Calvin's historical reading of the Old Testament is hermeneutically different from the modern historical critical analysis of the text.<sup>118</sup>

J. M. Mays acknowledges in the introduction to his article on "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: The Preface as Introduction,"<sup>119</sup> that his analysis of the features

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<sup>115</sup> "Le sens de l'Ecriture se délivre à partir de l'examen des manières du langage ordinaire, en retour l'existence de chacun peut trouver, dans les manières de dire bibliques, une sorte de répondant symbolique qui ne fait pas s'évanouir -comme s'il s'agissait d'une illusion- le sentiment de l'abandon par Dieu mais qui, en l'élevant à l'expérience la plus dramatique, l'élève paradoxalement à l'expérience la plus 'spirituelle'." Vincent, "Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII," p. 43.

<sup>116</sup> See the article by Muller, "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment," p. 81.

<sup>117</sup> Vincent, "Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII," p. 47.

<sup>118</sup> Childs, "*Sensus Literalis*," pp. 80-93. See also E. B. Monsma, "The Preaching Style of Jean Calvin: An Analysis of the Psalm Sermons of the *Supplementa Calviniana*" (Ph.D. diss., New Brunswick Rutgers State University, 1986).

<sup>119</sup> J. L. Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: The Preface as Introduction," in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. T. George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 195-204.

of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms is anachronistic. Mays offers a rereading of Calvin's exegesis of the Psalms in the context of the modern debate on the Psalter. He indicates that Calvin's hermeneutics of the Psalms is already visible in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms. Mays argues that from the introduction one understands that Calvin's preoccupation is kerygmatic. The reformer writes for the edification of the church. "Calvin discusses the material to be interpreted in terms of its usefulness to the reader."<sup>120</sup> Mays indicates that Calvin finds three uses of the book of the Psalms for its readers. The Psalms teach: 1) true methods of prayer; 2) the right manner of praising God; and 3) the right manner of conduct in life. Mays argues that these three classifications isolated by Calvin correspond to "the three primary genres of psalmic poetry with which form criticism works: prayers of lament, hymns of praise, and wisdom poetry."<sup>121</sup>

As to Calvin's actual exegesis of the Psalms, Mays argues that Calvin followed a threefold format: Calvin introduced his exegesis of every Psalm by providing an introductory paragraph that gives a summary description of the occasion, the content, and the structure of the Psalm. Mays sees a similar pattern in modern exegesis of the Psalms that asks introductory questions concerning the who, what, when, where and why of each Psalm.<sup>122</sup> The second step of the format followed by Calvin consists of the translation of the Psalm from the Hebrew text. Calvin uses all his linguistic skills and all the philological resources available at his time to find the correct translation of the text. The third format

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<sup>120</sup> Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms," p. 197.

<sup>121</sup> Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms," p. 197.

explains the literal meaning of the text and its theological implications. Mays indicates that Calvin asks two main questions: “how is the text to be understood? and second, how does the text so understood instruct belief and conduct?”<sup>123</sup> He argues that Calvin’s preoccupation with what the text meant and what it means for the body of Christ is similar to the modern critical approach to the Psalter. But Mays adds that Calvin goes beyond mere historicism and incorporates in his exegesis the theological dimension of the text.

Mays discusses also Calvin’s metaphorical or (more precisely) typological understanding of the Psalms. David is, according to Mays, not an actual historical character for Calvin, but a theological one, a type that represents not only the whole humanity confronted to suffering, but Christ. “The David of Calvin’s mirror is a theological rather than a narrative identity. He is a theological type, conceived in a theological rather than a biographical way, that often provides the relation between the psalm and those for whom Calvin interprets.”<sup>124</sup> But one wonders if Mays’s assessment of Calvin’s understanding of David is not incomplete. It seems correct to argue that for Calvin, David represents both his own person and time, and also the rest of humanity and mostly anticipates the coming messiah. Thus, Calvin’s David is both historical and theological, since for Calvin, a type must have a historical reality in order to point to a future historical reality.

B. Pitkin’s article on “Imitation of David: David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin’s

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<sup>122</sup> Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms,” p. 198.

<sup>123</sup> Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms,” p. 199.

<sup>124</sup> Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms,” p. 201.



Exegesis of the Psalms”<sup>125</sup> argues for the paradigmatic position occupied by David in Calvin’s understanding of the message of the Psalter. After providing background information on Calvin’s interest in the book of Psalms,<sup>126</sup> Pitkin develops the notion that Calvin’s exegesis of the Psalms is pervaded by the presence of David, not only as the paradigm of human suffering, but mostly as the paradigm of the true believer who in the midst of confusion and chaos witnessed in human history still perceives, by the light of faith, God’s providence.<sup>127</sup> Pitkin contends that the question of the prosperity of the wicked distances David’s assurance on divine providence from Job’s defiant attitude. Pitkin argues that “in the Davidic Psalms Calvin discovers and underscores a view of faith that is characterized by what we might call an existential assurance of God’s continuing care.”<sup>128</sup> And David’s faith in God’s providence was based on his word of promise, the promise that God will be merciful to him and will never forsake him. Pitkin argues that this same word of divine promise represents the link for Calvin between David and Christ, between Israel and the church. The word of divine mercy toward David is the word of the unique covenant between God and his people in the Old Testament, and God and his church in the New Testament through Christ. But Pitkin points out that the paradigmatic position given to David stopped Calvin from developing a coherent christocentric reading of the Psalter. According to Pitkin, Calvin downplayed “one of his central assumptions about the nature of

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<sup>125</sup> Pitkin, “David as Paradigm,” pp. 843-863.

<sup>126</sup> Pitkin, “David as Paradigm,” pp. 845-849.

<sup>127</sup> Pitkin, “David as Paradigm,” pp. 850-851.

<sup>128</sup> Pitkin, “David as Paradigm,” p. 855.

faith –namely, that it is explicitly christocentric– in order to raise the example of David to prominence.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, according to Pitkin, Calvin’s interpretation of the Psalms was less prophetic and christocentric. She affirms: “Calvin’s reluctance to pursue either of these options stems from his unwillingness to risk making a sharp distinction between the faith of David in his historical situation and that of sixteenth century Christians in theirs.”<sup>130</sup> It is important to note that Pitkin’s essay is the only one in this section, which takes into account the broader context of sixteenth century exegesis. Furthermore, the present study will substantiate Pitkin’s position that Calvin’s exegesis of the Psalms was less christocentric because of the paradigmatic role given to David. Our study will show that Calvin’s understanding of David as a paradigm of faith allowed him to apply his trials and faith directly to believers in Geneva without transiting through Christ as in traditional exegesis.

Before concluding this section on modern scholarship on Calvin’s exegesis of the Psalms, two articles deserve our attention because of their direct relationship to our subject. B. Childs’s short article on “The Struggle for God’s Righteousness in the Psalter”<sup>131</sup> discusses the subject of the imprecations of the Psalter in the exegesis of the reformers. Childs contends that modern exegesis of the Psalter has not yet offered a satisfactory approach to the imprecations of the Psalter because it has disregarded the work done in this subject by the reformers. After reviewing different interpretations proposed by modern

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<sup>129</sup> Pitkin, “David as Paradigm,” p. 862.

<sup>130</sup> Pitkin, “David as Paradigm,” p. 862.

<sup>131</sup> B. S. Childs, “The Struggle for God’s Righteousness in the Psalter,” in *Christ in Our Place*, ed., T. A. Hart and D. P. Thimell (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1989).

exegetes, Childs concentrates on Luther's and Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalms.

Childs argues that both Luther and Calvin shared the same preoccupation in their approach of the imprecatory Psalms. Both agreed that the chief function of these Psalms is to witness to God's righteousness; that David's role is that of pointing to Christ; and God's wrath against his enemies fell on Jesus-Christ.<sup>132</sup> But the core of Childs' article uses Luther as a foil to magnify Calvin's exceptional exegetical insights. Childs argues that Luther's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter is mostly anthropological and "concerned with the inability of sinful man to defend God's righteous cause."<sup>133</sup>

But Calvin's exegesis of the imprecatory Psalms, according to Childs, has great strength because of its "closeness to the biblical text coupled with a powerful theological rendering of its message."<sup>134</sup> Childs points out that Calvin is careful to hear the psalmist speak in his Old Testament context. Calvin's contextual study of the Psalter helped him avoid the pitfall of looking for the psychological motivations of David. According to Childs, Calvin understood David's imprecations as not directed against his historical enemies, but against their evil designs.<sup>135</sup> Childs indicates that for Calvin, the actual scope of the imprecations expressed in the Psalms is christological. "David's zeal for God's

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<sup>132</sup> Childs, "God's Righteousness in the Psalter," p. 259.

<sup>133</sup> Childs, "God's Righteousness in the Psalter," p. 261.

<sup>134</sup> Childs, "God's Righteousness in the Psalter," p. 259.

<sup>135</sup> Childs, "God's Righteousness in the Psalter," p. 260.

righteousness is only fully seen in the light of Jesus Christ.”<sup>136</sup> Christ has accomplished the imprecations formulated in the Psalms not only because of his word of forgiveness toward his enemies, but mostly because his righteousness vindicated God against the evil forces opposing his just rule. Childs concludes his article by contending that Calvin’s historical reading of the text, contrary to Luther, makes him a forerunner of modern biblical interpretation.<sup>137</sup> But our study will show that Calvin’s interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter was neither christocentric nor historical in the modern sense as argued by Childs. Furthermore, contrary to Childs’s conclusions, our study will show that Calvin’s historical reading of the imprecations of the Psalter stands within the traditional historical hermeneutics followed in late medieval and in sixteenth century biblical exegesis.

Also to be mentioned is the article by J. A. De Jong, “‘An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul’: Insights into Calvin’s Spirituality from His Psalms Commentary.”<sup>138</sup> De Jong’s article focuses more on Calvin’s spirituality rather than on his hermeneutics. De Jong contends that the field of Calvin’s piety (spirituality) has not been adequately investigated. According to De Jong, there is a need for a spiritual “re-reading” of Calvin’s commentary on the Psalms in order to discover more on his faith-life and “dispel the stubborn perception of Calvin as cold, rationalistic, vindictive, and aloof.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Childs, “God’s Righteousness in the Psalter,” p. 260.

<sup>137</sup> Childs, “God’s Righteousness in the Psalter,” p. 260.

<sup>138</sup> J. A. De Jong, “‘An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul’: Insights into Calvin’s Spirituality from His Psalms Commentary,” in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. W. H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>139</sup> De Jong, “An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul,” p. 4.

De Jong indicates that in his introduction to the Psalms, Calvin describes the Psalter as “the mirror of the soul,” where all human beings can see themselves in their everyday experiences. According to De Jong, in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin does not only tell the story of David’s suffering, but also sees through it his own experience as the leader of the church of God in Geneva. But De Jong points out that Calvin’s preface is not a biography as such. It is rather “a confession, a testimony, a *pro vita mea* designed to serve the exposition by acknowledging how a believing commentator cannot engage this material without becoming totally and personally absorbed into it.”<sup>140</sup>

The anatomy of the soul indicated by Calvin takes the form in the commentary of human self-expression before God, rooted in the unfailing trust on his providence.<sup>141</sup> De Jong argues that Calvin understood that David’s unshakable faith in God’s providence was based on his promises. Prayer in the Psalms is the outpouring of the soul confronted with adversity. And adversity is used by God to strengthen, rather than weaken the faith of believers. Trust in God through adversity creates confidence in prayer, which in turn strengthens faith.

De Jong indicates that prayer in the Psalter takes also the form of imprecations. But he points out that Calvin did not understand the imprecations of the Psalter as encouraging believers to take revenge against their enemies. According to De Jong, Calvin considered David to be such a pious man that any thought of personal vengeance was unthinkable on

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<sup>140</sup> De Jong, “An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul,” p. 3.

<sup>141</sup> De Jong, “An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul,” pp. 4-5.

his part. Rather Calvin encouraged believers to endure suffering and pray for the welfare of their enemies. De Jong argues against those who use Calvin's controversies against Bolsec, Castellio, and Servetus as examples of his harshness. He contends: "Calvin abhorred evil, including vengeance. His affections of the soul concerning the wicked were toward their conversion by the spiritual weapons at the church's disposal."<sup>142</sup>

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to further the new direction initiated by Steinmetz, Muller, Thompson, Schreiner, Lane and other scholars who emphasize the study of specific sixteenth century authors and their actual exegetical work with attention to its background and context. The benefit of such an approach is that it provides a concrete and more accurate account of the actual exegetical activity of sixteenth century commentators, instead of relying on broad characterizations, which often overlook important elements of discontinuity between authors and subjects. Thus, the present work limits itself to the study of Calvin's hermeneutics as exemplified in his study of the book of Psalms, especially in his commentary on the imprecations of the Psalms. The imprecatory passages of the Psalms represent an interesting trial case where Calvin's "exegetical principles" as argued by scholars like Parker,<sup>143</sup> Kraus,<sup>144</sup> Vischer<sup>145</sup> are put to test. The objective of the study is to discover Calvin's exegetical principles, and the elements of continuity and discontinuity

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<sup>142</sup> De Jong, "An Anatomy of All Parts of the Soul," p. 10.

<sup>143</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*.

<sup>144</sup> Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," pp. 8-18.

<sup>145</sup> Vischer, "Calvin exégète de l'Ancien Testament," pp. 213-231.

with the exegetical tradition of the Church, with emphasis on the imprecations of the Psalter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PSALMS INTERPRETATION: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO THE REFORMATION PERIOD

#### 1. Introduction

As argued by Mitchell, the early church writers shared “by and large the same hermeneutical principles as the rabbis with regard to the Psalter.”<sup>1</sup> According to Mitchell, the continuity of Jewish exegesis with that of the church fathers is due to the fact that “the Christian community inherited their hermeneutic from Israel through the early Israelite church and its leaders.”<sup>2</sup> Recognition of such elements of continuity between the two traditions (Jewish and Christian) is especially important in the context of Calvin’s exegesis, since the reformer of Geneva was in dialogue with both Jewish and patristic commentators in his interpretative work. Calvin’s reference to Jewish sources in his exegesis coupled with an absence of Trinitarian readings of the Old Testament drew criticism from Hunnius who called him a Judaizer.<sup>3</sup> Steinmetz explains that: “by ‘Judaizing exegesis’ Hunnius meant an approach to the Bible that divorced it from its

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<sup>1</sup> D. C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Program in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSup., no. 252 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1977), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> G. Hunnius, *Articulus de Trinitate, per quaestiones et responsiones pertractatus solide, et indubitatis testimoniis sacrarum literarum contra quavis haereticorum veterum et recentium blasphemias strophas et corruptelas firmissime communitus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Johannes Spies, 1589); Calvinus Iudaizans, *Hoc est: Iudicae Glossae et Corruptelae, quibus Iohannes Calvinus illustrissima Scripturae sacrae Loca et Testimonia, de gloriosa Trinitate, Deitate Christi, et Spiritus sancti, cum primis autem Vaticinia Prophetarum de Adventu Messiae, nativitate eius, passione, resurrectione, ascensione in caelos et seesione as dextram Dei, detestandum in modum corrumpere non exhorruit. Addita est corruptelarum confutatio per Aegidium Hunnium* (Wittenberg: Vidua Matthaei Welaci, 1593). For a discussion of the subject see Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, pp. 52-81.



Christian context. Calvin exhibited his Judaizing tendencies when he read passages of Scripture that had traditionally been interpreted by Christian theologians to refer to Christ or the Trinity as though they had nothing whatever to do with them.”<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the interpretation of the Psalter in Jewish and Christian literature from the early period to the Reformation era. The aim of the chapter is not to offer an exhaustive study of the subject, but rather to provide general introductory remarks on the early and late medieval, and Reformation hermeneutics of the Psalter, which could have directly or indirectly influenced Calvin’s exegesis of the Psalms.<sup>5</sup> The exegetical works of selected Jewish and Christian Bible commentators of the early, medieval and Reformation periods will be analyzed as background material to the subsequent chapter devoted to Calvin’s interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalms. This background study is important as it establishes a paradigm for the traditional understanding of the Psalter, which runs from the purely historical, to historical prophetic, and to purely prophetic understanding of the text, as it will be shown subsequently. The paradigmatic study of Jewish and Christian approaches to the Psalter will help locate Calvin’s hermeneutics both in its continuity and discontinuity with his predecessors’ and contemporaries’ exegesis.

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<sup>4</sup> D. C. Steinmetz, “The Judaizing Calvin,” in *Die Patristik in der Bibelexegese des 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. D. C. Steinmetz (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), p. 136; See also Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, pp. 52-72.

<sup>5</sup> The task of identifying Calvin’s sources is difficult since Calvin and the rest of sixteenth century writers did not always cite their sources and even when they did, they sometimes cited sources they never read personally. Lane argues that when trying to identify Calvin’s sources, one has to follow a hermeneutic of suspicion, “that is, one should not assume from the mere citation of an author or a work that Calvin has first-hand acquaintance of it or that he has consulted the author or work on this particular occasion. He was highly skilled in making the maximum use of minimal resources. He knew how to borrow quotations from others. He knew how to discuss texts without actually consulting them. His memory was such that he could introduce citations on the basis of earlier remembered reading.” Lane, *John Calvin. Student of the Church Fathers*, p. 6.

## 2. Jewish Interpretation of the Psalter

### 2. 1. The Translations (LXX, Targumim, and the Peshitta)

Jewish interpretation of the Psalter takes its root in the early translations of the Hebrew Bible. The LXX, the Targumim, and the Peshitta all follow a future-predictive and messianic interpretation of the Hebrew Psalter. This is especially true in their rendering of the headings of the different Psalms (the headings of the Psalms functioned in traditional Jewish and Christian exegesis as hermeneutical markers in the research of the meaning of the text). In many instances, the translators of the LXX, the Targumim, and the Peshitta chose not to follow the obvious rendering of the headings, which provide the liturgical and cultic usage of the Psalms. They (the translators) preferred instead to read these headings eschatologically. For example, the LXX renders the Hebrew word *lamnatseha*, “to the choirmaster” (the expression occurs 55 times in the Hebrew Psalter), by “for the end.” The broad rendering of *lamnatseha* by “the end” instead of “choirmaster, or song leader” opens the Psalm to an eschatological interpretation. The end referred to represents the messianic time, still yet to come.<sup>6</sup> The same eschatological reading is also seen in the Targumim and Peshitta rendering of the Hebrew text. Although the Targumim do not overlook the obvious translation of the Hebrew headings, they do insert interpretive comments, which have an eschatological scope. In most cases, the headings concerning David are all preceded or followed by the comment: “in the

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<sup>6</sup> See G. Dorival, “A propos de quelques titres des Psaumes de la Septante,” in *Le Psautier chez les Pères*, Cahiers de Biblia Patristica, no. 4 (Paris: Centre d’Analyse et de Documentation Patristiques, 1994), pp. 21-36, especially pp. 29-31; Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, pp. 18-20. See also J. W. Wevers, “The Interpretative Character and Significance of the Septuagint Version,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 1. *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 84-107.

spirit of prophecy, by David,” or “by David, a prophetic word.”<sup>7</sup> The Peshitta follows also a similar rendering of the headings. The heading of Psalms 22, 45, 72, 110 referring to David are all read prophetically and messianically. The Peshitta considers David as a prophet predicting the messianic time.<sup>8</sup> Now given the position occupied by the LXX in the early church,<sup>9</sup> it is likely that the prophetic and messianic understanding of David in the Psalter was later on applied to Christ.

## 2. 2. The Qumran Community

Seybold indicates in his introduction to the Psalter that the community of Qumran produced the first and true textual and exegetical commentary on the Psalter in Jewish literature. Because of its eschatological orientation (the community at Qumran considered itself as the faithful remnant of Israel)<sup>10</sup>, the community at Qumran considered the material of the Psalter as future-predictive. The interpretation of the Psalter at Qumran followed the “*peshet*” approach which gives a verse by verse literal (plain) explanation of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Commentators at Qumran read most Psalms

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, pp. 16-21.

<sup>8</sup> See M. P. Weitzman, “The Origin of the Peshitta Psalter,” in *Interpreting the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of E. I. J. Rosenthal*, eds. A. Emerton and S. C. Reif (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); “The Peshitta Psalter and its Hebrew Vorlage,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 341-354.

<sup>9</sup> The LXX is considered as the “Bible” of the early church. See M. Müller, *The First Bible of the Church: A Plea for the Septuagint*, JSOTSup., no. 206 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp.38-45; E. L. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, eds. G. Vermes et al. (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986), pp. 474-479; S. Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> K. Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, trans. R. G. Dunphy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 247-248. On the interpretation of Scripture at Qumran see G. J. Brooke, *Exegesis at Qumran. 4Qflorilegium in its Jewish Context*, JSOTSup., no. 29 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> On the commentary of the Psalter at Qumran see G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: The Penguin Press, 1997), pp. 487-491. On the “*peshet*” interpretation at Qumran see the article and bibliography by J. Maier, “Early Jewish Biblical Interpretation in the Qumran Literature,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/1*, pp. 108-129. On “*peshet*” and “*derash*” interpretations in Jewish exegesis see D. Weiss Halivni, “Plain Sense and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis,” in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation*, ed. P. Ochs (New York:

messianically. According to them, all Psalms are messianic and future-predictive, since David composed them under divine prophetic illumination. The concluding prose section to the Psalter found at Qumran states: "And David ben Jesse was wise . . . and he wrote 3,600 Psalms . . . and all these he composed through prophecy which was given him before the Most High."<sup>12</sup> And these prophecies concern the coming of the Messiah and the vindication of the righteous, i.e., the members of the community at Qumran.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. 3. The Rabbinic Tradition

As argued by Graboïs, rabbinic exegesis finds its foundation on the mishnaic and talmudic teaching of the "sages" from around second-century BC to sixth-century AD.<sup>14</sup> The "sage" of the mishnaic and talmudic tradition worked on codifying the Old Testament law and applying it to the reality of the daily life of the Jewish communities of the diaspora.

The mishnaic and talmudic tradition developed four methods of biblical interpretation called *PaRDes*: *Peshat* (literal sense), *Remez* (allusion), *Derash* (homiletical sense), and *Sod* (mystical or allegorical sense). From these different

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Paulist Press, 1993), pp. 107-141; *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); B. J. Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> 11QPSa, col. 27, lines 1-11, in J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Although fragmentary, the commentary of the Psalter found at Qumran emphasizes the eschatological victory of the master of righteousness over his enemies. See Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, pp. 21-26; J. A. Sanders, "The Qumran Psalms Scroll (11QPSa) Reviewed," in *On Language, Culture, and Religion: In Honour of Eugene A. Nida* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); *The Dead Sea Psalms*; "Variorum in the Psalms Scroll (11 QPSa)," *Harvard Theological Studies* 59 (1966): 83-94; "Pre-Masoretic Psalter Texts," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965): 114-123.

<sup>14</sup> A. Graboïs, "L'exégèse rabbinique," in *Le Moyen age et la Bible*, eds. P. Riché et G. Lobrichon (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), pp. 233-234.

methods, the research for the literal sense (*Peshat*) took precedence and served as the foundation for the other methods. The “sages” of the mishnaic and talmudic tradition investigated the literal or plain meaning of the text in order to discover its scope and application in the life of the community. The mishnaic and talmudic tradition read the Scripture literally to respond to the need of guidance in daily life, and read the Scripture prophetically to respond to the eschatological hope of the community. Thus the rabbinic tradition continued the messianic and prophetic reading of the Psalter, since in both the Talmud and the Midrash David and the rest of the authors of the Psalms are considered as prophetic figures, and their words as eschatological.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Midrash of Psalm 2:2 reads: “In the time to come, Gog and Magog will set themselves against the Lord and his Messiah, only to fall down. David foreseeing this said: ‘Why do the nations rage?’”<sup>16</sup> Rabbis of the early and late medieval eras, in general, continued the same messianic and eschatological reading of the Psalter, but their messianic reading is consciously restrained in view of the Christian application of the Psalter’s messianic hope to the person of Jesus.

Uriel Simon distinguishes four different approaches to the Psalter in medieval Jewish exegesis. According him, the Psalter was considered by Jewish exegetes either as “a second Pentateuch,” “mandatory prophetic prayers,” “non-prophetic prayers and poems,” or as “prophetic and sacred poetry.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For an introduction to the Targum and Midrash see H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and the Midrash* (New York: Atheneum, 1978); J. Neusner, *Invitation to the Talmud* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> See C. D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon (882-942) a logician trained in the neo-platonist school of philosophy at Alexandria, develops a literal and homiletical approach to Scripture based on philology and philosophy. Saadiah approaches Scripture rationally, and distinguishes in the Hebrew Bible between precepts and laws given through direct divine revelation, and those given through human reason.<sup>18</sup> Thus Saadiah considers the Psalter as a second Pentateuch on the ground that what is spoken in the Psalter as prayer, is not actually prayer, but rather the theological and moral recommendation of the Lord.<sup>19</sup> According to Gaon, the same Lord who spoke to his people in form of prescriptions and prohibitions in the Torah speaks to his people through different genres and forms of speeches in the prophetic and psalmic literature. Thus, Psalms are not prayers articulated by human servants to God, but rather God's theological and moral recommendations to his people, given in a lyrical form. Simon points out that Gaon's pentateuchal approach to the Psalter was largely ignored by most Jewish commentators, since it failed to take into account the relational aspect of the God who speaks in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>20</sup>

Contrary to Gaon's approach, commentators at the Karaite community (Salmon ben Yeruham, Yefet ben Ali Halevi, and David ben Abraham) argued that Psalms are mandatory prophetic prayers for the people of God of all times, especially for the Karaite exilic community.<sup>21</sup> Against Gaon, the Karaites insisted that Psalms were prophetically

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<sup>18</sup> H. Malter, *Life and Work of Saadiah Gaon* (Philadelphia, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Saadiah Gaon, *The Book of Psalms: Tafsir and Arabic Commentary*, ed. and trans. J. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1966). On Gaon's exegesis see "Saadya Gaon: An Appreciation of his Biblical Exegesis," by E. I. J. Rosenthal, *Jewish Themes*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 87-96.

<sup>20</sup> Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> About the Karaite Graboïs writes: "les Kéraïtes sont une secte qui, sous la direction d'Anan ben David de Bagdad, se sont séparés au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle du judaïsme 'rabbinique', refusant de reconnaître l'autorité du Talmud. Leur grand essor se situe entre les VIII<sup>e</sup> et Xe siècles, lorsqu'ils ont fondé leurs communautés en Mésopotamie, Perse, Syrie, Palestine, Egypte et l'Empire byzantin. Leur polémique avec le judaïsme

inspired by God to his servants (Moses, David, and others) in order to help his holy community to correctly approach him in times of joy or sorrow. Thus, Karaite's exegesis of the Psalter follows the "*peshet*" tradition (without following the traditional rabbinical glosses) and often interprets the message of the Psalter eschatologically, as addressing its immediate concerns.<sup>22</sup>

Although most of the exegetical work of Rabbi Moses Ibn Gikatilah on the Psalter has been lost, a scholarly reconstruction of his hermeneutical approach of the Psalter is possible. Simon contends that a careful analysis of references to Gikatilah's hermeneutics in Ibn Ezra's commentary on the Psalter allows arguing that Gikatilah adopted a "non-prophetic" approach to the Psalter.<sup>23</sup> Simon points out that although Gikatilah, as the rest of Jewish exegetes considered David as a prophet, he (Gikatilah) refused on literary and rhetorical ground to consider most of the Psalms as prophecies. According to him, most Psalms are not prophetic words, because they do not contain any prophetic formulation such as "thus says the Lord!" Instead, Psalms are formulated as petitionary prayers, and belong to the genre of song or prayer. Thus, their authors are not principally prophets dealing with future predictions, but are rather poets who certainly spoke under God's inspiration. As to the predictions found in prophetic literature (as in the Psalms), Gikatilah acknowledges their veracity, but argues that they refer only to their own time, and have no impact on the eschatological messianic time to come. Gikatilah's

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"rabbinique", qui avait pris des formes acerbes, les amena à développer leur propre exégèse, qui a été critiquée par Saadiyah Gaon." Graboïs, "L'exégèse rabbinique," p. 238, note 13.

<sup>22</sup> In his commentary on Psalm 109, Yefet argues that the Karaite community is the "righteous servant" of God who is being persecuted by both gentiles nations and domestic enemies. Yefet ben Ali, *The Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Paris: 1846); J. Mann, "Early Karaite Bible Commentaries," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 12 (1921/1922): 435-526.

<sup>23</sup> Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, pp. 113-136.

literary and rhetorical approach to the Psalter is motivated by his adherence to the “*peshet*” exegesis that emphasizes the plain meaning of the text, and by his effort to counter Christian’s messianic application of Isaiah and the Psalter to Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

Gikatilah’s strong non-prophetic reading of the Psalter is somewhat tempered in Rashi’s exegesis (1040-1106). Rashi is considered as one of the greatest rabbis of the middle-age.<sup>25</sup> His literal approach to the Hebrew Bible influenced both Jewish and Christian commentators.<sup>26</sup> Rashi’s historical approach to the Psalter focuses on the literal reading of the text, without denying or overlooking its prophetic scope. He does acknowledge that David, the author of most of the Psalms spoke prophetically under the influence of the Holy Spirit, both about his earthly kingdom and the messianic kingdom to come. But given the conflictual relationship between Jewish and Christian use of the Old Testament in eleventh-century Europe, Rashi avoids the prophetic reading of the Psalter in order to discourage Christian interpreters from applying the messianic scope of the Psalter to the person and ministry of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Deliberately, Rashi opted for a strict literal and historical reading of the Psalter every time Christians used it to assert the

<sup>24</sup> On Gikatilah’s “non-prophetic” approach Simon concludes: “His argument was basically literary: the nature of the psalms as addresses to God, the poetical terminology in their headings, and the non-inclusion of the Book of Psalms among the prophetic writings are evidence that these are prayers rather than prophecies.” Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> E. Shereshevsky, *Rashi: The Man and His World* (New York: 1982); M. Liber, *Rashi, sa vie, son oeuvre, son influence* (Paris, 1953).

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, one of the greatest Christian commentators frequently quoted Rashi in his commentaries. And Rashi’s influence could have reached Calvin via Nicholas of Lyra, one of the fathers Calvin used the most in his exegetical work. See L. Smith, *Medieval Exegesis in Translation. Commentaries on the Book of Ruth* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>27</sup> See Gruber’s introductory remarks on the subject in M. I. Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms 1-89 (Books I-III) With English Translation, Introduction and Notes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 10-13; K. Hruby, “Exégèse rabbinique et exégèse patristique,” in *Exégèse biblique et judaïsme*, ed. J. E. Menard (Strasbourg: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1973), pp. 187-218; E. Shereshevsky, “Rashi’s and Christian Interpretations,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 61 (1970): 76-86.



fulfillment of the messianic hope of Israel through Jesus. In many instances, he overlooked traditional rabbinic messianic interpretation of prophetic books and the Psalter to counter Christian messianism with an “extreme” historical reading of the text. Commenting on Psalm 21:1 Rashi writes: “Our rabbis interpreted it as a reference to the king Messiah, but it is correct to interpret it as a reference to David himself as a retort to the Christians who found in it support for their erroneous beliefs.”<sup>28</sup>

Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) also interprets the Psalms prophetically, but unlike his predecessors, he is less polemical and accepts the traditional messianic interpretation of most Davidic Psalms. On the meaning of Psalm 2 he writes: “These are the words of one of the prophet-poets about David or about the Messiah. . . . If this is about the Messiah, the reference here is to Gog and Magog; if it is about David, the reference is to the nations around Jerusalem who fought against him, like the Arameans, Edom, Philistines, and Amalek.”<sup>29</sup>

Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235) also agrees with his predecessors and argues that although the human authors of the Psalter spoke as human beings, the spirit of God moved them and enabled them to speak words of revelation, and to predict the future.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, p. 123. On the meaning of Psalm 2:1 concerning the question of the psalmist on the reason nations are assembled against God's Messiah, Rashi writes: “Why do nations assemble? Our rabbis interpreted the subject as a reference to the King Messiah. However, according to its basic meaning and for a refutation of Christians it is correct to interpret it as a reference to David himself in consonance with what is stated in the Bible, ‘When the Philistines heard that Israel had anointed . . . David as king over them . . . (they) gathered their troops (1 Sam. 28:4), and they fell into his [David's] hand.’” Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, p. 52. On Isaiah 7:14 concerning the virginal birth of Emmanuel, Rashi departs from traditional rabbinic messianic interpretation and argues that the prophecy is time bound and should be explained in the context of the war between Resin, king of Aram and Pekah, king of Israel. Rashi, *Commentaire sur Isaïe*, ed. I. Maarsen (Jérusalem, 1936); M. Waxman, *Rashi, His Teachings* (New York, 1958), pp. 9-47.

<sup>29</sup> See the Hebrew-English version in Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, pp. 324-325.

<sup>30</sup> D. Kimhi, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms CXX-CL*, eds. and trans. J. Baker and E. W. Nicholson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); *Commentary on the Psalms 42-72*, ed. S. I.

Accordingly Kimhi interprets Psalms 2, 45, 53, 72, and most of the Psalms as prophetic texts referring to the messiah and to his reign, but against Christians Kimhi insists that the predictions of the prophets (and the psalmists) concerning the messiah are not realized yet.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, it may be stated that although there are different approaches to the Psalter, the consensus among most Jewish medieval commentators was that the Psalms speak both of the earthly kingdom of God as experienced by Israel under the leadership of David and his dynasty, and the eschatological kingdom of God to come during the reign of the messiah. Even though most medieval Jewish commentators, in their efforts to counter Christian messianic claims followed the plain meaning (*peshet*) of the text of the Psalter, and explained it in the light of the history of Israel, they still accepted its prophetic scope as predicting the eschatological messianic time, which still was to come.<sup>32</sup> Thus, for most medieval Jewish commentators the Psalter was both unfulfilled prophecy and sacred poetry.

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Esterson (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1935); *Commentary on Psalms 1-41*, ed. S. M. Schiller-Szinessy (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1883).

<sup>31</sup> Graboïs, "L'exégèse rabbinique," p. 240.

<sup>32</sup> Marcel Simon writes: "Il est vraisemblable que l'interprétation messianique de certains textes, d'abord acceptée, a été écartée, au moins pour un temps, en Israël, justement pour répondre à l'utilisation qu'en faisaient les chrétiens." M. Simon, "La Bible dans les premières controverses entre juifs et chrétiens," in *Le monde grec ancien et la Bible*, La Bible de tous les temps, vol. 2, ed. C. Mondésert (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), p. 118. See also J. J. Brierre-Narbonne, *Les prophéties messianiques de l'Ancien Testament dans la littérature juive* (Paris, 1933); *Exégèse rabbinique des prophéties messianiques*, 5 vols (Paris, 1934-1938); G. Stemmerger, "Elements of Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Jewish-Christian Disputation," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation 1/2: The Middle Ages*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), pp. 578-590.

### **3. Christian Exegesis of the Psalter**

#### **3. 1. The Early and Medieval Church**

As argued in the preceding pages, patristic exegesis of the Scriptures was largely dependent on Jewish hermeneutics because of its continuity with the early Israelite church.<sup>33</sup> Although most church fathers did not know or did not have a good working knowledge of biblical Hebrew, they followed the reading of the Hebrew text through its Greek and Latin translations (the LXX, and the Vulgate). In general, most church fathers interpreted the Psalms prophetically and considered them as referring to the life and ministry of Jesus. The fathers mostly quote the Psalms apologetically as proof texts concerning the fulfillment of David's messianic prophecies in the life and ministry of Jesus. This prophetic reading of the Psalter results from the eschatological scope of the titles of the Psalms found in the LXX. The titles of the Psalms in the LXX function as hermeneutical markers for the Fathers who apply them directly to Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Now, given the vast amount of patristic material (commentaries) on the Psalter, the following section provides a limited analysis of the interpretation of the Psalter in the works of selected fathers who have significantly impacted traditional biblical hermeneutics. Among the Fathers, the exegetical works of Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, and Nicholas of Lyra, and among sixteenth-century commentators, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Luther, Musculus and Bucer on the Psalter stand as important hermeneutical highlights

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<sup>33</sup> See the introduction to the second chapter.

<sup>34</sup> See Dorival, "A propos de quelques titres des Psaumes de la Septante," pp. 21-36.

for the exegesis of the church. The following lines give an overview of their hermeneutics of the Psalter with reference to the imprecations of the Psalms.

### 3. 1. 1. Jerome and the Psalms

Among the Fathers, Jerome is the one who had had more exposure to the Hebrew text of the Psalter. He translated it, preached on it and commented on it. His translation activity began in 384 A.D. Pope Damasus, confronted by the difficulties created by the corruption of the Old-Latin Bible (through copyists' errors), requested the help of Jerome for the revision of the gospels in circulation. But instead of limiting his work to the gospel, Jerome extended it to the Old Testament, and corrected the Latin Psalter following the LXX. In Palestine (Bethlehem), between 389 A.D and 392 A.D, he continued his work and revised his translation of the Psalter following Origen's Hexapla (this Psalter will be called the Gallican Psalter because of its wide use in the province of Gaul and will be included in the Vulgate).<sup>35</sup> And finally, between 392 A.D and 393 A.D Jerome produced a Latin translation of the Psalter based on the Hebrew text.<sup>36</sup>

In his monastery at Bethlehem, Jerome devoted a considerable amount of time to the preaching of the Psalms to his monks.<sup>37</sup> Jay indicates that in his homilies to the

<sup>35</sup> H. F. D. Sparks, "The Latin Bible," in *The Bible in the Early Church*, Studies in Early Christianity, vol. 3, ed. E. Ferguson (New York/London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), pp. 110-115.

<sup>36</sup> This translation will be known as the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*. For the bibliography on Jerome's translations of the Psalter from the Greek and Hebrew see CCSL 72, pp. XXXVI-XXXVIII; C. Estin, "Les traductions du Psautier," in *Le monde latin antique et la Bible*, La Bible de tous les temps, eds. J. Fontaine and C. Pietri (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), pp. 67-88; R. Kieffer, "Jerome: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/1*, pp. 663-681; C. Estin, *Saint Jérôme traducteur des Psaumes* (Thèse de doctorat: Paris, 1977); M. J. Rondeau, *Les commentaires patristiques du Psautier (III-Ve siècles)*, vol. 1 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1982), p. 154; R. Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham's Commentary on Jerome's Hebrew Psalter," *Biblica* 34 (1953): 44-77, 159-192, 275-298; C. M. Cooper, "Jerome's 'Hebrew Psalter' and the New Latin Version," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69 (1950): 233-244.

<sup>37</sup> Morin has recovered 90 homilies on the Psalter written by Jerome, for a long time lost to the Church. D. G. Morin, ed., *Tractatus siue homiliae in psalmos, in Marci euangelium aliaque uaria argumenta*; and

Psalter, Jerome follows two exegetical methods: he inquires first for the “literal” or “historical” meaning of the text before inquiring for its “spiritual” sense.<sup>38</sup> In the homilies, the first level of interpretation (the literal-historical) is judged profitable for the “simples.” According to Jerome, the historical interpretation of a text helps the simples to gradually elevate to the hidden sacred mysteries. The mysteries of God are understood when the text is read spiritually. And the spiritual reading of Scripture implies a christological approach, since the all Scripture speaks of Christ. This, however, does not mean that Christ should indiscriminately be found everywhere in Scripture. Jerome refuses a christological application of the Old Testament not warranted by the literal (historical) context of the text. For example, Jerome refutes those who apply Psalm 1 to Christ, since the context of the Psalm, according to him does not warrant a christological application. Jerome’s homilies on the Psalter are paraenetic in nature and purpose. The audience is encouraged to the imitation of Christ, found in the Psalter through the spiritual reading of the text.

The free and paraenetic style of Jerome’s homilies is replaced in the commentaries by a heavy philological and grammatical analysis of the text. The literal (historical) meaning of the text is now investigated through a scholarly dialogue with

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*Tractatus siue homiliae in psalmos quattuordecim* in *Anecdota Maredsolana*, III, II, III (Maredsous, 1897 and 1903 (=CCL, 78). But his position was challenged by V. Peri, *Omilia origeniane sui Salmi*. Contributo all’identificazione del testo latino (Città del Vaticano, 1980), who argues that Jerome’s homilies on the Psalter are but translations of Origen’s work. In defense of Morin, Jay contends that Peri’s position is untenable because “elle minimise en particulier systématiquement l’importance des interventions incontestables de Jérôme: allusions personnelles ou contemporaines, pointes polémiques anti-ariennes et anti-origéniennes, adresses répétées à un auditoire monastique, etc. Elle ignore plus encore les différences radicales de ton et de style entre la plupart de ces homélies et les nombreuses traductions d’homélies d’Origène que nous ont laissées Rufin et Jérôme lui-même.” P. Jay, “Jérôme et la pratique de l’exégèse,” in *Le monde latin antique et la Bible*, pp. 529-534, especially p. 529, note 25.

<sup>38</sup> Thus, “la pratique exégétique de Jérôme ne pouvait, au ive siècle, être radicalement neuve; elle s’inscrit logiquement dans le cadre, consacré par une tradition déjà longue, des deux grands sens de l’Ecriture.” Jay, “Jérôme et la pratique de l’exégèse,” p. 536.

Jewish, Christian and pagan sources.<sup>39</sup> The literal interpretation of the text serves as the foundation of the spiritual meaning. But Jerome's search for the spiritual meaning of the text does not promote a free and unrestrained use of allegory. Although Jerome does not completely reject allegory, his spiritual interpretation avoids it and follows the typological use of the Old Testament.<sup>40</sup> Jerome's commentaries on Isaiah and the Psalms are the best places where his typological approach of the Old Testament is displayed. People, events, and offices in the Old Testament are not only "*umbra*", but also prophecies, direct predictions of revelational events realized in the history of Israel, in the Roman Empire, and ultimately in Christ. Thus, wherever the historical context allows, Jerome reads the Psalms messianically.

His interpretation of Psalm 109 offers a better example of his typological and messianic reading of the Old Testament and of the Psalter. Taking his clue from the heading of the Psalm, "Unto the End," Jerome argues that the heading of the Psalm is a

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<sup>39</sup> "L'importance du sens littéral se mesure encore à l'extension que Jérôme lui reconnaît. Il ne le limite pas, en effet, au sens obvie qu'une paraphrase rapide suffit parfois à dégager. En grammairien, il y fait entrer avec la plus grande netteté tout ce qui relève du style figuré, y compris les anthropomorphismes qui prêtent à Dieu gestes ou sentiments. ... Jérôme mobilise donc toutes les ressources du savoir au service de l'exégèse littérale. Les éclaircissements historiques y occupent la première place. Jérôme les emprunte d'abord à la Bible elle-même, première source de l'histoire d'Israël. Mais il ne néglige pas l'histoire profane, dont-il attend en particulier qu'elle atteste objectivement, pourrait-on dire, la réalisation de certaines annonces prophétiques." Jay, "Jérôme et la pratique de l'exégèse," p. 537. On Jerome's interest on the historical reading of the text Kieffer comments: "But his hard labour with the philological aspects of the Bible made him more and more interested in the literal or historical meaning of the texts ... At times he distinguishes between *three meanings*: the historical or literal, the tropological or allegorical, and the spiritual or mystical." R. Kieffer, "Jerome: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/1*, p. 674.

<sup>40</sup> "Enrichi de termes comme *umbra*, *imago*, *typus*, mis en relation avec *ueritas*, c'est en définitive à une perspective unique, où les réalités 'historiques' de l'Ancienne Alliance et les réalités 'spirituelles' de la Nouvelle se correspondent comme 'l'ombre' et 'la vérité', que nous introduit ce vocabulaire hiéronymien du sens spirituel. C'est dire que, pour accéder à ce deuxième niveau de lecture de l'Écriture, l'exégèse 'typologique' apparaît la voie privilégiée, encore que Jérôme, tout comme d'ailleurs l'ensemble des Pères, ait ignoré le mot." Jay, "Jérôme et la pratique de l'exégèse," pp. 538-539.

sign that the message of the psalm pertains not to the present but to the future.<sup>41</sup> Now the present that Jerome is referring to is not his present, but rather the historical present of the text. In other words, Psalm 109 does not speak of the present of King David, but rather King David, as a prophet, speaks of the future, when the King of Kings, the messiah will be betrayed by his own people.

Jerome reads Psalm 109 in the light of the events related to the ministry and passion of Christ. The enemy accusing and attacking Christ is double: Judas, his personal disciple and the Jews, his own people. It is against both Judas as an individual and the Jews as a nation that the imprecations of Psalm 109 are directed.<sup>42</sup> The curses articulated in Psalm 109 predict the death of Judas and his replacement by another disciple, but also the destruction of the Jewish community which is stripped of its land and sent into exile to wander as the children of the wicked mentioned in Psalm 109.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. 1. 2. Augustine and the Psalms

The book of Psalms was one of the favorites of Augustine, the bishop of Hippo. Augustine meditated, preached and expounded on the Psalter throughout his long ministry in Africa, first as a new convert to the Catholic faith, then as priest, and after as bishop.<sup>44</sup> Wright affirms that the Psalter was “the special love of the African father. He

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<sup>41</sup> See Jay, “Jérôme et la pratique de l’exégèse,” pp. 538-539.

<sup>42</sup> See Jerome commentary of Psalm 109 in Saint Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 1, trans. M. L. Ewald (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964).

<sup>43</sup> Jerome, *Homilies*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>44</sup> See J. J. O'Donnell, ed., *Augustine's Confessions I-III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); F. Van Fleteren, “Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview,” in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, eds. Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 1-32; V. J. Bourke, “Augustine on the Psalms,” in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, pp. 55-70; Burns, “Augustine's Distinctive Use of the Psalms in the Confessions: the Role of Music and Recitation,” *Augustinian Studies* 24 (1993): 133-146; S. Poque, “Les Psaumes dans les Confessions,” in *Saint Augustin et la Bible, La Bible de tous les temps*, vol. 3, ed. A. M. La Bonnardière (Paris: Beauchesne, 1986), pp. 155-166; J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine* (London:

produced expositions of them all, informed by his distinctive, christological and ecclesiological exegesis.”<sup>45</sup>

But to better understand Augustine’s christological and ecclesiastical interpretation of the Psalter, one has to analyze the hermeneutical principles that direct his interpretation of Scripture, especially his interpretation of the Old Testament as presented in *De Doctrina Christiana*.<sup>46</sup> In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine contends that the purpose of biblical interpretation is to encourage the love of God and the love for the neighbor. He writes: “whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”<sup>47</sup>

Augustine grounds scriptural interpretation on the love of God and the neighbor, since according to him, Scriptures are but signs that point to the real thing, to God, the absolute reality to be loved and enjoyed through faith. Thus, any biblical interpretation,

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Longmans, 1954); P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de S. Augustin* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> D. F. Wright, “Augustine: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/1*, p. 703.

<sup>46</sup> *De Doctrina Christiana* is a complex work written in a long span of time throughout Augustine’s ministry. The work is a treatise on basic Christian doctrines, hermeneutics, and homiletics. The work was written probably for the training of local clergy to the interpretation and preaching of the word of God. For the discussion on *De Doctrina Christiana* see M. Moreau, “Lecture du ‘De Doctrina christiana’,” in *Saint Augustin et la Bible*, pp. 253-285; I. Bochet, “Le cercle herméneutique dans le *De doctrina christiana* d’Augustin,” in *Augustine and his Opponents, Jerome, other Latin Fathers after Nicaea, Orientalia, Studia Patristica*, vol. 33, ed. E. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), pp. 16-21; B. D. Jackson, “The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*,” *Revue des études augustiniennes* 15 (1969): 4-49.

<sup>47</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, in *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. P. Schaff, trans. J. F. Shaw (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 533.



even erroneous in methodology, which promotes the love for God and the neighbor is to be preferred, although erroneous interpretation should be avoided.<sup>48</sup>

Now that the twofold love for God and the neighbor is established as the foundation of biblical interpretation, Augustine issues two important hermeneutical principles to be followed in actual exegesis of Scripture. He argues that Scripture should be read literally, i.e., words should be interpreted according to their natural sense. But when the literal meaning is so obscure and fails to communicate its natural meaning, or when it contradicts the commandment to love God and the neighbor, then Scripture should be read figuratively (spiritually).<sup>49</sup> And the spiritual meaning of Scripture can be allegorical, anagogical, or tropological. But the spiritual reading of Scripture does not only build up faith and hope, but mostly opens believers to Christ, the *telos* of the Old Testament, and the center of the whole Scripture.

The central position of Christ plays an important role in Augustine's interpretation of the Old Testament, especially in the book of Psalms. In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine adopts a christological approach. The theme of Christ as the head of the church found in Ephesians 5:22 is used as a hermeneutical device to unlock the meaning of each Psalm. According to Augustine, the Psalms speak of Christ and the church. They are the prayers of Christ to the Father for his own behalf,

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<sup>48</sup> "Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray, but not through any falsehood in Scripture. Nevertheless, as I was going to say, if his mistaken interpretation tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, he goes astray in much the same way as a man who by mistake quits the high road, but yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads. He is to be corrected, however, and to be shown how much better it is not to quit the straight road, lest, if he get into a habit of going astray, he may sometimes take cross roads, or even go in the wrong direction altogether." Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 533.

<sup>49</sup> This principle plays a key role in Augustine's interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms, as will be demonstrated subsequently.

and on behalf of the church, his body. But the Psalms are also the prayers of the church, addressed to its head, the Christ.<sup>50</sup> And Rondeau comments: “la voix qui se fait entendre dans les Psaumes est la voix du Christ total, tête et corps, époux et épouse, deux dans une seule chair, donc deux dans une seule voix: tel est le thème fondamental des *Enarrationes in Psalmos* d’Augustin.”<sup>51</sup> For example, commenting on the meaning of Psalm 85 (86):1, Augustine overlooks completely any literal or historical dimension of the text and applies it directly to Christ. He argues:

No greater gift could God have given to men than in making His Word, by which He created all things, their Head, and joining them to Him as His members: that the Son of God might become also the Son of man, one God with the Father, one Man with men; so that when we speak to God in prayer for mercy, we do not separate the Son from Him; and when the Body of the Son prays, it separates not its Head from itself: and it is one Saviour of His body, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who both prays for us, and prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us, as our Priest; He prays in us, as our Head; He is prayed to by us, as our God. Let us therefore recognise in Him our words, and His words in us.<sup>52</sup>

But when confronted to the difficult imprecatory passages of the Psalter, Augustine resorts to his twin concern about the love of God and the love for the neighbor as an hermeneutical marker. He argues that the curses of the Psalter are not directed

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<sup>50</sup> For the discussion on Augustine’s interpretation of the Psalms see O. I. Antomas, “La iglesia, cuerpo de Cristo, en las Enarraciones a los salmos de san AGUSTIN,” *Mayéutica* 21 (1995): 9-49; J. Godet, *L’image de Dieu en l’homme dans les Enarrationes in Psalmos de Saint Augustin* (Diss. Institutum Patristicum “Augustinianum,” 1995); S. Poque, “L’énigme des Enarrationes in Psalmos 110-117 de saint Augustin,” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 77 (1976): 241-264; H. Rondet, “Essai sur la chronologie des ‘Enarrationes in Psalmos’ de saint Augustin,” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 61 (1960): 111-127, 258-286; 65 (1964): 110-136; 68 (1967): 180-202; 71 (1970): 174-200; 75 (1974): 161-188; 77 (1976): 99-118; A. la Bonnardière, “Les Enarrationes in Psalmos prêchées par saint Augustin à l’occasion de fêtes de martyrs,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971): 73-104; “Les ‘Enarrationes in Psalmos’ prêchées par saint Augustin à Carthage en décembre 409,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 11 (1976): 52-90.

<sup>51</sup> M. Rondeau, *Les Commentaires patristiques du psautier (IIIe-Ve siècles), vol. II, Exégèse prosopologique et théologique* (Rome: Pont. Institutum, 1985), p. 365. See also, Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz*.

<sup>52</sup> St. Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. First Series, vol. 8, ed. P. Schaff (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T.&T. Clark/Eerdmans, 1989), p. 58.

against the psalmist's actual enemies, but against moral vices, or against evil-spiritual forces opposed to the righteousness of the kingdom of God.

Commenting on the nature of the enemies in Psalm 35, Augustine is forced to acknowledge their historical nature. He agrees that those who oppose the psalmist are certainly human foes who persecute and oppress him: "Who are they that persecute thee? Haply thy neighbour, or he whom thou hast offended, or to whom thou has done wrong, or who would take away what is thine. There are indeed even these enemies to us, and they persecute us."<sup>53</sup> But Augustine quickly indicates that the real enemy, those Scripture teaches believers to resist are invisible, they are the principalities and powers, opposed to the kingdom of God.<sup>54</sup>

But the enemies to be destroyed represent also moral evils to be opposed and overcome by believers. On the meaning of the imprecations of Psalm 137 asking that the children of the psalmist's enemies may be dashed against the rock, Augustine writes: "What are the little ones of Babylon? Evil desires at their birth . . . When lust is born . . . when lust is little, by no means let it gain the strength of evil habit . . . dash it. But thou fearest, lest though dashed it die not; 'Dash it against the Rock; and that Rock is Christ.'"<sup>55</sup>

Augustine applies also some of the imprecations expressed in the Psalter to the Pharisees, the enemies of Christ. In Psalm 57 (58):7 (8), Augustine relates the psalmist's demand that his enemies' teeth should be broken in their mouth to pharisaic speechlessness before Christ. Augustine explains the psalmist's imprecation in the light

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<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, p. 79.

of Jesus' argument against the Pharisees concerning tax payment. According to Augustine, the teeth of the Pharisees, the enemies of Christ were broken in their own mouth, since "He hath compelled them with their mouth against themselves to give sentence."<sup>56</sup> Jesus' response concerning tax payment to Caesar and praise and adoration to God forced the Pharisees to provide answers and explanations that contradicted their own position: "He willed to break utterly their teeth, wherewith they were gaping in order to bite; but in their own mouth He would do it."<sup>57</sup>

And concluding on Augustine's christological hermeneutics of the Psalms, Wright affirms: "One cannot but admire Augustine's versatility in applying a profound theological theme that here becomes an interpretative device serving highly diverse ends."<sup>58</sup>

### 3. 1. 3. Chrysostom and the Psalms

In his introduction to the work of Chrysostom Mitchell argues that, "to understand Chrysostom as a biblical interpreter one must always keep in mind his primary role as a preacher."<sup>59</sup> Mitchell contends that Chrysostom's exposition of Scripture always had in mind and "specifically address a congregation of the faithful, whom he seeks to confront with the meaning of the written word and spur to action."<sup>60</sup> And Chrysostom expounded the Scripture for his congregation and readers according to the general hermeneutical

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<sup>55</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, p. 632.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, p. 232-233.

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, p. 232.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, "Augustine: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/1*, p. 713.

<sup>59</sup> M. M. Mitchell, "Chrysostom, John (c. 347-407)," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. D. K. McKim (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), p. 29.

principles followed by the Antiochene school.<sup>61</sup> But as pointed out by Hidal, “John Chrysostom represents the Antiochene school of exegesis in a clarified and moderate way.”<sup>62</sup> And Chrysostom’s moderate historical exegesis is visible through his openness to the christological dimension of the text. In contrast to Diodore’s and Theodore’s strict historical and literal reading of the Old Testament limiting its message to Israel, Chrysostom acknowledges both the historical and typological readings of the Old Testament that allow its application to Christ.<sup>63</sup> And this is especially true for his commentary on the Psalter.<sup>64</sup> Hidal argues that although “the Antiochene tradition with a *hypothesis* is upheld, but John does not always place the Psalm in a historical context. He is not so fascinated by Israel’s history as his predecessors are.”<sup>65</sup>

Psalm 109 represents a good example where Chrysostom’s historical exegesis departs from that of his predecessors. Chrysostom does not expound Psalm 109 in the light of the life and ministry of David or Israel, but rather applies it directly to Christ. He

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<sup>60</sup> Mitchell, “Chrysostom,” p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> The hermeneutical differences between the Antiochene and Alexandrian school, although real, should not be pressed. There are important elements of continuity between the two schools of biblical interpretation. For the discussion see J. N. B. Carleton Paget, “The Christian Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Alexandrian Tradition,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation I/1*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 478-542; S. Hidal, “Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Antiochene School with its Prevalent Literal and Historical Method,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/1*, pp. 543-568; D. A. Garrett, *An Analysis of the Hermeneutics of John Chrysostom’s Commentary on Isaiah 1-8 with an English Translation* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 5-23.

<sup>62</sup> Hidal, “Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Antiochene School,” p. 562.

<sup>63</sup> Garrett, *An Analysis of the Hermeneutics of John Chrysostom*, pp. 20-21. See also, R. C. Hill, “Chrysostom as Old Testament Commentator,” *Estudios Bíblicos* 46 (1988): 61-77.

<sup>64</sup> On Chrysostom and the Psalter see, R. C. Hill, “Chrysostom’s Commentary on the Psalms: Homilies or Tracts?” in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, ed. L. Cross (Melbourne, 1998); “The Spirituality of Chrysostom’s Commentary on the Psalms,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997): 569-579; “Chrysostom, Commentator of the Psalms,” *Estudios Bíblicos* 56 (1998): 61-74.

<sup>65</sup> Hidal, “Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Antiochene School,” p. 562.

argues: “So to whom does the psalm refer? Some things are in reference to Judas, the Spirit prophesizing through David, the remainder about others.”<sup>66</sup> As for the imprecations formulated in the psalm, Chrysostom argues that although harsh, they are not immoral because they are “inspired . . . composed in the form of a curse, announcing and foretelling . . . what will befall those who wrong their neighbor, those who rise up with trickery and corrupt attitude against those who have done them no wrong.”<sup>67</sup> And in the history of salvation, these inspired compositions were realized in the life of Judas, the disciple who betrayed Christ.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. 1. 4. Theodoret and the Psalms

In contrast to Diodore who was an exegetical innovator and to Chrysostom who was known as the “golden mouth,” i.e., a great preacher, Theodoret is “rather the one who tersely and effectively summarizes the Antiochene tradition. What he lacks in originality, he abundantly compensates for in learning and assiduity.”<sup>69</sup> And McCollough points out that Theodoret’s biblical approach “defies easy alignment with either of the two prominent methodological camps, the Antiochenes or the Alexandrians.”<sup>70</sup> McCollough argues that in his commentaries, Theodoret uses different strategies to expound the Scripture. From a simple historical reading of the text,

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<sup>66</sup> J. Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms II*, trans. R. C. Hill (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms II*, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> In Psalm 137, however, Chrysostom offers a more historical reading of the text. He limits its scope to the history of Israel and argues that the children to be smitten against the rock are the children of the historical Babylonians who oppressed the people of God. Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms II*, pp. 231-234.

<sup>69</sup> Hidal, “Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Antiochene School,” p. 566.

<sup>70</sup> C. T. McCollough, “Theodoret of Cyrus (393-458), in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, p. 71.

Theodoret interprets the Scripture either typologically or prophetically. According to Theodoret, the Scripture speaks first of all about God's work in the history of Israel, then in the history of the New Testament, and finally in the history of the Christian Church. Thus, Theodoret approaches the Old Testament historically, figuratively and typologically.<sup>71</sup> And the book of Psalms is the best place where Theodoret's historical, figurative and typological readings of the text is exemplified.

Expounding the meaning of Psalm 55:1, Theodoret argues that, "though blessed David spoke this psalm when pursued by Saul . . . at the same time he also forecasts the Jews' plots against the savior, and in himself foreshadows the Lord's sufferings."<sup>72</sup> Explaining the meaning of the imprecatory passages of Psalm 55, Theodoret argues that David's prayer asking God to "drawn" his enemies and "divide their tongues" goes beyond the destruction of his actual enemies. "He seems to be foretelling the discord and transgressions of Jerusalem and at the same time to be listing the forms of its wickedness . . . which they embraced while not accepting the salutary laws of the Savior."<sup>73</sup>

Psalm 109 is another place where Theodoret's Christological interpretation is visible. In the introduction to the psalm, Theodoret explains that the psalm is a prophecy concerning the passion of Christ caused by the Jews and Judas. And the imprecations articulated in the psalm are not curses but prophecies foretelling the destruction of the enemies of Christ. He contends that, "the inspired word in this case does not proceed by

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<sup>71</sup> For the discussion see J. N. Guinot, "Un évêque exégète: Théodoret de Cyr," in *Le monde grec ancien et la Bible*, Bible de Tout les Temps 1 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), pp. 335-360; G. W. Ashby, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus as Exegete of the Old Testament* (Grahamstown, 1972).

<sup>72</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms, 1-72*, trans. R. C. Hill (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 314.

<sup>73</sup> Theodoret, *Commentary on the Psalms I*, pp. 317-318.

way of cursing but by foretelling the punishments coming both to Jews and to Judas.

This prophecy is expressed as a prayer.”<sup>74</sup>

### 3. 1. 5. Aquinas and the Psalms

Aquinas’s exegesis of the Psalter follows his general hermeneutics of Scripture.

As stated in the introduction to his *Summa Theologica*, Scripture, according to Aquinas, has one primary meaning, the literal meaning, but also a secondary meaning, the spiritual or mystical meaning based on the literal meaning.<sup>75</sup>

In his study *Esquisse d’une histoire de l’exégèse latine au Moyen Age*, Spicq argues that Aquinas is the primary representative, among thirteenth-century biblical exegetes, of a literal exegesis that followed closely the nuances of the text thanks to a careful grammatical analysis. Aquinas’s grammatical reading of the text allowed him to posit the possibility of a double or of a multiple literal meaning of the text. But Spicq points out that the possibility of the multiple literal meaning of the text does not mean that the biblical text as such has two literal meanings, but means that “aucune

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<sup>74</sup> Theodoret, *Commentary on the Psalms II*, p. 200.

<sup>75</sup> Aquinas argues: “That God is the author of Holy Scripture should be acknowledged, and he has the power, not only of adapting words to convey meanings (which mean also can do), but also of adapting things themselves. In every branch of knowledge words have meaning, but what is special here is that the things meant by words also themselves mean something. That first meaning whereby the words signify things belongs to the sense first mentioned, namely the historical or literal. That meaning, however, whereby the things signified by the words in their turn also signify other things, is called the spiritual sense; it is based on and presupposes the literal sense. Now this spiritual sense is divided into three ... Well then, the allegorical sense is brought into play when the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law; the moral sense when the things done in Christ and in those who prefigured him are signs of what we should carry out; and the anagogical sense when the things that lie ahead in eternal glory are signified. Now because the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of holy Scripture is God who comprehends everything all at once in his understanding, it comes not amiss, as St. Augustine observes, if many meanings are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture.” St. T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), Ia, Q1, art. 10.



interprétation n'étant absolument décisive, l'une et l'autre peuvent être légitimement proposées."<sup>76</sup>

Now the literal meaning is the base upon which Aquinas builds the spiritual sense of Scripture (as his predecessors did). And Dubois observes that in Aquinas, the spiritual sense "unfolds itself in three directions or according to three levels: the allegoric, according to which the New Testament is prefigured in the Old; the moral, according to which the word of the Scriptures is a rule of life; and finally the analogical, by which the Scriptures signify the eternal realities of the glory or the kingdom to come."<sup>77</sup>

In general, Aquinas's hermeneutics follows the traditional *quadrige*, but as argued by Dubois, "what is important, is precisely the insistence, novel for its clarity, . . . the importance attached to the literal sense as the foundation of others. It is not strictly speaking, an innovation, since Thomas cites Augustine to support his synthesis. It is certain, however, that he proposed, on this base, once affirmed, a new equilibrium, or at least a new way of organizing it."<sup>78</sup> And this capacity to offer a more balanced literal reading of Scripture comes from Aquinas's resolve to "faire une exégèse réelle; appuyée sur les mots et la grammaire, tenant compte du contexte, elle analyse le sens littéral qui est unique, encore qu'on ne puisse toujours le déterminer avec précision."<sup>79</sup> Thus, although Aquinas accepts the traditional *quadrige*, he sifts it, since according to him,

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<sup>76</sup> C. Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au Moyen Age* (Paris: Vrin, 1944), p. 207.

<sup>77</sup> M. Dubois, "Mystical and Realistic Elements in the Exegesis and Hermeneutics of Thomas Aquinas," in *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics through the Centuries*. JSOTSup., no. 59, ed. B. Uffenheimer and H. G. Reventlow (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> Dubois, "Mystical and Realistic Elements in Aquinas," p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au Moyen Age*, p. 209.

many traditional exegetes moved too far away from the real and immediate literal and spiritual meaning of the text.

Now Aquinas's effort to read the text literally is more visible in his interpretation of the Psalter. In the introduction to his *Postilla super Psalmos*, Aquinas contends that to better expound the Psalter one should avoid the extreme literalism of Theodore of Mopsuestia who refused to acknowledge any christological mention or implication of the message of the Old Testament (especially of Old Testament prophetic literature). Aquinas argues that the book of Psalms should be exposed historically regarding things already done, and christologically as prefiguring the coming Christ and his church.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Aquinas opts for a historical and christological reading of the Psalter. But contrary to his predecessors, Aquinas opts for a figurative Christology. The events that occurred in King David's life are but images of what will happen in the life and ministry of King Jesus. According to Aquinas, the figurative meaning of the Psalter implies its prophetic scope. The Psalter is a book of prophecy, but a prophecy by a direct manifestation of a truth itself.<sup>81</sup> And the truth manifested in the Psalter concerns David as a historical person, confronted by his real enemies (Saul and Absalom), but goes beyond its immediate historical setting and reaches its fulfillment in Christ. Aquinas contends that prophecies sometimes are pronounced in reference to current events at the moment. Yet such current events are not made principally in reference to the moment. They are made

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<sup>80</sup> We are following the French translation of Aquinas's *Postilla super Psalmos*. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, trad. J. S. De Saint-Eloy (Paris: Cerf, 1996), p. 39.

<sup>81</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 39. For a discussion of the subject see T. F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); J. F. Boyle, "The Twofold Division of St. Thomas' Christology in the *Tertia Pars*," *The Thomist* 60 (1996): 439-447; M. Morard, "A propos du commentaire des Psaumes de saint Aquinas," *Revue Thomiste* 96 (1996): 653-670; R. Weber, *Le Psautier romain et les autres anciens psautiers latins* (Rome: Abbaye Saint-Jerome, 1953).

only insofar as the contemporary references pre-figure future events: thus, certain current events are recorded within the kingdom of David and Solomon. Such events were not fulfilled within the rule of these two kings. Yet, they were fulfilled in the kingdom of Christ (the King of Kings) as stated and prefigured.<sup>82</sup>

For example, concerning the meaning of the lament expressed in Psalm 3, Aquinas offers a parallel interpretation of the Psalm. He introduces Psalm 3 as King David's lament over his son Absalom's treason, but in the development of the Psalm, he parallels the historical conflict between King David and his son Absalom with the historical conflict between Jesus, the eschatological king, and Judas his "son". Explaining verses 2 and 3 Aquinas contends that this statement pre-figures the persecution of Christ, as he himself suffered persecution from his own spiritual son, Judas Iscariot.<sup>83</sup> But Aquinas goes beyond the application of the text to the conflict between Christ and Judas and reads also the sufferings of the body of Christ. He explains that Psalm 3 can also pre-figure the persecution of Christ's one true church. For, by such persecution, members of the church suffer from temporal and spiritual enemies.<sup>84</sup>

The same double figurative reading of the Psalter is seen in Aquinas's interpretation of Psalm 12. Now King David suffers persecution not from his son Absalom, but from King Saul. Aquinas reads David as a figure of Christ, and Saul as a figure of the Jewish priesthood. As Saul pursued David and used every uncanny way to oppress him, so did the leaders of the Jewish people to Jesus.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 55.

<sup>84</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 55-59.

<sup>85</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 148-153.

Concerning the imprecations of the Psalter, Aquinas follows his double reading of the text. Aquinas explains that the imprecations of the Psalter are prophetic words uttered by David to forecast the physical destruction of his historical enemies, Saul and his accomplices and Absalom and his conjuration. But spiritually, the imprecations of the Psalter foretell the demise of the enemies of Christ and his church. Commenting on Psalm 35 Aquinas argues that David's imprecations asking God to rise and judge his enemies do not contradict the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:44 encouraging Christians to pray for those who persecute them. Aquinas argues that David's imprecations have a double meaning. They are, on the one hand, announcements of God's future judgment of the wicked, and on the other hand, they are words expressing not David's personal vindictiveness, but his anticipation of the manifestation of divine justice.<sup>86</sup>

Aquinas's historical and Christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter is made more visible in his explanation of Psalm 54:7, where David prays that God may exterminate his enemies. Aquinas argues that on the historical level, the imprecation means three things: David is predicting the downfall of his enemies or is praying God to turn his enemies' attacks away from him, or is asking for the manifestation of divine justice. On the christological level, Aquinas understands the extermination of the enemies of Christ as their conversion when they renounce their sinful life and live for God.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "Cependant il est écrit dans Matthieu: 'Priez pour ceux qui vous persécutent et vous calomnient.' On répondra en disant que dans toutes ces imprécations il y a une double interprétation. L'une selon laquelle elles sont prononcées par mode d'annonce, comme lorsqu'il dit: *Juge*, autrement dit: tu jugeras. Ou bien en tant que toutes ces choses proférées sont comprises non comme venant d'un zèle de vengeance personnelle, mais comme émanant de la divine justice, à laquelle les justes se conforment." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 415.

<sup>87</sup> "Mais cette attitude semble être en contradiction avec la parole du Christ qui dit: 'Priez pour ceux qui vous persécutent.' Il faut répondre à cette objection en disant que toutes les imprécations qu'on lit dans les

### 3. 1. 6. Nicholas of Lyra and the Psalms

Nicholas of Lyra's interpretation of Scripture follows the literal reading of the text initiated by previous medieval Bible exegetes (Albert the Great, Aquinas etc.). But more than his predecessors, Lyra's commitment to the literal meaning of Scripture implies also his commitment to the Hebrew text. Lyra endeavors to discover the literal meaning of the text by comparing the Latin text to the original in Hebrew and determining the correct reading to be exegeted.<sup>88</sup> But as correctly indicated by Lubac, the new spirit which inspires Lyra's literal reading of Scripture is still informed by the spiritual exegesis of the Fathers and continues it where applicable.<sup>89</sup> In the *Postillae perpetuae in universa Biblia*, Lyra follows the *duplex sensus litteralis* of the text. As Aquinas, Lyra defends the possibility of a "double-literal sense" of the text. According to Lyra, the literal reading of the text implies both the historical figures or events immediately related to the historical context of the biblical author, and the historical figures or events related to Christ and the Church, the accomplishment of Scripture.<sup>90</sup> But Lyra limits the double-

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prophètes peuvent se comprendre de trois manières. Ou bien, sous forme d'annonce, car ils parlaient sous l'esprit de Dieu et prédisaient l'avenir. Sous forme de prière, autrement dit: *Détourne, etc.*, c'est-à-dire tu détourneras. D'où le présent en hébreu: 'Tu détournes'. Ou bien en conformité avec la justice divine. Enfin, selon la signification spirituelle. Les pécheurs, lorsqu'ils cessent de pécher, meurent alors et cessent d'être pécheurs. Et cela doit faire l'objet d'une supplication incessante." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 676-677.

<sup>88</sup> Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine*, p. 338.

<sup>89</sup> Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, II,II, pp. 344-345.

<sup>90</sup> Gross-Diaz argues that Aquinas's and Lyra's *duplex sensus litteralis* is inspired by the Aristotelian *duplex causa efficiens* "which allowed exegetes from the mid thirteenth century on to deal with the questions raised in recognizing simultaneously a human and a divine author of Scripture." T. Gross-Diaz, "What's a Good Soldier to Do? Scholarship and Revelation in the Postills on the Psalms," in *Nicholas of Lyra. The Senses of Scripture*, eds., P. D. W. Krey and L. Smith (Leiden, 2000), p. 112, note 4. See also, A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship. Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: 1988), pp. 79-80; A. J. Minnis, A. B. Scott and D. Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100- c.1375: The Commentary-Tradition* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 271-274.

literal meaning of the Old Testament only in those passages where the Old Testament passage finds its spiritual fulfillment in the New Testament.<sup>91</sup>

Lyra's *duplex sensus litteralis* of Scripture is made clear in his exegesis of the Psalter. Lyra's interpretation of the Psalter is guided by his concern for the original historical context of its author (David), but also by his faithfulness to the new rereading of the Old Testament in the New by the apostles of Christ. Contrary to traditional exegesis which sees the Psalter as a clear prophetic book which describes well in advance the life, passion and glorification of Christ, Lyra, following Jewish exegesis (especially the exegesis of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi), argues that the Psalms speak of the life of the people of God as exemplified in the life of King David. The historical David becomes the key to unlocking the literal-historical meaning of the Psalter. Thus, to correctly interpret the Psalms, Lyra reads them in the light of the historical books of the Old Testament as they relate to the life of David and to the history of Israel.

Lyra's introduction to the Psalter establishes his commitment to the literal or historical reading of the Psalter based on the historicity and spirituality of David and the people of Israel. With most late medieval interpreters, Lyra introduces his commentary by dividing the text into different causes identified by Aristotle: the efficient, material, formal, and final causes.<sup>92</sup> Using Luke 7:16 which states that "A great prophet has risen among us," Lyra argues that the "great prophet" who has risen through the Psalter is not Christ, but David. Thus, David, the historical figure, is the efficient cause of the Psalter

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<sup>91</sup> Gross-Diaz, "What's a Good Soldier to Do?", p. 126. "It seems that his *duplex sensus litteralis* is pressed into service only when divine authority revealed through New Testament witness leaves Nicholas no choice."

<sup>92</sup> Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, pp. 197-200; A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship. Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: 1988), pp. 79-80.

and not Christ, the coming Messiah, as argued by the tradition.<sup>93</sup> The greatness of the Psalter, not of the prophecy about Christ, is considered as the material cause of the Psalter. According to Lyra, the Psalter is great because in it, all Scripture is found. The formal and final causes of the Psalter are seen in the richness of the Psalter which opens our hearts to God's blissfulness. Thus, the Psalter's message speaks first to the individual seekers, then to the church as whole, through the historical and spiritual figure of King David.

As to Lyra's actual application of the *duplex sensus litteralis* to the Psalter and to its imprecatory passages, three Psalms in particular provide good examples of his hermeneutics: Psalms 10, 2 and 35. Lyra starts his exegesis of Psalm 10, not by rehearsing the exegetical tradition of the church, but by conversing with Rashi, the Jewish Rabbi. Rashi reads Psalm 10 literally and explains it historically in the light of the David narrative in 1 Kings 26. But Lyra argues against Rashi that instead of explaining the psalm in the light of the 1 Kings 26 (1 Samuel 26), which describes David flight from Saul, the psalm should be read in the light of 1 Samuel 22, which relates David's return from the mountains. Contrary to the tradition, Lyra argues that the psalm is not about the pride of heretics who withdraw from the Church and follow their own teaching as taught by traditional exegesis, but is about David's faith in the Lord, although threatened by powerful enemies.<sup>94</sup> As argued by Gross-Diaz, Lyra's approach of Psalm 10 is an attempt to explain its literal meaning with the help of texts from the historical books. Thus, for Lyra, "the Psalm is about an episode in the life of David, and no

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<sup>93</sup> See the English translation of Lyra's introduction to the Psalter in Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, pp. 271-274.

<sup>94</sup> See Lyra's exegesis of Psalm 10 in Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam* (Rome, 1471-1472).

allusion is made to any spiritual interpretational possibilities, including the errors of the Jews or of any heretics, Jewish or Christian.”<sup>95</sup>

If Lyra’s exegesis of Psalm 10 demonstrates his total commitment to the literal and historical reading of the text, his exegesis of Psalm 2 by contrary, shows his continuity with the spiritual and prophetic reading of the Old Testament. Psalm 2 has always been read in the tradition of the church as a clear prophecy of the opposition of the nations and the Jewish people to the lordship of Jesus, the Messiah of God. But Lyra sides with Jewish commentators and argues that the psalm should be read historically. The context is that of David celebrating his victory over his political enemies (the Philistines). Against the traditional reading of the word *filius* as Christ, the co-eternal Son of God, Lyra contends that the word *filius* in Psalm 2 refers to David as the special son of God who has been chosen and anointed by God as a representative of his people.<sup>96</sup>

But Lyra’s vigorous historical interpretation of Psalm 2 is suddenly wrapped into the larger *duplex sensus litteralis* and opened to a christological application. Lyra also accepts that Psalm 2 speaks about Christ, the coming messiah. He argues that the lack of a heading at the beginning of the psalm may be an indication that its message is not solely related to king David’s life, but is open and should be applied to Christ as did the apostles in the New Testament. Lyra’s acceptance of the prophetic reading of Psalm 2 comes from his respect for its *relecture* (rereading) in the New Testament. Peter’s

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<sup>95</sup> Gross-Diaz, “What’s a Good Soldier to Do?”, p. 121-122.

<sup>96</sup> See Lyra’s exegesis of Psalm 10 in Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.



quotation of Psalm 2 in Acts 4: 25-28 coerces Lyra to agree with the tradition and apply it to Christ.<sup>97</sup>

The imprecatory passages of Psalm 35 provide another example of Lyra's double reading of the text. With his predecessors, Lyra agrees that on the literal level, Psalm 35 speaks of David's persecution by Saul. And he reads historically David's imprecations asking God to send his angel to pursue his enemies and make them fall. But as his predecessors, Lyra considers them as prophecies foretelling the destruction of Saul and his troops. According to Lyra, David's imprecations were realized when the Philistine's army defeated and killed Saul and his troops.<sup>98</sup> On the spiritual level, Lyra argues that David is the figure of Christ who also was opposed by the Jews and was delivered through God's justice.<sup>99</sup>

### 3. 2. Sixteenth-Century Commentators

#### 3. 2. 1. Lefèvre d'Etaples and the Psalms

In his study of Lefèvre d'Etaples's *Quincuplex Psalterium* Bedouelle contends that Lefèvre approached biblical interpretation as a "pédagogue."<sup>100</sup> Bedouelle argues that the same energy that led Lefèvre, as professor at the Cardinal Lemoine College, to

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<sup>97</sup> Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen âge*, p. 340.

<sup>98</sup> "David predixit prophecice: et motus zelo divine iustice et causam dicte punitionis . . ." See Lyra's exegesis of Psalm 35 in Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.

<sup>99</sup> "Mystice aute exponit psalmus iste de Christo cuius David fuit figura sicut dictu fuit supra psalmo." Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.

<sup>100</sup> G. Bedouelle, "La lecture christologique du psautier dans le *Quincuplex Psalterium* de Lefèvre d'Etaples," in *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVIe siècle*, pp. 131-143.

edit and comment on Aristotle for his students, led him also to translate and comment on the Psalms for the monks at the monastery of Saint-Germain de Prés.<sup>101</sup>

In his preface to the *Quincuplex Psalterium* dedicated to bishop Guillaume Briçonnet, Lefèvre explains that his interest in expounding the Psalter came from the sadness he discovered on the faces of monks at the monastery of Saint-Germain de Prés confronted by the limits of the literal sense for the edification of the soul.<sup>102</sup> To answer the spiritual and hermeneutical needs of his audience, Lefèvre inquires about the true, literal meaning of the biblical text. Following the New Testament authors' hermeneutics of the Old Testament, Lefèvre argues that the apostles, and the evangelists, who all were prophets of God, re-read the Old Testament, not according to its literal and natural sense, but according to the intention of the Old Testament prophets and of the Holy Spirit who spoke through them. And the intention of the Old Testament prophets and of the Holy Spirit is the true literal sense; since this literal-spiritual sense does not only correspond with the natural sense of the words spoken by the prophets, but mostly corresponds with what they intended to communicate through the literal sense. According to Lefèvre, if there is no doubt that the literal sense as traditionally understood is the natural sense of the biblical text, then the natural sense has no real meaning in itself outside of its spiritual

<sup>101</sup> Bedouelle, "La lecture christologique du psautier," pp. 133-134.

<sup>102</sup> He affirms: "Et si j'interrogeais ceux des moines qui cherchaient dans les Saintes Ecritures une nourriture, leur demandant assez souvent quelle douceur ils y trouvaient, ce qu'ils y goûtaient, nombre d'entre eux répondaient que toutes les fois qu'ils s'arrêtaient à je ne sais quel sens littéral, surtout en cherchant à comprendre ces saints psaumes, ils quittaient leur lecture tout à fait tristes, l'âme découragée." We are following the French translation of Lefèvre's *Quincuplex Psalterium* offered by G. Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d'Etaples et l'intelligence des Ecritures* (Geneva: Droz, 1976), p. 178. See also the latin version in idem, pp. 174-175; and in J. Lefèvre d'Etaples, *Quincuplex Psalterium. Fac-similé de l'édition de 1513* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), p. Aii. "Et si qui eorum ex sacris litteris pastum quaerent, saepius interrogavi quid in illis dulcedinis experirentur, quid saperent, responderunt plurimi quoties in nescio quem sensum litteralem incidissent et maxime cum divinorum psalmorum intelligentiam quaeritarent, se multum tristes et animo dejecto ex illa lectione abscedere solitos."

intention. Thus Lefèvre distinguishes between two literal senses: the literal-natural sense which is improper and is followed by those who are blinded by their carnal desires, and the literal-spiritual sense followed by those who are ready to accept the intention of the Holy Spirit speaking through the natural words of the prophets.<sup>103</sup>

After announcing his hermeneutical approach to Scripture, Lefèvre expounds the Psalter according to the literal-spiritual sense, according to the intention of the Holy Spirit who speaks through the psalmist. And the literal-spiritual sense unlocks the meaning of the Psalter by using the “key of David,” i.e., by reading it Christologically. Christ is the real intention of the Psalter prayed and sung by Old Testament prophets. According to Lefèvre, although the Psalter contains the prayers and songs of the Old Testament saints, these prayers and songs are not concerned with the depiction of the personal histories of their human authors. The human authors of the Psalter are prophets who spoke not about the earthly kingdom of David and Israel, but spoke solely of Christ and of his kingdom. Thus, there is no need for more than one literal sense of Scripture as is argued by the tradition which develops the four senses. Lefèvre contends that although the allegorical, tropological and anagogical senses are possible, they are only possible in the context of the literal-spiritual sense. Scripture has only one sense, the sense intended by its authors (human and divine), and this sense in the Psalter reveals Christ as the one who speaks through the prophetic prayers of ancient Israel.

Now Lefèvre accepts that the literal-spiritual, may sometimes be conveyed allegorically, or tropologically, or anagogically, but he contends that the Scriptures never can mean all four senses at once. He argues that: “Sensus igitur litteralis et spiritualis

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<sup>103</sup> Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, pp. Aii-Aiii.

coincidunt, non quem allegoricum aut tropologicum vocant sed quem Spiritus Sanctus in propheta loquens intendit.”<sup>104</sup>

Without hesitation, Lefèvre dismisses any literal exposition of the Psalter that limits its meaning to the historical context of David and Israel. For Lefèvre, “Christus Dominus qui principium est et finis universae hujus psalmodiae.”<sup>105</sup> For example, against the traditional Jewish exegesis of Psalm 2:1 which explains the hostility of foreign nations against the Messiah in the light of David and his political enemies, Lefèvre writes: “Verum Paulus et caeteri apostoli spiritu Dei repleti ad litteram de Christo domino, vero Mesiah et vero Dei filio (ut et verum est et decet) exponunt.”<sup>106</sup>

Lefèvre’s commitment to the Christological reading of the Psalter is so total that he does not hesitate to change, when needed, the traditional Latin texts (the *Vetus Latina*, and the *Psalterium Gallicum*) to achieve his purpose. One such case appears in his exegesis of Psalm 8:6. On the proper referent of “son of man” in Psalm 8:6, Lefèvre argues that the Psalm does not speak only of the human nature of Christ, as argued in traditional exegesis, but also of his divine nature. He contends that it is probable that the Hebrew text of Psalm 8:6 quoted by the apostle Paul in Hebrews . . . had “son of God” instead of “son of man” as in the Greek text which is not the original, but a translation. Lefèvre considers as impious any explanation of Psalm 8:6 that emphasizes the humanity of Christ over his divinity.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, pp. Aii-Aiii.

<sup>105</sup> Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, pp. Aiii v. “Le Christ Seigneur est le début (le principe) et la fin de toute cette psalmodie.” The translation in Bedouelle, “La lecture christologique du psautier,” p. 133.

<sup>106</sup> Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, pp. Aii-Aiii.

<sup>107</sup> “Neque de assumptio homine intelligimus, neque intelligi necesse est, sed intelligimus de Christo Domino qui est filius Dei . . . Absurdum esset filium hominis aliter accipi quam sacra continent eloquia et

But Lefèvre's rigid application of all the Psalms to Christ is not without contradictions. In two places, in Psalm 7 and 5, Lefèvre refuses to see Christ as the one praying, since the psalmist refers to himself as a sinful creature. This time Lefèvre follows the rabbinic, literal (historical) sense of the text and argues that David is the one praying for his sinful nature and behavior. On Psalm 50 he writes: "Psalmus David. Humana deprecatio. David loquitur. Et cum hic psalmus quid humanum contineat, non prophetiam, non est in ejus intelligentia multum laborandum."<sup>108</sup>

Lefèvre's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter follows his christological hermeneutics. The enemies mentioned by the Psalmists are understood as Judas and the Jews who opposed Christ. For example, in expounding Psalm 35, Lefèvre argues that psalm speaks of the prayer of Christ against the scribes and the Pharisees who were opposing him. The imprecations voiced in the Psalm ask for the shaming and the destruction of those opposing Christ.<sup>109</sup> This reading has affinities with Augustine's interpretation of Psalm 57.

On the one-sidedness and limits of Lefèvre's literal-spiritual hermeneutics of the Psalter Bedouelle concludes: "Lefèvre a une trop médiocre connaissance des langues bibliques; une théologie trop tentée par un certain monophysisme, . . . il s'impose un cadre sans doute trop rigoureux en voulant tout rassembler sous l'unicité d'un sens qui

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relativum eum illic filium hominis bis referentem . . . Si igitur in illo Psalmorum loco, filium hominis et id quod ipsum refert intelligeremus de homine assumpto et non de hypostasi contra consuetudinem divinarum scripturarum et intelligentiam spiritus irrationabiliter faceremus quod nequaquam est admittendum." Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, p. 226 r.

<sup>108</sup> Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, p. 77.

<sup>109</sup> Lefèvre, *Quincuplex Psalterium*, p. 53. Lefèvre offers a similar interpretation in his exegesis of Psalm 58 and 69.

ferait toujours coïncider la philologie et la théologie.”<sup>110</sup> But the interest of Lefèvre’s literal-spiritual approach to Scripture is that it represents an attempt not to deny, but to go beyond the traditional *quadriga*, and approach the Scriptures in a more holistic way.

### 3. 2. 2. Martin Luther and the Psalms

Most scholars agree that much of Luther’s exegesis stays within the medieval approach to Scripture. But what distinguishes Luther’s hermeneutics is his progressive departure from the pervasive medieval spiritual reading of the text towards a more literal or historical reading of the text. Albeit, to the end of his life he had a major interest in tropology and in typology. This progressive departure is evident even in his early readings of the Psalter. Luther lectured twice on the Psalter; first in 1513, at the beginning of his teaching ministry at the University of Wittenberg, and a second time in 1519.

In the introduction to his first lecture on the Psalms (*Dictata super Psalterium*) Luther argues that to better understand the message of the Psalter, one has to avoid the error of the Jews who read it in a carnal way. Jewish reading of the Psalter is carnal according to Luther because they (the Jews) “apply the Psalms to ancient history apart from Christ,”<sup>111</sup> and “some explain very many Psalms not prophetically but historically, following certain Hebrew rabbis ... because they are far away from Christ (that is, from the truth).”<sup>112</sup> For Luther, a proper and correct reading of the Psalter must be prophetic, i.e., Christological, for the Psalter is a prophetic book and “every prophecy and every

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<sup>110</sup> Bedouelle, “La lecture Christologique du psautier,” p. 143.

<sup>111</sup> M. Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms. Psalms 1-75*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 10, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1974), p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, p. 7.

prophet must be understood as referring to Christ the Lord, except where it is clear from plain words that someone else is spoken of.”<sup>113</sup> Continuing the fourfold approach to Scripture, Luther reads the Psalter literally, allegorically, tropologically and anagogically in order to find Christ, who is its center.

But as indicated by Hendrix, although Luther’s first lectures on the Psalter continue the traditional reading of the text, one can already notice significant changes in his application of the received fourfold senses. Hendrix argues that “already in his first lecture course on the Psalms (1513-1515), Luther practically ignored the future-directed or anagogical meaning and concentrated on the application of the text to the individual Christian and to the church, the so-called tropological and allegorical senses of Scripture.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly, in his article on “Old Testament Promissio and Luther’s New Hermeneutic,” Preus contends that in Luther’s first lectures on the Psalms, there are already traces of his departure from the spiritual reading of the text.<sup>115</sup>

Luther’s progression toward a more literal (historical) reading of the Psalm can be seen through his exposition of a certain number of Psalms. In Psalm 1 for example, Luther follows a typically medieval approach and states that “the first psalm speaks literally concerning Christ.”<sup>116</sup> The blessed man in Psalm 1 is Christ, the man of manly virtue, the man of grace, and the man who is the bridegroom of the church. In Psalm 1, Luther sees Christ and Christ only with his church throughout, and there is no trace of the

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<sup>113</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> Scott, H. Hendrix, “Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 37(1983): 229-239. Especially page 230.

<sup>115</sup> James S. Preus, “Old Testament Promissio and Luther’s New Hermeneutic,” *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 145-161.

<sup>116</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, p. 11.

Old Testament author or of the Old Testament historical context in his exposition of the text.

But his interpretation of Psalm 50 brings the first noticeable awareness of the Old Testament context of the text. Luther indicates that the history behind the text is that of David's repentance for his sin with Bathsheba. But Luther argues that the true meaning of the psalm lies in the allegorical level of the text. Psalm 50 is an allegory of the relationship between Christ and his church.

Luther's exegesis of Psalm 101 is the first instance where he stays closer to the literal-historical sense of the text and acknowledges that the text speaks of the longing of the Jews for the coming Messiah. Contrary to the traditional reading of the psalm as a penitential prayer, Luther considers Psalm 101 as the prayer of an anxious Jew expecting God's presence and deliverance. From the historical reading, Luther applies the tropological use of the psalm to the church readying itself for the spiritual advent of Christ. Preus explains that "for the first time, then, the 'literal' sense of the text is allowed to conform to the historical order of things: attention is focused on the people '*ante adventum Christi*.' The psalmist's own history and word emerge from below the hermeneutical horizon to become a new basis for theological and religious interpretation."<sup>117</sup>

A clear hermeneutical shift appears in Luther's exposition of Psalm 142. Luther explains that the psalm is a prayer of David. Luther contends that the historical reading of this psalm makes its exposition easy. According to him, the psalm voices the prayer of the people of the Jewish synagogue expecting the coming of Christ. The new people of

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<sup>117</sup> Preus, "Old Testament Promissio and Luther's New Hermeneutic," p. 152.



God, the synagogue of Christ, joins in the welcoming of his king. "The psalmist gradually begins to be noticed as an historical figure in his own right, living prior to the fulfillment of God's promises, struggling to keep faith amidst all the *contraria* of his existence."<sup>118</sup>

Luther's second lecture on the Psalter further distance him from the pervasive influence of medieval spiritual exegesis of the text. Hendrix argues that "by the time of his second Psalms course (1519-1521), Luther departed from the traditional emphasis on the Christological meaning and made independent exegetical decisions based on the Hebrew text."<sup>119</sup> From now on, Luther pays more attention to philological and historical elements of the text. For example, in his second exposition, the blessed man of Psalm 1 is no longer the one and true man, Christ. Instead, from the philological analysis of the Hebrew words of verse 1, Luther explains that the blessed man is anyone who has a right attitude toward God. And this right attitude is the attitude of faith believers ought to have in Christ. Here, the literal and philological meaning become the foundation of the Christian use of the text.

Psalm 51 is also expounded literally (historically).<sup>120</sup> David, becomes the Old Testament prophet whose disobedience becomes the teaching ground not only for the sin of adultery, but for human sinfulness in general and the effect of the grace of God on those who repent. Luther affirms: "Although the psalm talks about the whole nature of sin and its source, yet we do not exclude the history to which the title refers, that is,

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<sup>118</sup> Preus, "Old Testament Promissio and Luther's New Hermeneutics," pp. 148-149.

<sup>119</sup> Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," p. 232.

<sup>120</sup> Luther interpreted this psalm three times, in 1513-1515, in 1517-1525 and in 1532. See the discussion in C. Clifton Black II, "Unity and Diversity in Luther's Biblical Exegesis: Psalm 51 as a Test-case," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985): 325-345.

adultery and the murder of Uriah. In these sins of his David sees the impurity of all of nature as in a mirror.”<sup>121</sup> Thus, in Luther’s second exposition of Psalm 51, David and his experience of sin are acknowledged in their historicity and used as the hermeneutical ground for the exposition of the gospel concerning human sinfulness, true repentance and divine grace.

As argued previously, although Luther’s exegesis of the Psalter stays within the traditional approach of the text, his continuous effort to explain the text literally before applying it to the church goes beyond the more rigid systematization encouraged by the quadriga. His effort to retrieve the literal-historical meaning of the Psalter and apply it to the reality of the church caused him to use in a diluted form the different senses of Scripture taught by traditional exegesis. From an understanding of the Psalter, with the medieval, as a literal prophecy of Christ in 1513, Luther arrived to an understanding of the Psalter as the book of prayer that nurtured Israel through David and now nurtures believers through Christ.

But in his approach of the imprecations of the Psalter, Luther stays within traditional hermeneutics and argues that the imprecations are prophecies forecasting the destruction of Judas and the Jews. In his *First Lectures on the Psalms*, Luther’s exegesis of the imprecations of Psalm 109 is dominated by his concern for the oppression believers experience on the tropological level. According to Luther, “the entire thrust of the psalm is . . . not about his bodily suffering but about the suffering of his

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<sup>121</sup> M. Luther, *Selected Psalms I*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 12, ed. J. Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955), p. 307.

reputation.”<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, Luther indicates that “the imprecation of the whole psalm is also properly directed against those who disparage another’s reputation.”<sup>123</sup> And for Luther, those who disparage another’s reputation in the context of Psalm 109 are both the Jews who attacked Christ and the heretics who distort the truth of the gospel. The imprecations formulated in the psalm asking their complete destruction are understood as expressing both the historical destruction of the Jewish nation and of the heretics. Luther contends: “Who among men is not horrified to hear this? And yet this is the way the Jews, the heretics, and all detractors pray: For the former all killed Christ, the latter the church, His body, and these His member.”<sup>124</sup>

Luther puts the same emphasis in his second reading of the same Psalm. Luther argues that although the curses formulated in Psalm 109 are terrible, however they do not contradict the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:44. Luther contends that “Love does not curse or take vengeance, but faith does.”<sup>125</sup> According to Luther, God himself curses those who threaten his kingdom. This was the case with the Jews who were punished because of their opposition to Christ, and this should be the case for the heretics who oppose the spread of the gospel. Luther contends that believers should not curse those who oppose them on the personal level, but should love them and pray for their conversion. He explains: “In short, it is permissible to curse on account of the Word of

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<sup>122</sup> M. Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II. Psalms 76-126*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. H. C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1976), p. 353.

<sup>123</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, p. 353.

<sup>124</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms II*, p. 356.

<sup>125</sup> M. Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 14, ed. J. Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), p. 258.

God; but it is wrong to curse on your own account for personal vengeance or some personal end.”<sup>126</sup>

### 3. 2. 3. Martin Bucer and the Psalms

In his article on “Bucer exégète,” Roussel argues that Bucer’s exegesis is characterized by a “retour aux Ecritures” which is accompanied by “un réel travail sur le texte biblique et l’histoire de ses interprétations.”<sup>127</sup> Roussel argues that Bucer’s return to Scriptures does not originate from him. As a scholar of his time, Bucer’s return to Scriptures results from the influence of the Renaissance and its emphasis on languages on sixteenth-century scholarship. Bucer’s return to Scriptures results from his knowledge of biblical languages, his efforts to use Jewish grammatical and philological tools in order to recover the historical (original) meaning of the text within the limits of traditional theology and exegesis.<sup>128</sup> In other words, on the one hand, Bucer interrogates Jewish traditions in order to understand the text on its philological and lexicographical level, and on the other hand, interrogates Christian traditions in order to discover the Christological

<sup>126</sup> Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, p. 258.

<sup>127</sup> B. Roussel, “Martin Bucer exégète,” in *Martin Bucer and Sixteenth Century Europe: Actes du colloque de Strasbourg*, vol. 1. eds. C. Krieger and M. Lienhard (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 39-54; *Strasbourg au coeur religieux du XVIe S.* eds. G. Livet, F. Rapp (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1977). For the discussion on Bucer’s exegesis see H. Eells, *Martin Bucer* (New Haven, London, 1931); J. Müller, *Martin Bucers Hermeneutik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965); B. Roussel, *Martin Bucer, lecteur de l’épître aux Romains* (Thèse de Doctorat, Strasbourg, 1970); “De Strasbourg à Bâle et Zurich: une ‘école rhénane’ d’exégèse (ca 1525-ca1540),” *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 68 (1988): 19-39; M. de Kroon and F. Krüger, eds., *Bucer und seine Zeist* (Wiesbaden, 1976); C. Hopf, *Martin Bucer in England* (Oxford, 1946); M. Hobbs, “An Introduction to the Psalms Commentary of Martin Bucer” (Ph.D. diss., Strasbourg, 1971); G. Bedouelle and B. Roussel, eds., *Le Temps des Réformes et la Bible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989); M. Greschat, *Martin Bucer: Ein Reformator und seine Zeit 1491-1551* (Munich: Beck, 1990); A. Lang, *Der Evangelienkommentar Martin Butzers und die Grundzüge seiner Theologie* (Leipzig: Dietrich, 1900); P. Lutz, “Le Commentaire de Martin Bucer sur le livre des Juges” (Ph.D. diss., Strasbourg, 1953); B. Roussel and G. Hobbs, “Strasbourg et l’école rhénane d’exégèse,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 135 (1989):36-53..

<sup>128</sup> Roussel, “Bucer exégète,” pp. 41-46.

*scopus* of the text under study.<sup>129</sup> And Bucer's critical use of both Jewish and Christian tradition is better demonstrated in his commentary on the Psalter.

Discussing Bucer's exegesis of the Psalter, Hobbs contends that "the significance of Bucer's *Psalms* . . . lies in the fact that this was the first commentary to bring the skills and resources of a Christian Hebraist of the sixteenth century to the task of translating and commenting extensively upon the Hebrew original of that book."<sup>130</sup> According to Hobbs, Bucer's adequate knowledge of biblical Hebrew and of Jewish sources helped him follow a rigorous historical reading of the Psalter. Bucer's rigorous historical interpretation of the Psalter resulted from his concern over Jewish commentators' criticism against the excessive use of allegory by Christian exegetes. Bucer argues that a careful and rigorous historical reading of the Psalter provides a better foundation for the Christological understanding of the Psalter than an arbitrary allegorical reading, which is the main cause of Jewish commentators' rejection of the results of Christian exegesis of the Psalter. And Bucer's commitment to the historical reading of the Psalter is visible through his rejection of the Vulgate, and the adoption of the Massoretic text as the foundation for his exegesis of the Psalter.

According to Hobbs, Bucer's historical analysis of the Psalter led him to distance himself from the traditional ascription of all the Psalms to David. Bucer opened the authorship of the Psalms to "a range of authors from the shepherd king to some as late as

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<sup>129</sup> "Ce Christ, *scopus* unique de l'Écriture, n'est donc pas seulement une figure du passé . . . Le centre de gravité du travail exégétique bucérien est déplacé vers ce terme: le rétablissement d'une relation positive entre ses contemporains et cet être divin, élevé, désigné comme le Seigneur de l'Eglise, identifié au Jésus de Nazareth d'autrefois. L'objectif du travail exégétique est moins culturel et historique que théologique et religieux." Roussel, "Bucer exégète," p. 52.

<sup>130</sup> M. Hobbs, "How Firm a Foundation: Martin Bucer's Historical Exegesis of the Psalms," *Church History* 53 (1984): 480.

the Maccabean period!”<sup>131</sup> Hobbs contends that Bucer did not only pay attention to matter related to the authorship of the Psalms, but researched the philology of key words, discusses the superscription of the Psalms in the light of the narrative texts of the Old Testament, or in the light of Jewish conjectures. Bucer was in constant dialogue with medieval Jewish commentators such as Rashi, David Kimhi and Ibn Ezra. Although he acknowledged the value of their historical analysis, Hobbs indicates that Bucer did not hesitate to follow his own conjecture when the conjectures offered by Jewish scholars seemed too far removed from both the letter and the spirit of the text.

This is the case in his understanding of the historical context of Psalm 72. Jewish sources argued that Psalm 72 was composed by David on behalf of his son Solomon (following the Hebrew superscription *lishlômôh*, which was translated by: “For, on behalf of Solomon”). Bucer disagrees with his Jewish sources and follows his own conjecture and argues that David did not compose the psalm on behalf of his son and successor Solomon, but instead the psalm originated from the time and the reign of Solomon. But true to the *mot d’ordre* accepted by all Christian Hebraists of the sixteenth century that Christian Old Testament scholars had to *hébraïser sans judaïser*,<sup>132</sup> Bucer does not limit his historical reading of the Psalter only to the unearthing of its historical and philological meaning. Bucer opens his historical reading of the Psalter to a typological reading, which extended its *scopus* to Christ.

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<sup>131</sup> Hobbs, “How Firm a Foundation,” p. 485.

<sup>132</sup> M. Engammare, *Qu’il me baise des baisers de sa bouche. Le Cantique des Cantiques à la Renaissance: Etude et Bibliographie* (Genève: Droz, 1993), p. 179. See the discussion in J. Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony. Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of the Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, Ohio, 1983).

In his exegesis of Psalm 22, for example, Bucer follows the results of Jewish historical reading of the text. He agrees with Jewish commentators that the psalm talks about David's flight from Saul, and his anticipation of divine deliverance exemplified through the procession of the ark of the covenant as reported in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13: 15-16.<sup>133</sup> But when discussing the scope of the psalm, Bucer argues that David's anticipation of his salvation through his progeny goes beyond his immediate historical context. Distancing himself from Jewish sources, Bucer sees in David's words a forecast of the eschatological deliverance of the people of God through Christ. Bucer argues that in Psalm 22, David is a prophet who forecasts the arrival of the messianic king who will bring everlasting salvation to his people. Bucer concludes that in Psalm 22, David himself is a type of Christ.<sup>134</sup>

Bucer follows the same typological reading in his understanding of the imprecatory passages of the Psalter. But contrary to traditional theology, Bucer builds his typological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter on their historical meaning. For example, commenting on the imprecations expressed in Psalm 3:8, Bucer limits his interpretation to the historical level and does not apply it to directly Christ. Bucer argues that the broken teeth of the enemies are a metaphor that describes the destruction of the offensive power of the counsels of Ahitophel to Absalom, the rebellious son of David.<sup>135</sup> But in his exegesis of Psalm 109, Bucer falls back to the traditional Christian prophetic approach and contends that the gruesome imprecations of the Psalm 109:6-20 forecast the

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<sup>133</sup> M. Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum libri quinque* (Strasbourg, 1529), pp. 170-178.

<sup>134</sup> "David Christi se typum aperte admodum hoc psalmo exhibet." Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum*, p. 176. See the discussion in R. G. Hobbs, "Martin Bucer on Psalm 22: A Study in the Application of Rabbinic Exegesis by a Christian Hebraist," in *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVIe siècle*, pp. 144-163.

<sup>135</sup> Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum*, pp. 32-33.

demise of the enemies of David. But since David is a type of Christ, the imprecations of the Psalm 109 have an eschatological scope and are directed against Judas and the Jews, the archenemies of Christ and his Church.<sup>136</sup>

### 3. 2. 4. Wolfgang Musculus and the Psalms

The person and exegetical work of Wolfgang Musculus is closely linked to his mentor and fellow reformer Martin Bucer. In his developmental years, Musculus served as the personal secretary of Bucer and later on was recommended by him for a preaching position in Augsburg in 1531.<sup>137</sup> Although he did not benefit from a formal theological training, like his mentors and fellow reformers Musculus studied biblical languages and developed into a skilled biblical commentator.<sup>138</sup> Farmer argues that Musculus's commentaries "reflect his debt to technical scholarship of sixteenth-century biblical humanism, revealing his commitment to the study of the underlying Greek and Hebrew of the biblical texts."<sup>139</sup> During his teaching ministry at Bern, Musculus wrote ten biblical commentaries (both in the Old and New Testaments) among which is his commentary on the Psalter.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum*, pp. 338-340.

<sup>137</sup> Musculus was considered by many sixteenth century Reformers but as a copy of Bucer. For the discussion see R. Dellsperger, "Bucer and Musculus," in *Martin Bucer and Sixteenth Century Europe*, vol. 1, pp. 419-427; R. Bodenmann, *Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563). Destin d'un autodidacte lorrain au siècle des Réformes* (Geneva: Droz, 2000), pp. 327-333; H. Scheible, *Wolfgang Musculus und die oberdeutsche Reformation* (Berlin, 1997).

<sup>138</sup> For the critical review of scholarship on Musculus and biblical languages see Bodenmann, *Wolfgang Musculus*, pp. 369-377.

<sup>139</sup> C. S. Farmer, "Musculus, Wolfgang (1497-1563)," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 172.

<sup>140</sup> See P. R. Musculus, "Catalogue des oeuvres imprimées du théologien Wolfgang Musculus," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 43 (1963): 260-277; 46 (1966): 212.



In his commentaries, Musculus follows a historical reading of the text.<sup>141</sup> He pays close attention to the textual difficulties of the passage under study, and provides a philological analysis of key words, which guides his theological and moral application of the text. Farmer argues that although strongly historical, Musculus's exegesis stays in continuity with patristic hermeneutics through his overwhelming preoccupation with the tropological (moral) meaning of the text.<sup>142</sup> This is especially true in his explanation of the Psalter in general, and of the imprecatory passages of the Psalter in particular.

In general, Musculus reads the Psalter both historically and Christologically. The events linked to David's life and ministry constitute the historical background for Musculus' historical-literal reading of the Psalter. But as his predecessors and especially his mentor Bucer, Musculus acknowledges the typological function of David, as a representative of Christ in the Old Testament. In the case of the imprecations of the Psalter, Musculus agrees that David expressed these prayers against his enemies, but as his predecessors, Musculus argues that they are prophecies foretelling the demise of David's historical enemies and the demise of the eschatological enemies of Christ and his church.

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<sup>141</sup> For Musculus' hermeneutics see P. G. Langenbruch, *Schriftverständnis und Schriftauslegung bei Wolfgang Musculus* (Magisterschrift, Göttingen, 1969); C. S. Farmer, "Wolfgang Musculus's Commentary on John. Tradition and Innovation in the Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, pp. 216-240; "Eucharistic Exhibition and Sacramental Presence in the New Testament Commentaries of Wolfgang Musculus," in *Wolfgang Musculus und die oberdeutsche Reformation*, pp. 299-310.

<sup>142</sup> Farmer, "Musculus," p. 172. See the discussion of Musculus' continuity with medieval exegesis in C. S. Farmer, *The Gospel of John in Sixteenth Century. The Johannine Exegesis of Wolfgang Musculus* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 178-182; I. Backus, *Lectures humanistes de Basile de Césaire. Traductions latines (1439-1618)* (Paris, 1990), pp. 40-43; Bodenmann explains: "Musculus n'est pas en rupture avec la tradition exégétique médiévale: il examine généralement le texte sous les trois aspects que lui inspirent les lectures christologiques (étude du rapport du texte au Christ), anagogique ou morale (étude des répercussions du texte sur la vie et la piété du lecteur), et tropologique (étude de l'incidence du texte sur l'espérance à venir du croyant)." Bodenmann, *Wolfgang Musculus*, pp. 460.

For example, in expounding Psalm 35, Musculus contends that the psalm should be read in the light of David's struggle against Saul and his followers. Musculus explains the imprecations articulated in the psalm literally. He contends that David is indeed asking God to arm himself against his enemies and bring war to them since they are plotting against him. But Musculus indicates that on the tropological level, David is not acting out of a vindictive spirit, but as a man of peace, he leaves the defense of his cause into God's hand.<sup>143</sup> And on the tropological level, Musculus encourages believers not to seek personal revenge, but to put their faith in God's justice when faced with injustice and oppression from their enemies.<sup>144</sup>

Even when expounding Psalm 109, Musculus resists the easy Christological reading of his predecessors. Although he agrees that the imprecations of Psalm 109 find their final realization in the life of Judas who betrayed Christ, Musculus starts by explaining the psalm historically and links it to David's trials caused by Saul. According to Musculus, the imprecations articulated in Psalm 109 were directed first of all against Doeg, the Edomite, because he sided with Saul, and secondly against Saul and his troops who were pursuing the prophet.<sup>145</sup> But Musculus acknowledges that the harsh imprecations formulated by David go beyond his historical enemies and forecast the

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<sup>143</sup> "His tribus versibus ultionem meritam hostibus suis imprecatur. Imprecant autem talem, quae sit omnium iustissima, id est, quae talionis aequitatem habeat, ut scilicet ipsi patiantur, quae sibi paraverant." W. Musculus, *In Sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii* (Basel, 1551), p. 483.

<sup>144</sup> "Videmus hic, quae sit iustis fiducia interpellandi coram Deo, adversus improbos. Certe talis, quam nemo principum huius seculi a suis impune fieri fineret. De eo quod orat, ne elongetur a se Deus, et iusticia suam praetexit, secundum quam causam suam a Deo iudicari petit, dictum et alibi." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium*, p. 483.

<sup>145</sup> Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium*, pp. 1390-1391.

destruction of the enemies of Christ represented by Judas and the Jews, and the enemies of his church represented by those who oppose the truth of the gospel.<sup>146</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The preceding overview of Jewish and Christian exegesis of Scripture in the early, medieval and Reformation periods shows that the Psalter has been approached either spiritually as a prophetic book speaking about the coming messiah, or both literally and spiritually as the book of prayer of Israel and of the church.

Early Jewish exegesis approached the Psalter spiritually and read it as a prophecy announcing the coming messiah. Both the LXX and the Targumin considered David as a prophet predicting the arrival of the messianic time. The Qumran community, confronted with the destruction of the national and spiritual life of the Jewish nation, emphasized the messianic approach of the Psalter by accentuating its eschatological scope. The Psalter announces the coming of the messianic king who is going to vindicate the community of the righteous.

Following on the footsteps of Jewish exegesis, Christian commentators adopted the Jewish spiritual reading of the Psalter and profited from the Jewish historical reading as well. Early church fathers, medievals and reformers have all used Jewish sources to argue that Jesus is the awaited messiah of Israel. This, however, had as a result the shift of Jewish exegesis toward a more historical reading of the Psalter, which in turn helped many late Christian medievals and early reformers interpreters to rediscover and adopt a literal-historical reading of the text. Jewish literal (historical) reading of the text

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<sup>146</sup> "Est huius rei luculenta experientia etiam nostro hoc seculo, quo nimium multorum ora hactenus clausa, ad blasphemandum nunc adversus veritatem Christi aperiuntur." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium*, pp. 1393, 1394.

explained the Psalter in the light of King David as the corporate representative of Israel. According to this reading, David was the paradigm of the believer who in his spiritual life experiences both God's grace and his hiddenness.

Christians interpreters of the late medieval and early Reformation period who adopted a literal-historical reading of the text went beyond Jewish limitations of the literal meaning of the Psalter to David and their hesitations concerning the eschatological messiah, and applied it to Christ both typologically and paraenetically. Thus, Jewish interpretation of the Psalter functions as the hermeneutical foundation upon which Christian commentators built both their historical-literal and Christological rereading of the history of Israel, accomplished in Jesus Christ. In the footsteps of Jewish exegesis, traditional Christian exegesis of the Psalter offer a reading of the Psalter that moves from a purely spiritual reading to a more historical-literal, historical-prophetic and to a purely prophetic reading. This hermeneutical movement is also visible in Calvin's exegesis of the Psalter. Calvin understands the Psalter as a historical book that tells the story of David's trials and faith in God in the context of the Old Testament. But Calvin understands the Psalter prophetically as well. He reads into David's trials and faith, the trials and faith of believers in the context of the church. Thus, Calvin uses David as the hermeneutical key, which unlocks the meaning of the Psalter both historically and spiritually. The following chapter offers an analysis of the imprecatory passages of the Psalter where Calvin applies his historical-literal and spiritual reading of the Psalter in light of the life and experience of David as the elected King, the representative of the holy nation and church of God.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CALVIN'S INTERPRETATION OF THE IMPRECATIONS OF THE PSALTER

#### 1. Introduction

In the initial discussion of scholarship on Calvin's exegesis of the Old Testament (chapter I. 3. 2), we saw that, despite different readings of Calvin's method, scholars have generally positioned him on a trajectory of interpretation that approached the Scripture in general, and the Psalter in particular, with a historical-literal method.<sup>1</sup> Calvin's historical-literal reading of Scripture and of the Psalter committed him to confronting the literal text in its immediate historical setting. This is especially true in his understanding of King David's life and ministry as the hermeneutical key, which unlocks the meaning of the Psalter.<sup>2</sup> In what sense is David the hermeneutical key that unlocks the meaning of the Psalter?<sup>3</sup> Calvin answers the main question in the preface to his commentary on the Psalter.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Calvin was a precursor of modern critical exegesis, but rather that he understood the historical or literal sense of the text as basic to its interpretation. Prior to his work, various exegetes, like Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra and Bucer had tended in this direction and had seen the literal sense as the foundation for understanding typological, prophetic, messianic/christological, and spiritual readings.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this historical setting is the history described or implied by the literal sense of the text, not as in modern critical exegesis, a reconstructed, hypothetical historical setting lying under or behind the text. For the discussion on modern critical understanding of biblical history see C. H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God. An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 29-34; W. R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> And, subordinate to that question, how is the historical David the basis for understanding how the text speaks to and for the Church and individual believers in Calvin's own time.

## 1. 1. David as a Mirror: The Hermeneutical Key to Calvin's Understanding of the Psalter

In his article on *Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms*, Mays points out that although Calvin's preface to his commentary on the Psalter is mostly biographical, however, its purpose is "not only (to) introduce the author; it is a real introduction to the commentary itself."<sup>4</sup> According to Mays, Calvin's preface is a "real" introduction to the commentary because through it Calvin seeks to answer three main rhetorical and hermeneutical questions: a. Why another commentary on the Psalter? b. What is the specificity of the Psalter compared to other books of Scripture? c. What qualifies Calvin as an interpret of the Psalter? The following develops Calvin's preface to the Psalter according to the preceding rhetorical questions.

### 1. 1. 1. Why Another Commentary on the Psalter?

Calvin opens his preface by acknowledging his previous contribution to the study of the Psalter in the setting of the Geneva Academy and the significant contribution of some of his contemporary fellow reformers such as Bucer and Musculus, whose work is highly regarded and full of insights.<sup>5</sup> Calvin acknowledges that Bucer worked so diligently and faithfully on his commentary on the Psalter that there was apparently no need for him to undertake anew such an endeavor. The same is also true for the high quality of the commentary by Musculus.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> L. J. Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms: The Preface as Introduction," in *Calvin Studies IV*, ed. J. Stacy (Richmond, 1988), p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum libri quinque*; Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*.

<sup>6</sup> "Et de faict, avant que j'entreprinsse d'exposer ce livre en mes leçons à la requeste de mes frères, j'avoye dit (ce qui estoit vray) que je m'en deportoye, pour autant que Martin Bucer très fidèle docteur de l'Eglise de Dieu y avoit besongné en tel sçavoir, diligence et fidélité, et si bien rencontré que pour le moins il n'estoit pas si requis que j'y misse la main. Et quant au Commentaires de Wolphgangus Musculus, si lors ils eussent desjà esté mis en lumière, je n'eusse pas voulu oublier à en faire mention par mesme moyen, veu

But Calvin argues that he was compelled to take the burden of writing a commentary on the Psalter because of the pressure exercised on him by some of his colleagues and readers who benefited from his previous short lectures on the Psalter, and by the possibility that someone in the future might publish, without his permission, notes taken from his lectures on the Psalter given at the academy.<sup>7</sup> Calvin acknowledges that although burdensome, the undertaking did contribute to his own spiritual growth. In expounding the Psalter, Calvin did not only discover the meaning of its message for his readers, but he discovered that the message of the Psalter was so close to his own life and ministry that it gave him a certain closeness and openness for better understanding and expounding it.

As argued previously, in 1557, Calvin published his Latin commentary on the Psalter, and translated it into French one year later. But in 1561 he published a second French translation that he considered more close to the Latin edition. The literary accuracy of the 1561 French translation compared to the Latin edition is stated in the title of the commentary (“Ceste traduction est tellement reveue et si fidèlement conferée sur le latin, qu’on le peut juger estre nouvelle.”) and has been acknowledged in modern scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Our subsequent analysis of Calvin’s introduction to the Psalter, and his

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que luy aussi, au jugement des gens de bien, a acquis grand’louange en cest endroit par sa diligence et industrie.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. v.

<sup>7</sup> On Calvin’s exegetical work and commentary on the Psalter see Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*; Martin-Achard, *Calvin et les Psaumes*. See also the bibliographical entries on the subject in our first chapter (I. 3. 3. An Overview of the Scholarship on Calvin’s Exegesis of the Psalms).

<sup>8</sup> For a comparative study of the French and Latin editions of Calvin’s commentary on the Psalter see CO vol. XXXI. See also Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, pp. 28-36; De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, p. 105.

interpretation of its imprecatory passages will be based on his 1561 French translation, which will be checked against the Latin edition when necessary.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. 1. 2. What is the Nature of the Psalter?

Calvin acknowledges the peculiarity of the Psalter in itself and in comparison to other books of Scripture. According to Calvin, the Psalter offers an anatomy of the different parts of the human soul, as it makes visible, as in a mirror, all the affections that characterize human beings.<sup>10</sup> Human affections depicted in the Psalter range from pain, sadness, anxiety, doubt, to hope, joy, etc.<sup>11</sup> Thus, at a first level, Calvin characterizes the Psalter as a book describing the condition of the human soul. As such, the Psalter does not only voice the emotions of its past authors, but it voices also the emotions of human beings of all times.<sup>12</sup>

But Calvin indicates a second level found in the Psalter. The emotions vividly voiced in the Psalter come from the soul of believers, the church of the Old Testament living under the leadership of David, the holy prophet and king. The Psalter does not speak only of the pain and suffering of the people of God. It also speaks about the

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<sup>9</sup> Our study uses the 1859 reprint of the Badius's French edition printed in 1561 because of its readability. See Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes I et II*.

<sup>10</sup> "J'ay accoustumé de nommer ce livre une anatomie de toutes les parties de l'âme, pour ce qu'il n'y a affection en l'homme laquelle ne soit yci pourtrait au vif toutes les douleurs, tristesses, craintes, doutes, espérances, sollicitudes, perplexitez, voire jusques aux esmotions confuses desquelles les esprits des hommes ont accoustmé d'estre agitez." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. vj.

<sup>11</sup> A similar understanding and description of the Psalter is found in the commentaries to the Psalter by Calvin's contemporaries such as Luther, Bucer and Musculus. See Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, pp. 3-10; Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum libri quinque*; Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*.

<sup>12</sup> "Mais yci les Prophètes d'autant que parlans à Dieu ils descouvrent toutes les affections intérieures, appellent ou plustot tirent un chacun de nous à examiner soy-mesme, afin que rien de tant d'infirmitez ausquelles nous sommes sujets, et de tant de vices desquels nous sommes pleins, ne demeure caché." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. vj.



praises and thanksgiving of those who have experienced God's faithfulness in their daily life.<sup>13</sup>

Calvin points out that the Psalter is the only book of the Bible in which human beings address God directly. Compared to the rest of Scripture, the Psalter is the only book that contains both the prescription of God for proper worship and proper conduct of human life, and expresses human response to God's presence and action.<sup>14</sup> The Psalter is the response of the inspired prophets who voiced to God, without any hindrance their inner feelings in their struggle to stay faithful to him. In other words, in the other books of the Bible, God speaks to his people, he gives them commandments and ordinances to follow, but in the Psalter, the people speak to God through the mouth of the holy prophets. Thus, the Psalter is a book of prayer, the prayer of the people of God, addressing God directly. The psalmists express the pain and anxiety linked to their fallen nature (Lament Psalms), but they express also their praises and thankfulness to the God of the covenant who hears their cries and delivers them (Praises).

Calvin indicates also a third level. He argues that through the prayers formulated in the Psalter, people do not only voice their urgent needs to God but mostly become aware of their needy nature and of the nature of God as the benevolent creator who is their only source of hope, deliverance and salvation.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Psalter teaches believers how to pray, how to approach God with real concerns and how to discover true faith that

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. vj.

<sup>14</sup> "Ce livre nous apporte un bien qui est souhaitable sur tous autres, c'est que non-seulement nous avons accès familier à Dieu, mais aussi qu'il nous est permis et libre de desployer devant Dieu nos infirmités, lesquelles nous avons honte de déclarer devant les hommes." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. vj.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. vj-vij.

withstands trial and suffering. Trials and sufferings although negative when experienced, do produce positive changes in the lives of believers. Only through suffering can believers develop patience and godliness. And Pitkin concludes: "Thus we see that the Psalms, according to Calvin, when they are read, sung, studied, and explicated, instruct completely about God and about human nature. They provide clear knowledge of God's goodness and human need; they teach and inspire true piety."<sup>16</sup>

### **1. 1. 3. What Qualifies Calvin as an Interpreter of the Psalter?**

Now, perseverance in trials and sufferings as voiced in the life of the prophets praying in the Psalter, especially in the life of David, the prophet "par excellence," the representative of Israel, the church of God in the Old Testament, becomes the hermeneutical pre-condition for anyone who wants to correctly expound the Psalter. Calvin contends that readers will discover that he has a better grasp of the prayers voiced by the suffering servants of God and especially by David in the Psalter, because like the holy authors, he too experienced the same trials because of his attachment to the cause of God.<sup>17</sup> Calvin argues that David suffered oppression and persecution not because of his own sins, but because of the calling and ministry he received from God. David suffered oppression and persecution both from foreign and domestic enemies, because of his leadership position on the people of God.

Calvin finds a parallel between the life and ministry of David praying in the Psalter and his own life and ministry. He too suffered oppression and persecution both from the "papists" and false brethren because of his leadership position among the people

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<sup>16</sup> Pitkin, "David as Paradigm for Faith," p. 847

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. vj-vij.

of God in Geneva. Looking into the life and ministry of David praying in the Psalter, Calvin sees as in a mirror a face of his own life and ministry.<sup>18</sup> As David was called from the life of a shepherd to lead the people of God, Calvin was taken from a poor family and led by God to become the leader of the newly created reformed church in Geneva. As David suffered unjustly from his close friends because of his faithfulness to God, Calvin too suffered because of his faithfulness to the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin does not use his closeness to David primarily to argue for his moral righteousness. He acknowledges the fact that he is spiritually far behind the righteousness of King David. Calvin uses the similarity in suffering with David as a hermeneutical key to unlock both the human and the theological dimensions of the Psalter. From the suffering, praises and thanksgiving voiced in the Psalter, Calvin reads the human intrigues that characterized the life and ministry of David, the leader of the elected people of God. The hermeneutical mirror into which Calvin is looking does not reflect only David himself, as the suffering servant of God, but most importantly reflects the historical context in which David is experiencing suffering. The enemies king David

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<sup>18</sup> "Quand je me suis veu sans cause estre assailly des haines de ceux lesquels me devoient aider et soulager, ce m'a esté une grande consolation de me conformer à l'exemple d'un tel personnage si excellent. Et mesmes ceste cognoissance et expérience m'a beaucoup servy pour entendre les pseumes, afin que je ne m'y trouvasse trop de nouveau comme en un pays incognu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseumes*, p. xij. For the discussion on the subject see R. A. Hasler, "The Influence of David and the Psalms upon John Calvin's Life and Thought," *Hartford Quarterly* 5 (1965): 7-18; Mays, "Commentary on the Psalms," p. 100; Pitkin, "David as Paradigm for Faith."

<sup>19</sup> "Et Pource qu'entre ceux-là David est le principal, ce qui m'a beaucoup servy pour entendre plus à plein les complaints qu'il fait des afflictions que l'Eglise a à soustenir au dedans de soy, et par ceux mesmes qui se disent en estre membres, *c'est que j'ay souffert les mesmes choses ou semblables des ennemis domestiques de l'Eglise* . . . Ainsi doncques, j'à soit qu'en lisant les tesmoignages de sa foy, patience, ardeur, zèle, et intégrité, je me soye souventesfois mis à gémir et souspirer que je n'en approchoye que de bien loing, *toutesfois ç'a esté une chose qui m'a beaucoup servy, de contempler en luy, comme en un miroir, tant les commencemens de ma vocation, que le discours et la continuation de ma charge: à ce que je recogusse plus asseurément que tout ce qu'a souffert et soustenu ce Roy et Prophète tant excellent, m'estoit proposé de Dieu pour exemple afin de l'imiter.*" Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseumes*, p. vij. Italics are ours.

is complaining about are, for Calvin, historical and human figures related to the David narratives as told in the historical books of the Old Testament.<sup>20</sup>

By initiating a correlative reading of the Psalter, Calvin engages in a historical and human understanding of the Psalter in the light of the narratives of the kingship of David. Calvin commits himself to recovering the meaning of the Psalter within the framework of the historical rereading of the Old Testament. In other words, Calvin offers to reread the Psalter in the light of events related to David narrated in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. This, however does not mean that Calvin's interpretation of the Psalter is merely a historical retelling of narratives recorded in the historical books of the Old Testament. Calvin uses the historical context of the life and ministry of David as the background for a theological and practical interpretation of the text. Mays does not do justice to the historical commitment of Calvin's interpretation of the Psalter when he argues that "the David of Calvin's mirror is a theological rather than a narrative identity."<sup>21</sup> It is true that David is understood by Calvin as "a theological type a called and installed man of God who is opposed and afflicted . . . (who) often provides the relation between the psalm and those for whom Calvin interprets."<sup>22</sup> But it is equally true that Calvin arrives at this theological understanding through the historical understanding of David as the king confronted by real foreign and domestic enemies. The enemies against whom David prays are real; they are sometimes named according to the narrative

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<sup>20</sup> See the discussion on the hermeneutical parallels between the historical difficulties of David in the Psalter and the historical difficulties of the commentators of the Psalter in the Reformation era in E. A. Gosselin, *The King's Progress to Jerusalem: Some Interpretations of David during the Reformation Period and Their Patristic and Medieval Background* (Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1976).

<sup>21</sup> Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms," p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms," p. 101.

of the historical books (see for example Calvin's introductory notes on the "argument" of Psalms 3 and 35). Calvin's commitment to the historical reading of the Psalter is very important in relation to his approach to the imprecatory passages of the Psalter, which call for divine vengeance against David's many foreign and domestic enemies.

## **1. 2. Calvin's Exegetical Methodology of the Psalter**

Another important element for understanding Calvin's hermeneutics of the Psalter is the format he follows in his methodology. In his commentary on the Psalter, Calvin follows a threefold format. Each Psalm has: (1) an introductory section called "argument," (2) a translation of the text from the Hebrew Bible, and (3) a running commentary or comment on sections of the psalm.<sup>23</sup>

### **1. 2. 1. The Introduction: "Argument" of the Psalm**

Like many of his predecessors, Calvin begins the interpretation of each individual Psalm by providing an "argument" or an introduction that deals with questions related to the author, the content, the main ideas or structure, and the occasion of the Psalm. In most cases, Calvin considers David as the author of the prayers formulated in the Psalter. A short but precise discussion about possible different authors is found where the content of the Psalm does not allow it to be attributed to David.<sup>24</sup> If attributed to David, Calvin links the interpretation of the Psalm to the events related to his life as narrated in the

<sup>23</sup> Mays, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalms," pp. 98-99; Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, pp. 36-38. It is important to note that in contrast to the methods of other sixteenth-century exegetes, Calvin does not digress into *scholia* or *loci communes* (as do Luther, Bucer, Bullinger, and Musculus) nor does he identify topical *loci* as the proper task of the exegete (as Melancthon does). Instead, he writes only a running commentary on each verse.

<sup>24</sup> Providing the argument, the author and the context of the Psalm before expounding is a well established traditional and sixteenth century exegetical practice see for example the Psalm commentaries of Aquinas, Lyra and Musculus. For the discussion see G. Dahan, "Genres, Forms and Various Methods in Christian Exegesis of the Middle Ages," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament I/2*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), pp. 196-236.

books of Samuel.<sup>25</sup> Calvin does not fail to address authorship or hermeneutical issues related to the superscription of the Psalm. Also are mentioned difficulties related to the practical application of the Psalm in the context of the church. As correctly pointed out by Mays: “It is in these introductory sections that Calvin takes up the questions of who, what, when, where, and why”<sup>26</sup> the Psalm was written.

### 1. 2. 2. The Translation of the Text from Hebrew

Calvin provides the Latin or French translation of the Psalm to be expounded from the Hebrew original. Calvin’s translation is dependent on the lexicographical and philological tools available at his time.<sup>27</sup> Different textual choices are explained in the body of the commentary where they are justified either in the light of lexicographical data or in the light of the elements of Jewish scholarship. For example, expounding on the meaning of *selah* in Psalm 3, Calvin acknowledges that commentators do not agree. He explains that some understand *selah* as an affirmative particle, which means: “truly” or “Amen.” Others argue that the word means “eternity.” But Calvin contends that *selah* comes from a Hebrew word that means “to elevate,” thus, the word is related to the

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<sup>25</sup> See Martin-Achard, “Calvin et les Psaumes.”; Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*.

<sup>26</sup> Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms,” p. 98

<sup>27</sup> For the grammatical and lexicographical tools that could have been available to Calvin see: M. Engammare, “Olivet et les Commentaires Rabbiniques. Historiographie et recherche d’une utilisation de la littérature rabbinique par un hébraïsant chrétien du premier tiers du XVI<sup>ème</sup> siècle,” in *L’Hébreu au temps de la Renaissance*, ed. Zinguer (New York: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 27-64; “Johannes Calvinus Trium Linguarum Peritus? La question de l’hébreu,” in *Bibliothèque d’humanisme et renaissance; Travaux et Documents* 58, no. 1 (1996): 35-60; “Introduire une édition humaniste de la Bible. Les prologues des Bibles de Robert Estienne (1528-1560),” in *Entrer en matière: les prologues. Patrimoines, religions du livre*, ed. Jean-Daniel Dubois (Paris: Cerf, 1998), pp. 394-425; *Qu’il me baise des baisers de sa bouche*, pp. 179-181; Baumgartner, *Calvin hébraïsant*; Forestier, *Calvin exégète de l’Ancien Testament*; Wilhelm, “Calvin exégète de l’Ancien Testament.”

elevation of the voice in hymn singing and should be understood as a musical term.<sup>28</sup>

Commenting on the meaning of the imprecation articulated in Psalm 5:11, asking God to cause the enemies to wander, Calvin argues that some commentators translate the imprecation by “destroy them.” But Calvin argues that both translations are possible since the Hebrew verb has both connotations and the context of the text allows both meanings.<sup>29</sup>

### 1. 2. 3. The Running Commentary of Sections of the Psalm

The translation of the text, or of the section of the text is followed by a running commentary of the section under study. In the commentary, Calvin endeavors to find the meaning of the text in its literal or historical level; in other terms, Calvin tries to understand what David wanted to say vis-à-vis his historical context; and the meaning of the text for the church, the body of believers in his time.

The commentary deals first of all with the historical or human dimensions of the text. Why or what caused David to say what he said? And what did he mean, in the context of his life experience and his faith in God? Thus, Calvin’s hermeneutics views the “psalms as philological and historical actualities, texts that express the experience and intention of a person in the past.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Quant à ceste voix *séla*, les expositeurs ne s’accordent point. Aucuns disent que c’est une note d’affirmation, et qu’elle vaut autant à dire que Véritablement, ou Amen. Les autres la prennent pour Siècle. Mais pource qu’elle vient d’un mot qui signifie Eslever, l’opinion est probable de ceux qui pensent que par icelle soit dénotée une eslévation de voix en l’accord du chant.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> “Les autres exposent, Destroy-les: pource que le mot hébreu signifie l’un et l’autre, et tous les deux peuvent bien convenir au present passage.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 30.  
“Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms,” p. 98

<sup>30</sup> Mays, “Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms,” pp. 98-99.

But although Calvin finds the meaning of the individual Psalm in the context of its historical setting (in the life of David or its past human author), he still opens the text to its spiritual meaning, i.e., to the intention of the Holy Spirit. What is the message intended by the Holy Spirit? The spiritual meaning of the text is according to Calvin the one and true meaning of the text, which encompasses both its historical and religious meaning for believers of all time. Through the Psalter, the Spirit of God speaks through the mouth of David in his function as a prophet and representative of God, to believers of the Old and New Covenants.<sup>31</sup>

Calvin's historical exegesis of the Psalter opens up to a moral or spiritual reading of the text that encourages believers to trust God and live lives of faith and sacrifice as did David and the rest of believers in the Old Covenant. Calvin's moral reading of the text is an extension of the tropological sense of the *quadrige* widely followed by sixteenth century biblical commentators.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to mention here, that although Calvin practices a double interpretation of the text, his double approach does not posit a double meaning of the text. For Calvin, the text has only one meaning: the theological meaning, the meaning intended by the Holy Spirit who worked in the past through the life and ministry of a historical nation and of historical people to communicate his eternal message of faith and trust in God.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Calvin's historical-prophetic reading does not open the biblical text

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<sup>31</sup> Pitkin, "David as Paradigm for Faith," p. 847.

<sup>32</sup> See for example the Psalms commentaries by Luther, Musculus and Bucer.

<sup>33</sup> For Calvin's historical-prophetic reading of the Old Testament and the Psalter see the article by Muller, "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment."; Vincent, "Calvin, commentateur du Psaume XXII."



to an “hémorragie de sens,” but rather opens it to the fullness and completeness of its meaning as intended by the Holy Spirit who spoke through human authors in history.

## **2. Calvin’s Interpretation of the Imprecations of the Psalter**

An overview of Calvin’s commentary on the Psalter reveals 40 instances where the reformer considered the passages commented upon as imprecatory.<sup>34</sup> Given the large number of the imprecatory passages, the following section limits itself to an overview of the main hermeneutical issues raised by Calvin in the passages listed previously in the light of medieval and sixteenth century interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter.

Following Calvin’s distinction between individual Psalms (which he attributed the authorship to David) and communal Psalms (which he attributed the authorship to a representative of the holy nation), the subsequent section analyzes first of all Calvin’s exegesis of the imprecations contained in the individual Psalms, and then the imprecations contained in the communal Psalms.<sup>35</sup> For a better evaluation of Calvin’s exegesis, the subsequent analysis is organized according to the following format: 1. A brief review of traditional understanding of each psalm is given. The review of traditional exegesis discusses the hermeneutics followed by Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas, and other fathers, in their interpretation of the imprecations of the psalm under study, when possible. 2. An analysis of Calvin’s exegesis and hermeneutics is provided in

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<sup>34</sup> “Individual Psalms”: Psalms 3:8; 5:11; 6:11; 7:11; 9:16-18, 20-21; 10:15; 11:6; 12:4-5; 17:13-14; 28:4-5; 31:18-19; 35:1-8, 26; 52:7; 36:12-13; 40:15-16; 41:11; 54:7; 55:10, 16, 24; 56:8; 58:6-11; 59:6, 12-14; 63:10-11; 64:8-10; 69:23-29; 70:3-4; 70:3-4; 71:13; 109:6-20, 29; 139:19-22; 140:10-12; 141:10; 143:12; 144:5-8. “Communal Psalms”: Psalms 68:20-24; 74:11; 79:6, 12; 83:10-18; 94:1-2, 23; 135:8; 137:5-9

<sup>35</sup> See Calvin’s “argument” introducing each psalm where he discusses issues related to its authorship, historical context and genre. As indicated previously these introductory questions are a commonplace in traditional and sixteenth-century commentaries on the Psalms. See for example Aquinas’s, Lyra’s and Musculus’s commentaries on the Psalms.

dialogue with both traditional and sixteenth-century commentators. 3. Some concluding remarks are provided in order to try to locate Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter within the spectrum of traditional and sixteenth-century interpretations, and to indicate the elements of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>36</sup>

## **2. 1. Calvin's Hermeneutics of the Imprecatory Passages in the Individual Psalms**

### **2. 1. 1. Psalm 3:8**

Taking his clue from verse 5, which speaks of David as lying down, sleeping and awaking under the Lord's presence, Augustine argues that Psalm 3 teaches about the passion (suffering, death and resurrection) of Christ. Following the traditional heading of Psalm 3 which links the Psalm historically to the flight of David from his son Absalom, Augustine finds a parallel between David, the elected king and Jesus, the elected messiah and between Absalom, the rebellious son of David and Judas, the rebellious disciple of Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Augustine argues that as David fled from Absalom, his son who betrayed him, so did Jesus flee from the mind and the spirit of Judas, his disciple who betrayed him. Judas

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<sup>36</sup> Given the large number of texts under study, an exhaustive comparative study of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecatory passages of the Psalms in the light of medieval and contemporary commentators will be impossible. The following analysis limits the dialogue between Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter and the exegesis of Jerome, Augustine, Cassiodorus, Theodoret, Aquinas, Lyra, Luther, Bucer and Musculus, when applicable. The preceding fathers and sixteenth-century commentators have been chosen because they are among those who could be considered as both representative of traditional and sixteenth-century exegesis and might have, directly or indirectly, influenced Calvin's exegesis. For bibliographical information see our previous bibliographical entries on the authors cited. In order to avoid confusion in chapter and verse numbering between the different translations and versions of the text of the Psalter, we are going to follow the numbering of the Massoretic Text and indicated the discrepancies with the LXX and the Vulgate when necessary. The different chapter and verse numbering of the LXX and the Vulgate will be indicated by a parenthesis ( ).

<sup>37</sup> "The words, 'I slept, and took rest; and rose, for the Lord will take me up,' lead us to believe that this Psalm is to be understood as in the Person of Christ; for they sound more applicable to the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord, than to that history in which David's flight is described from the face of his rebellious son." Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 4.

and the crowd of the Jews who opposed Christ become in Augustine the theological correspondents of Absalom and the many enemies David is complaining about in Psalm 3. According to Augustine, Christ, through the prophetic mouth of David is requesting divine deliverance in the face of the many enemies who are persecuting him. He asks that the Lord may break the teeth of his enemies.

The imprecations formulated by the psalmist asking God to break the teeth of his enemies are understood by Augustine as the destruction of the power of the curses coming from the mouth of the enemies of Christ and of his doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

Aquinas follows Augustine in acknowledging the Christological scope of Psalm 3. He indicates that the *glossa ordinaria* considers the Psalm as referring totally to Christ, the promised messiah, to the true one church, his body, confronted with persecutions and heresies.<sup>39</sup> But Aquinas emphasizes the historical dimension of the story of the flight of David from his rebellious son Absalom and applies it to Christ typologically. Absalom, the rebellious son of King David is paralleled to Judas, the rebellious disciple of King Jesus. As David suffered from domestic enemies and was betrayed by his own son, so did Jesus who was persecuted by his own people, by the Pharisees and was betrayed by his own son Judas. David and Absalom in Psalm 3 are types for Christ and Judas in the Gospels.

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<sup>38</sup> "It is forsooth the punishment of the opposers, whereby their teeth have been broken, that is the words of sinners rending with their cursing the Son of God, brought to naught, as it were to dust; so that we may understand 'teeth' thus, as words of cursing." Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> "D'après la Glose, ce psaume peut-être interprété autrement, à savoir en tant qu'il s'agit du Christ tout entier, c'est-à-dire de l'Eglise et de sa tête fondée au milieu des tempêtes des persécutions. Ou bien au sens moral, on peut le lire selon qu'il s'agit de la personne de chaque fidèle qui combat les vices et les mauvais désirs. Et suivant ce sens David représente alors n'importe quel fidèle, Absalom les vices et les désirs charnels, comme le rapporte la Glose." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, trad. J.E. Stroobant de Saint-Eloy (Paris: Cerf, 1996), p. 59.

But for Aquinas, the meaning of the Psalm goes beyond its historical context in David and its fulfillment in Christ. Psalm 3 speaks also about the persecutions of the true church, of true believers in the hands of ungodly people.

The cry of the psalmist asking God to break the teeth of the enemies is understood by Aquinas both historically and morally. According to him, the psalmist is asking God to break both Absalom and his followers (in the context of sacred history).<sup>40</sup> But Aquinas argues that the psalmist's appeal is not limited to sacred history, but involves also human history in general. The appeal of the psalmist asks God to break those who defame human life in general.<sup>41</sup>

As his predecessors, Calvin starts his exegesis of Psalm 3 by acknowledging its hermeneutical link with the story of David's flight told in 2 Samuel 15-19.<sup>42</sup> But where traditional exegesis found two levels of interpretations, i.e., the historical level (the story of the flight of David from Absalom) collapsing into the spiritual level (the betrayal of Christ by Judas, his disciple), Calvin finds only one level of interpretation, the historical level. Calvin does not apply Psalm 3 to Christ. He applies it solely to the historical and human David, who, like other human being, experiences the tragedy of being betrayed by

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<sup>40</sup> "La mâchoire fut Absalom, les dents furent ses complices. Aussi Absalom ayant été anéanti, les autres furent écrasés." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 59. Theodoret offers a more literal interpretation of the imprecation in verse 8. According to him, the teeth of the enemy to be broken represent his strength that has to be weakened. He argues: "The phrase *breaking the teeth of sinners*, that is to say, depriving them of all strength, is by comparison with wild beasts, which when bereft of their teeth are quite undaunting and open to attack." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms. Psalms 1-72*, trans. R. C. Hill (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> The same historical link has been acknowledged in Musculus' commentary of Psalm 3; commentary that was available to Calvin. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 40. See Calvin's acknowledgement of Musculus' and Bucer's work in his introduction to his Psalm commentary. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. v.

his own son Absalom.<sup>43</sup> And from the historical, human and religious dimensions of David's experience, Calvin draws theological and practical applications for his readers.<sup>44</sup>

Reflecting his predecessors' understanding of the literal sense of the text, Calvin rereads the story of Absalom's betrayal of his father in 2 Samuel 15-19 throughout the body of Psalm 3. The many enemies David is complaining about in Psalm 3:2-3 are certainly Absalom and the rebellious crowd gathered around him. And their attacks against David, although seen by Calvin as the result of David's past sin in the case of his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah, are unjust because they don't take into account his election by God as the representative of the holy nation.

The enemies must be destroyed by divine intervention, since their attacks against David are actually attacks against God and his chosen king.<sup>45</sup> Calvin considers the imprecations formulated in verse 8 asking God to strike the enemies' cheek and break their teeth as a past reality, already realized by the mighty saving action of God.<sup>46</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> This one level reading, i.e., the historical-literal reading of Psalm 3 is already visible in Theodoret's commentary on Psalm 3. See Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 60-62.

<sup>44</sup> "Il est bien aisé à chacun de nous de recueillir par le sentiment de nature combien aspre et fascheuse tristesse a eue David en ceste conspiration domestique, laquelle estoit procédée de la desloyauté de son propre fils." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 14. It is important to notice that Calvin mentions Christ only once in the whole exegesis of Psalm 3. He mentions Christ, not as the fulfillment of Psalm 3, but as the one believers should turn to in time of crisis as David turned to God. See Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 17. But in his sermons on the Absalom narrative in 2 Samuel 15-16, Calvin makes a clear connection between David and Christ. He argues: "Or tant y a que ce qui a esté fait en la personne de Daud, a esté finalement accompli en la personne de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ. Car nous voyons qu'il a esté crucifié auprès de ceste sainte cité de Ierusalem, et mesmes quil a esté chassé hors de la ville, comme sil n'eust point esté digne d'y souffrir la mort." Johannes Calvin, *Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis*, ed. Hanns Rückert (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1936-1961), p. 436.

<sup>45</sup> "Or il signifie que leur audace est creue, d'autant qu'ils s'asseuroient que David estoit rejeté de Dieu; possible aussi que leur impiété est yci obliquement notée, de ce qu'ils ne faisoient nul conte de l'aide de Dieu, à préserver le Roy qu'il avoit esleu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> "Ce qui s'ensuyt de ses ennemis battus et frappez, se peut exposer en deux sortes: ou qu'en priant il réduit en mémoire les victoires précédentes, ou qu'ayant expérimenté l'aide de Dieu, ou jouy de son souhait, il adjouste l'action de grâces: et j'incline volontiers en ceste sentence-là. Premièrement doncques il récite qu'ès dangers il s'est retiré au secours de Dieu, et qu'il l'a humblement supplié de luy donner salut.

enemies destroyed are certainly Absalom and his troops.<sup>47</sup> And Calvin concludes that the church may find assurance in the fact that God will always intervene on her behalf to destroy those who threaten her existence.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of Psalm 3:8 does not limit itself to the literal aspect of David's appeal, and does not concern itself with the kind of punishment wished by him. The teeth and the jaws of the enemies to be broken do not retain Calvin's attention contrary to traditional and sixteenth-century commentators.<sup>49</sup> Instead his attention falls on the general framework of divine election, providence and intervention on behalf of his people. According to Calvin, God delivered David, he broke the teeth of his enemies, because they were threatening his rule among his people. David considers his enemies vanquished, not because they attacked him personally, but because they attacked him as God's elected king and the representative of the people of

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Et puis à cause qu'il l'a obtenu, il luy en rend grâces: tesmoignant par cela qu'il tient de Dieu sa délivrance, et la recognoist de luy." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> In his sermons on 2 Samuel, Calvin compares the destruction of Absalom and his troops to the destruction of the reprobate. "Et voila comment il en aduendra a tous reprouuez. Ilz sont tant plus hardiz a mal faire et a prouoquer son ire. Vray est que, quand ils seront chastiez de leurs forfaitz, ilz ne laisseront pas de ronger leur frein, comme vne beste qui sera tenue enchainee . . . Ainsi en font tous contempteurs de Dieu, que, s'ilz sentent sa main et qui les punisse a la rigueur, ilz se tormenteront et monstrent, de quelle fierté ilz sont pleins." Calvin, *Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis*, p. 415. See also pages 511-537.

<sup>48</sup> "David doncques recognoist que ceste meschante conjuration a esté dissipée, pource que Dieu avoit soin de conserver son Eglise. Toutesfois nous receuillons de ce passage que l'Eglise sera tousjours délivrée de tous maux: pource que Dieu qui a les moyens de sauver, ne retirera jamais d'icelle sa bénédiction ne sa grâce." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> Contrary to Calvin, Musculus emphasizes the literal meaning of the imprecations voiced in Psalm 3:8. With historical-literal traditional commentators Musculus agrees that the psalmist is asking God to destroy the strength of the wicked. He contends: "Notanda est haec loquutio, qua Deum omnium inimicorum suorum maxillam percussisse dicit. His enim verbis usqueadeo impiorum potentiam extenuat." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 46. See also Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 62; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 59.

God.<sup>50</sup> Calvin wraps the imprecations of Psalm 3:8 in the general history of God's faithful intervention on behalf of his chosen people. For Calvin, in Psalm 3:8, the letter of the imprecation is less important than the purpose of the imprecation, i.e., the destruction of the enemies of the king in order to preserve the sacred kingship of God in Israel through his elected one, David. Thus, Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 3:8 shifts the emphasis of the text from its literal meaning (the breaking of the strength of the enemies of David) to its theological meaning, the preservation of David's kingship through God's providence and election.<sup>51</sup>

### 2. 1. 2. Psalm 5:11 (10)

Similarly, in the case of Psalm 5, the exegetical tradition offers both significant background to Calvin's reading of the text and a helpful foil for identifying Calvin's own interest and emphasis. Following the LXX eschatological rendering of the Hebrew title of the psalm (LXX: "Unto the end, for her that obtains the inheritance." Hebrew Text: "To the choirmaster, for the flutes. A psalm of David."), traditional Christian exegesis

<sup>50</sup> "Car autrement il pourroit sembler que David s'attribue ces choses à fausses enseignes, veu qu'il s'estoit desnüé soy-mesme de la gloire et secours de Dieu. Mais pource qu'il est bien asseuré de n'estre point décheut de la grâce de Dieu, d'autant que l'élection demeure tousjours ferme, il reprend courage pour bien espérer." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 16.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin will further develop this theological reading in his sermons on the 2 Samuel 15-16 preached in 1562. In his sermons Calvin identifies Absalom and his coalition with the reprobate who misunderstand God's patience towards them and continue in their evil until they are destroyed by God's judgement. "Ainsi donc voicy la source de son ingratitude, c'est qu'il mesprise la bonté de Dieu plus que paternelle. Et voila comment il aduiendra a tous reprouuez. Car d'autant plus que Dieu les espargne. Ilz sont tant plus hardiz a mal faire et a prouoquer son ire. Vray est que, quand ilz seront chastiez de leurs forfaits, ilz ne laisseront pas de ronger leur frein, comme vne beste qui sera tenue enchainée, ou comme vn sanglier qui se viendra enfermer, il mordra le fer duquel il sera precipité." Calvin, *Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis*, p. 415.

explains the message of Psalm 5 as foretelling the eschatological inheritance of Christians in Christ, contrary to the inheritance of the Jews received in the past.<sup>52</sup>

According to Augustine, in Psalm 5 David foretells the cry of the church of Christ confronted by the wickedness of the world.<sup>53</sup> Most church fathers agree that Psalm 5 should be read as a prophecy and the imprecations formulated in verse 11 as a prediction of the evil, not wished but seen by David, that will befall the wicked, the enemies of the church of Christ.<sup>54</sup> Augustine argues that David's call for God to judge the wicked and let them fall in their own's schemes in Psalm 5:11 "is a prophecy, not a curse. For he does not wish that it should come to pass; but he perceives what will come to pass."<sup>55</sup> And what will come to pass, according to Augustine is that the enemies of the church and the truth (not of David) will fall in their own wickedness and be separated forever from the church.<sup>56</sup>

By way of contrast, Aquinas acknowledges both the historical context of Psalm 5 as it tells the suffering of the inheritance of Abraham in David (Genesis 25:5-6) and the suffering of the Church, which is the fulfillment of the inheritance of Abraham in Christ

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<sup>52</sup> Jerome explains that "our inheritance is not promised at the beginning, but at the end of the world. The Jews thought that they had obtained theirs at the beginning; we obtain ours at the end . . . David sings at the beginning that the church wins the inheritance at the end. The fifth psalm, therefore, sings in the name of the church." Saint Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 1, trans. M. L. Ewald (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), pp. 15-16. See also Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms I*, pp. 78-84.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Jerome, *Homilies*; Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*; Aquinas, *Exposition on Psalms*; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms. Psalms 1-72* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 14.



(Galatians 4:28).<sup>57</sup> Aquinas also acknowledges the predictive nature of the imprecations formulated in verse 11, but goes further and applies them not only to the enemies of David or the church, but to evildoers in general.<sup>58</sup> Aquinas contends that David knows by prophecy that God will judge the evildoers by punishing them in two ways: they are going to fall in their own evil schemes; and they are going to be separated from good people. Evildoers are going to fall by their own counsel, namely, by those things by which evildoers are malicious. Evildoers, or sinners, after increasing their evils become impertinent. Then the Lord God does not spare them. He becomes wrathful and induced to vindicate himself.<sup>59</sup> Thus, according to Aquinas, the imprecation formulated in Psalm 5 foretells the demise of evil people who are going to experience self-destruction by the judging action of God.

Calvin begins his exposition of Psalm 5 by acknowledging the difficulties related to the LXX translation of the superscription of the Hebrew text. Calvin argues that the rendering by some commentators of the Hebrew *Néhiloth* by *Héritages* and link heritage to the salvation of the twelve tribes of Israel is less convincing. Calvin argues that *Néhiloth* is a musical term and has less hermeneutical value, since it indicates only a particular musical instrument.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> “Et c’est ainsi que ces paroles étaient davantage des prédictions portant sur l’avenir que leurs propres prières; aussi dit-il: juge, c’est-à-dire je sais que tu jugeras.” Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>59</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 76.

<sup>60</sup> “J’ensuy volontiers l’opinion de ceux qui enseignent que c’estoit un instrument ou ton de musique. De l’espèce d’iceluy, je ne m’en tormente pas beaucoup.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 25.

In the “argument” of the prayer, Calvin contends that in Psalm 5 David prays as a man profoundly wounded by the vicious attacks of his enemies. David prays for divine punitive action against his enemies and voices it in the form of imprecations in verse 11.

Since the heading of Psalm 5 does not relate the prayer to any particular event in David’s life, Calvin explains the content of the prayer in the light of all the persecutions and trials experienced by David in his life and tenure as God’s representative. According to Calvin, David wrote Psalm 5 during a time of peace as reminiscence of all his persecutions and of God’s providence on his behalf. This theme of David’s deliverance through God’s providence developed by Calvin in Psalm 5 was already present in the exegesis of Theodoret of Cyrus. Expounding on Psalm 5:11-12, Theodoret explains: “when your servants are regaled with both your blessings and your providence, those who made themselves lovers of your name will glory in your providence, telling of your power.”<sup>61</sup>

In Psalm 5, David asks God, because of his nature as the one who loves justice and righteousness, the judge of the world who cannot stand evil, to deliver him from his enemies whose nature and actions stand against God.<sup>62</sup> David petitions God to cause his enemies to be confused in their minds and to be unable to carry on their evil schemes against him.<sup>63</sup> Calvin explains that David requests that God may affect the cognitive

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<sup>61</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 71.

<sup>62</sup> “Il fonde sa raison sur la nature de Dieu mesme: car d’autant que justice et droicture luy plaisent, il conclud de cela qu’il fera vengeance de tous les meschans. Car comment se pourroit-il faire qu’ils eschappassent la main de Dieu sans estre punis, puis qu’il est le juge du monde?” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 27.

<sup>63</sup> “David souhaite que Dieu mette la main sur ses ennemis, et empesche leurs perverses délibérations . . . il entend qu’ils ne viennent pas à bout de ce qu’ils avoyent entrepris.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 30.

faculties of his enemies and cause them to make mistakes in their thinking process, and thus frustrate their plans. Calvin describes David's enemies as drunk and unable to think and act in a cohesive manner.<sup>64</sup> The enemies' cognitive incoherence becomes the cause of their ineffective attacks against David.<sup>65</sup>

On the practical aspect of the imprecation voiced by David in Psalm 5:11 Calvin argues that David teaches believers to take courage in affliction and persecution. God protects believers of all time by dwarfing the evil plans of their enemies as he did for David. David's imprecatory petition in Psalm 5:11 becomes the foundation for Calvin's exhortation to divine faithfulness in his punitive intervention against the enemies of his people, both in the case of David and in the case of believers in Geneva confronted to persecution and trials.<sup>66</sup> Here, Calvin binds believers in Geneva both on the human and religious levels to the difficulties and faith experienced by David in the Psalter. What is

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<sup>64</sup> The impairment of the cognitive faculty of David's enemies echoes Calvin's doctrinal teaching on divine providence found in the *Institutes*. Calvin argues: "Quant est de la fureur de nos enemis, il la sait bien rompre en diverses manieres. Aucune fois il leur oste l'entendement, à ce qu'ile ne puissent prendre bon conseil." Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, édition critique par Jean-Daniel Benoît (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957), I, xvii, 7. Benoît indicates that this section was originally from the 1541 édition. This shows that Calvin's similar development in his commentary on Psalm 5 is dependent on his previous theological exposition found in the *Institutes*. Subsequently we will state this conclusion by mentioning the name of the critical editor, i.e., Benoît, and the year of the section quoted. For example (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>65</sup> "C'est que Dieu les ayant privez d'entendement, les pousse en erreur, et les face fourvoyer: et puis qu'ils soyent frustrez de leurs conseils." Calvin, *Commentaire sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 30. Contrary to Calvin who accepts the literal meaning of the imprecation formulated in verse 11 asking God to cause the enemies to err and builds a theological meaning from it, Musculus shows uneasiness with the language of the imprecation and argues for its understanding as a prophecy instead of a curse. He contends: "Oratio haec prophetiae vim habet. Na hoc illis certo accidit. Deinde a quo debeant, vel possint disperdi ac pronci tales impii. Non dicit, Disperda et proncia eos: sed, Disperde eos Deus. Ite, pronce eos. Dei est igitur hoc genus mali tollere, non alicuius hominis, nisi eorum tantum, quorum ministe no Deus ad hoc utitur, ut tollatur. Humanae vires per se nihil hic possunt." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 73.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin's application echoes Aquinas'. In his commentary, Aquinas indicates that believers should take courage in their afflictions because they are protected by God's good will towards them. God uses his good will towards his people as a protective shield against the attacks of their enemies. "Et lorsqu'il dit: comme un bouclier, il précise que la volonté même de Dieu est bonne comme un bouclier qui protège contre tous les maux." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 77-78.

striking is that Calvin bases his exhortation to believers in Geneva directly on David's life and faith without making it dependent on a Christological rereading. In Psalm 5:11, Calvin goes from David's suffering and deliverance to the suffering and hope for divine deliverance on behalf of believers in Geneva. And his interpretation of the imprecations voiced in verse 11 is completely dependent on his understanding of the nature of God, as the one who loves justice and righteousness, and on his function as the judge of the earth. God's nature and his judicial function become the foundation of Calvin's understanding of the imprecations of Psalm 5.<sup>67</sup>

### 2. 1. 3. Psalm 7:7, 15-17

Traditional hermeneutics, with the exception of Jerome, explains the message of Psalm 7 in the context of the struggle between David and his son Absalom (2 Sam. 16-17).<sup>68</sup> Augustine argues that on the literal level, the psalm speaks of the prayer that David voiced to God after his friend Chusi joined the side of Absalom and countered Ahitophel's counsel advising Absalom to strike his father while he was weak.<sup>69</sup> But Augustine quickly overlooks the historical aspect of the text and argues for its spiritual understanding. According to Augustine, Psalm 7 is a prophecy of David foretelling the betrayal of Christ by his disciple Judas, who is a theological correspondent of

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<sup>67</sup> It is likely that Calvin's hermeneutics of Psalm 5:11 is based on his doctrinal teaching concerning divine justice and providence previously articulated in the *Institutes*. Calvin explains: "Car en gouvernant le genre humain il ordonne et modère tellement sa providence, qu'en se montrant libéral tant et plus par les biens infinis qu'il eslargit à tous, toutesfois il ne laisse pas de faire sentir en ses iugemens tant sa clémence envers les bons que sa sévérité envers les iniques et réprouvez." Calvin, *Institution*, I, v, 7. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>68</sup> In his homilies, Jerome argues against the context of 2 Samuel 16-17. According to him Psalm 7 narrates the struggle between David and Saul and not between David and Absalom, his son. Chusi is not David's friend, but the Ethiopian, the dark side of humanity represented in David's life by Saul, his enemy. Jerome, *Homilies*, pp. 25-28. In contrast, Chrysostom explains the psalm in the light of the betrayal of David by his son Absalom. Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms I*, pp. 111-116.

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 20.

Ahitophel.<sup>70</sup> Augustine argues that the curses voiced in the Psalm asking God to arise and punish the wicked foretells the defeat of the devil when God will arise in Christ and take possession of the souls of unbelievers through conversion.<sup>71</sup>

By contrast, in his “argument” of Psalm 7, Calvin argues against reading Psalm 7 in the light of Absalom’s rebellion (2 Samuel 16-17).<sup>72</sup> Calvin understands Chusi as a relative of King Saul and reads Psalm 7 in the light of David’s struggle with Saul. According to Calvin, in Psalm 7, David faces slanderous people who falsely accuse him. David confesses his innocence to God by self-imprecatory words and asks for divine intervention. David’s call for divine deliverance comes from the impossibility to obtain justice in the traditional court, which is under Saul’s dominion. David turns to the heavenly court and appeals to God, the just judge, to vindicate him through the exercise of his judgment. David expresses his desire for divine intervention under the form of imprecatory wishes. He calls God to “rise in his anger.”

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<sup>70</sup> Aquinas follows Augustine in identifying the Absalom revolt narrative as the context of Psalm 7. He proposes a double reading acknowledging both the historical and spiritual dimensions of the text. The enemies pursuing David are both historical and spiritual. On the historical dimension, David’s enemies are represented by Ahitophel and all the people gathered around his son Absalom. On the spiritual dimension, the devil is the enemy pursuing believers’ souls through temptations and trials. Thus, the imprecations articulated by David in verse 11 have both a historical and spiritual meaning. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 89-90. On the spiritual level, the imprecations asking God to arise and punish the enemies are related to the casting down of the devil and the conversion of ungodly people. According to Aquinas, the imprecations of Psalm 7 foretell the conversion of the Jews who will be cast down by the judgment of God and brought back to him through conversion in Christ. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>71</sup> “For when the ungodly is justified, from ungodly he is made just, and from being the possession of the devil he passes into the temple of God. And since it is a punishment that a possession, in which one longs to have rule, should be taken away from him; this punishment, that he should cease to possess those whom he now possesses, the Psalmist calls the anger of God against the devil ... God should be exalted ... rather than the devil, while the ungodly are justified and praise God.” Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 22. See also the same interpretation in Jerome. Jerome, *Homilies*, pp. 30-33.

<sup>72</sup> Calvin’s contextual choice echoes Musculus’ who devoted a long introduction to the issue in his commentary of Psalm 7. See Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 89.

Calvin argues that David opposes his enemies' anger to God's anger. He contends that the word *dresser* has both a judicial and a military connotation. The imprecation formulated by David asks God to punish the enemy by responding to their human anger by his divine wrath. And this is what believers should do when unjustly attacked. They have to invoke God to display his wrath against their enemies and teach them that indeed, he has both the zeal and the power to preserve his people. But quickly, Calvin points out that believers should exercise restraint when praying against those who oppose them.<sup>73</sup> They should call down God's wrath on their enemies only within the boundaries of his will. Calvin indicates that David called for the punishment of his enemies only because by opposing him as the ruler of the people of God, they were opposing God who called him.<sup>74</sup>

David asks God to show his wrath towards the enemies by causing them to fall in the pit they dug against him and by causing their evil to fall on their own head. Calvin attributes the wording of this imprecation to a saying of the common Hebrew language.<sup>75</sup> But he indicates that David's enemies do not fall in the pit they dug and that their evil does not fall on their own head in a natural way.<sup>76</sup> David's prayer explains God's

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<sup>73</sup> Musculus also emphasizes both the reality of God's anger and the need for human humility and restraint. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 95.

<sup>74</sup> "Il oppose l'ire de Dieu à la fureur de ses adversaires: ce qu'il nous convient aussi de faire quand nous sommes en semblable estat. Car quand nous voyons que nos ennemis sont eschauffez à l'encontre de nous et qu'ils deployent leur rage et furie pour nous perdre, il nous faut prier Dieu qu'il s'eschauffe aussi de son costé à l'encontre d'eux: c'est-à-dire qu'il monstre par effet qu'il n'a pas moins de zèle et de puissance pour nous préserver." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 39.

<sup>75</sup> Aquinas also goes back to the Hebrew text to explain the demise of the enemies through their own evil schemes in verse 17. "Chez les Hébreux le mot . . . lacus . . . signifie . . . une fosse profonde. Il a creusé, en pensant profondément, et en l'achevant il y tomba, car il pensait tuer et il fut tué." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 101.

<sup>76</sup> In his *First Lectures on the Psalms*, Luther proposes a double reading of the text (v. 11) and expounds it both historically (in the light of the life and ministry of David) and spiritually (in the life and ministry of

providence for his people against their enemies. God in his “secret ways” is the one causing the enemies to loose their sense and control and become victims of their own evil schemes.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, God’s universal justice and David’s calling and innocence function as the theological justification for the imprecation articulated in Psalm 7:11. David’s calling and innocence serve as the foundation for the use of the imprecations of the Psalter and of imprecatory words in the lives of Calvin’s readers confronted to injustice. Calvin argues that because God is the righteous judge who judges in justice, believers should first of all be innocent as David was in order to call upon his judicial intervention. Since God has no preferences, believers should not expect him to deliver them unless their cause is just. But because of the covenant, because of their calling, believers who suffer unjustly are encouraged to call upon God within the limits of his will to punish their enemies. Since their enemies by opposing the realization of the will of God in their lives oppose God himself. Thus, God’s justice and believers’ election become the foundation for Calvin’s rereading and application of the imprecations voiced in Psalm 7:7,15-17.

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Christ). Luther indicates that historically, David’s enemies who have fallen in their own pit are either: Goliath (who was slain by David using his enemy’s sword), or Saul (“who fell on his own sword, and his armor bearer after him”) or Absalom (who perished during the rebellion he started). Spiritually, the enemies of Christ are both the devil and the Jews who destroyed themselves in their attempt to destroy Christ. Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, p. 86.

<sup>77</sup> “Dieu promet yci, asçavoir qu’ils se tueront de leur propre cousteau: ce qui n’advient pas par cas fortuit, mais Dieu conduit tellement en secret le mal qu’ils apprestent aux innocens, qu’il le fait retomber sur leurs testes.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 43. Here, Calvin’s interpretation is similar to Luther’s. Both commentators attribute the fall of the enemy in the pit they dug to the divine punitive activity. But where Luther sees God’s wisdom in the fact that he punishes the ungodly “with their own stratagems, he mocks them with their own mockeries, he pierces them with their own javelins,” Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, p. 86. Calvin sees, not God’s wisdom, but his providence, his secret hand which destroys the evil one through his own evil schemes.

#### 2. 1. 4. Psalm 9:5-7, 16-18, 20-21

Psalm 9 was traditionally read as a prophecy announcing the hidden things of the son of God. Although most traditional commentators agree that on the historical level, the son mentioned in the LXX title of the psalm refers to Absalom, they all argue for its application to Christ.<sup>78</sup> Psalm 9 speaks about the hidden things of the son, i.e, his two comings that correspond to the two judgments of God. The first coming is hidden in reference to the divinity and glory of Christ. The second coming is hidden in reference to his eschatological manifestation. The two comings of Christ entail his two judgments: his judgment hidden in the very condition of the present world. Another judgment is from God, the Father, allowing good persons to suffer from evil persons.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, most traditional commentators consider Psalm 9 as the prayer of the church of Christ confronted by suffering and injustice and asking for God to bring about his judgment, which corresponds to the fall of the enemies. The enemies of the church are the nations opposed to the gospel. The nations are led by the devil. Psalm 9 sings the deliverance of souls from the power of Satan through the preaching of the Word of Christ.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Jerome argues: "What are these hidden things of the Son? They are the mystery hidden to all ages in the past, but revealed to us who are at the end." Jerome, *Homilies*, p. 35. Augustine contends that although the title of the text might refer historically to Absalom the son of David, "yet it is not merely said, from the face of Absalom but 'his' is not added. But here both because 'his' is not added, and much is said of the Gentiles, it cannot properly be taken of Absalom. For the war which that abandoned one waged with his father, no way relates to the Gentiles, since there the people of Israel only were divided against themselves. This Psalm is then sung for the hidden things of the only-begotten Son of God." Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 32.

<sup>79</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 113.

<sup>80</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 87-93.



The imprecations articulated by the psalmist proclaiming the destruction of the nations are read positively by most fathers. "Thou has rebuked the heathen, and the ungodly hath perished" means for most fathers that the nations were not politically vanquished or physically destroyed. The ungodly nations perished in the sense that they were justified and made godly.<sup>81</sup>

Calvin argues that in Psalm 9, David praises God for past deliverance and appeals for his intervention in his present danger. According to Calvin, the context of Psalm 9 is uncertain. The content of the psalm does not relate the prayer to any specific event in David's life and ministry. But Calvin indicates that the prayer of lament in which David calls upon God to act as the universal judge and rescue him from his enemies quickly replaces the song of thanksgiving that opens the Psalm.<sup>82</sup> David calls upon God to sit on his throne as the righteous judge and defend his case (v. 5). God's judicial function becomes the foundation upon which Calvin bases his interpretation of the imprecations formulated by David against his enemies. Since God is the righteous judge and defends the right of the oppressed, David already sees by faith the destruction of his enemies and the destruction of their names.<sup>83</sup> The enemies are destroyed when they fall in the pit they

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<sup>81</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 34. "Through the sacred apostles and the heralds of truth after them you offered to the nations the divine teachings, and when they received them and were rid of error, the godless perished, deprived of people to worship him in ignorance." Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 89. Luther also argues for a spiritual reading of the imprecation formulated in Psalm 9. He contends: "'They will be weakened,' . . . 'they will perish,' . . . All these must be understood according to the spirit and to the emotion. It is not that these things should happen in a local or physical sense." Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, p. 94.

<sup>82</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 51. See also Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 123.

<sup>83</sup> This motif echoes Calvin's doctrinal teaching on God's function as the universal judge. Calvin contends: "Ayant ainsi cogneu Dieu, pource qu'elle sait qu'il gouverne tout, elle se confie d'estre en la garde et protection d'iceluy, et ainsi elle se remet du tout en sa garde; pource qu'elle le cognoit autheur de tous biens, si tost qu'elle se sent pressée d'affliction ou disette, elle a son secours à luy, attendant d'en estre secourue . . . pource qu'elle le recognoist iuste Iuge, et qu'il est armé de iuste rigueur pour punir les

dug, when from the height of their pride they fall into the abyss of *Sheol*.<sup>84</sup> The wicked are brought down once for all by God's judging action because of their pride and boasting.<sup>85</sup> Thus, believers should find comfort in the fact that although evil people seem to prevail in daily experience, they can with the eye of faith see their fall to *Sheol* because of the secret action of God's hand. Calvin brings to the reader's attention the antithesis between the wicked action and God's action. The wicked endeavor to go higher and higher in their pride and God acts suddenly in his justice and pulls them down to the bottom of the earth.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, to prove his power and sovereignty, God creates fear in the hearts of the enemies and makes them realize that they are humans (v. 21). On the meaning of verse 21, *Donne-leur frayeur*, Calvin argues that David is asking God to use violence against his enemies because of their rebellious nature and the hardening of their hearts. He contends that the verse does not apply to those tributaries to David, but rather to God's action against rebellious people. But why such divine violence against the

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maléfices et péchez, elle se met tousiours devant les yeux le siège iudicial d'iceluy." See Calvin, *Institutes*, I, ii, 2. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>84</sup> To explain the fall of the enemies in their own schemes, Calvin uses the traditional image of bird hunters who set traps in order to catch their victims. Unfortunately, instead of catching the innocent, they fall themselves in their own traps. "Or ce n'est pas sans cause qu'il compare ses ennemis à des chasseurs ou oiseleurs: car combien que les meschans usent souvent d'effort et violences, toutesfois ils savent bien aussi ensuyvre leur père Satan, qui est le père de mensonge, en usant de fraudes et ruses: et appliquent tout leur esprit à malice et entreprises pernicieuses." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Psaumes*, p. 59. See a similar reading in Aquinas, Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>85</sup> "Les meschans retourneront . . . Par ce mot retourner, il entend que leur issue sera autre qu'ils ne pensent: et il y a une antithèse tacite entre la hauteur de leur audace et la profondeur de leur ruine . . . Il nous est doncques yci decrit un changement soudain et non attendu, par lequel Dieu, quand bon lui semble, remet les choses confuses en leur ordre . . . Toutes les fois doncques que nous voyons ainsi voltiger les meschants sans rien craindre, contemplons des yeux de la foy que le sépulcre leur est préparé: et soyons asseurez que la main de Dieu, encores qu'elle n'apparoisse pas; est prochaine, laquelle saura bien leur faire tourner bride, et au lieu qu'ils gravissent vers le ciel, les fera en un moment trebuscher en enfer." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 60.

<sup>86</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 60.

wicked? Calvin answers that God uses violence against the wicked to bring them down to their knees and make them realize that they are humans who depend on his mercy for their existence. Furthermore, Calvin contends that the humbling of the wicked is not for their conversion, but for their destruction. Calvin's negative reading of the destruction of the wicked by God's violence goes against the traditional positive reading which understands the destruction of the wicked as their conversion through the reception of the gospel.<sup>87</sup>

Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations articulated in Psalm 9 grounds the punishment of the wicked on a double image of God. The image of God as the righteous judge who sits on his throne of judgment and defends the cause of the righteous against the attack of the wicked; and the image of the action of the "secret" hand of God which acts as the natural law of gravity and pulls down, with extraordinary force, the wicked from the heights where they endeavored to put themselves to the darkness of the tomb. Believers should use their eyes of faith and see the result of God's providence and justice manifested through the destruction of their enemies, who are actually the enemies of God. Divine providence, his judgment, becomes the foundation of Calvin's understanding and application of the imprecations voiced by David in Psalm 9.

### **2. 1. 5. Psalm 10:15 (9:36)**

Following the LXX, traditional commentators consider Psalm 10 as a continuation of Psalm 9. They explain it in the light of the eschatological title, which links it to "the hidden things of the Son." In Psalm 10, the "hidden things of the Son"

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<sup>87</sup> Calvin's negative reading of verse 21 is an echo of Aquinas's reading which emphasizes the destruction of the wicked instead of their salvation. Aquinas argues that the result of God's judgment against the wicked is that they acknowledge their fragility and mortality. "Le fruit du jugement c'est qu'ils se

pertain to the boasting of the evil man, the Anti-Christ, who attacks the innocent, mocks God's patience and "exalts himself above all that is worshipped and that is called God."<sup>88</sup>

Following the standard of the Vulgate, Aquinas considers Psalm 10 as a section of Psalm 9, arguing that the section is a prophecy against sinners in general, who boast about their sins and prosperity, their lawlessness and the delight they find in God's patience.<sup>89</sup> David's imprecation in verse 15 asking God to "break the arm of the sinner and of the malicious" anticipates the destruction of the power of the Anti-Christ by the power of Christ in the day of judgment. It also anticipates the destruction of all sinners who have joined the Anti-Christ in his oppression against the church.<sup>90</sup>

Following the chapter division of the Hebrew text, Calvin considers Psalm 10 as an independent literary unit.<sup>91</sup> He explains it in the broader context of David's life and ministry. Calvin argues that in Psalm 10, David is praying under his own name and under the names of all believers against the wickedness of evil people who glory in their own strength and misread God's patience as his indifference towards their lawlessness.<sup>92</sup> He contends that Psalm 10 is a mirror both of the lawlessness believers experience in the

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reconnaissent être des hommes . . . fragiles, pécheurs et mortels." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 125.

<sup>88</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 38.

<sup>89</sup> Aquinas agrees that on the allegorical level, Psalm 10 talks about the sordidness of the Anti-Christ. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 127.

<sup>90</sup> Aquinas divides verse 15 into two parts; the sinners are those who, with the Anti-Christ oppose God himself, and the evildoers are those who oppose their neighbors. All of them (sinners and evildoers) will be broken during the eschatological judgment of God. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>91</sup> It is of interest to note that contrary to his custom, Calvin makes no mention of the textual and literary problems created by the conjunction of Psalms 9 and 10 in the LXX.

<sup>92</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 62.

real world, where corruption and lawlessness threaten their well being and of the certainty of God's providence on behalf of his people.<sup>93</sup>

Expounding on the meaning of Psalm 10, Calvin shows uneasiness with the anthropomorphic language used by David. Forcefully, he argues that David's cry asking why God has stayed far and hidden from his people's suffering (v. 1), and his appeal asking God to stand up and face his enemies is inappropriate (v. 12).<sup>94</sup> He contends that David's anthropomorphic language is a mirror that reveals the folly and impatience that affect all humans when experiencing God's forbearance toward the wicked.<sup>95</sup> But Calvin points out that David's impatience comes from the unspeakable lawlessness of the wicked. Led by their pride, the wicked oppress the weak, speak against God as they question his rule in human affairs. Calvin indicates that the wicked fall so deep in evil because they lack a good conscience (*inquisition*) which would allow them to live a restrained life. The wicked live as if God does not exist. Calvin explains that the wicked are not atheists in the sense that they deny the existence of the essence of God in a

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<sup>93</sup> "Or ceste description représente comme en un miroir une vive image d'un estat public corrompu et du tout renversé . . . En outre, les fidèles sont admonestez de recourir à Dieu en telle confusion: car s'ils ne sont résolus que c'est à Dieu d'y pourvoir et remédier." Calvin, *Commentaires sur les Pseaumes*, p. 62.

<sup>94</sup> Notice how Calvin's uneasiness with David's anthropomorphic language leads him to an apologetical interpretation of the first verse. Contrary to Aquinas who limits himself to giving the literal meaning of David's complaint, Calvin develops a long theological explanation defending God's wisdom and sovereignty against David's impatience and folly. For the contrast between the more literal exegesis of Aquinas and the theological exegesis of Calvin see Aquinas, *Commentaires sur les Pseaumes*, pp. 125-126; Calvin, *Commentaire sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>95</sup> "Combien que tous hommes soyent communément entachez de cette vice, qu'ils se font à croire selon leur sentiment charnel que Dieu se repose ou dort tandis qu'il n'exécute pas ses jugemens . . . les fidèles . . . ostent incontinent hors de leurs entendemens ceste fausse imagination, et se chastient, retournans d'eux-mesmes à leur bon sens: de laquelle chose nous avons un beau miroir en ce passage." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 62.

philosophical or metaphysical sense.<sup>96</sup> Rather, the wicked deny God's function as the judge of the universe, the one who defends the right of the oppressed in human affairs.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Calvin encourages his readers to take patience and find comfort in the truth that God will punish the wicked.

Moreover, Calvin argues that oppression and suffering shouldn't make believers doubt God's providence and judgment. Because of his judicial function, God will certainly punish the wicked. This comes from his providence, which shouldn't be understood in general terms as his concern for the well being of the whole universe, but especially as his involvement in the plight of the oppressed. Calvin argues that God does not look passively from heaven at what happens on earth, but intervenes in human affairs as the righteous judge.<sup>98</sup> Thus, Calvin encourages believers to be patient in face of their enemies and wait for God to exercise his vengeance. He exhorts his readers to put their thirst for vengeance into God's hands and wait for his time.<sup>99</sup>

In Psalm 10:15, David asks God to "break the arm of the wicked." Calvin explains that the imprecation asks God to break the oppressive power of the wicked.

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<sup>96</sup> "Non pas qu'ils nient pleinement et en un mot qu'il soit un Dieu, mais pource qu'ils le despouillent de sa vertu. Or Dieu ne seroit qu'une idole, si se contentant de son essence nue, il se démettoit de son office de Juge." Calvin, *Commentaires sur les Pseaumes*, p. 64.

<sup>97</sup> "Pource qu'ils ont prospérité continuelle, ils se font à croire que Dieu est bien tenu à eux, et voylà pourquoy ils rejettent ses jugemens au loing . . . Nous entendons maintenant le simple sens du Prophète, Asçavoir que les meschans se mocquent de Dieu sous ombre de sa patience . . . Car nous voyons comme délayans le temps, ils s'endurcissent et obstinent au mal de plus en plus: mesmes se faisans à croire que Dieu est enfermé au ciel, comme s'ils n'avoient que de lui, ils se conferment en l'espérance d'impunité." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 65.

<sup>98</sup> "Dieu ne contemple pas du ciel ce qui se fait yci-bas, se tenant oisif, mais qu'il entreprend aussi le jugement: car mettre en sa main, n'est autre chose qye cognoistre deueement et avec effet." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 70. This is an echo of Calvin's teaching on God's providence and his active involvement in human affairs found in the *Institutes*. Calvin argues: "Je laisse icy à parler des Epicuriens, . . . lesquels en leurs resveries pensent que Dieu soit oysif et comme un fait-néant . . . qu'il laisse ce qui est dessous à fortune." Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 4. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>99</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 70.

Calvin argues that David's imprecation asks God to hurry his deliverance and vengeance and punish the wicked *hic et nunc*. He contends that David's imprecation is caused by his frustration over the extreme arrogance of the wicked, who not only oppresses him but mocks God's silence. David wants the immediate destruction of the enemy. But in his explanation of verse 15, Calvin delays David's demand and reads it as a wish that depends on God's timing. He argues: "For the meaning to be clear, we have to read the sentence as meaning, Lord, when it is pleasing to you, please break the arm of the wicked; you can exterminate him in a moment, and make his violence disappear."<sup>100</sup>

Calvin tempers David's desire for the immediate application of God's vengeance against his enemies. He makes David's explicit imprecation dependent on God's timing and providence. Calvin acknowledges the certainty of the destruction of the wicked because of God's providence, but removes its application from David's will and urge and makes it completely dependent on God's will and time.

Furthermore, to stress that David's imprecation depends on God's providence, Calvin insists that the punishment of the wicked, although requested by David, is going to happen only when God sits on his throne as the righteous Judge and the King of the universe. Calvin links the punishment of the wicked to the judicial function and kingship of God.<sup>101</sup> Since God is the universal Judge and the King of the world, he will, without

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<sup>100</sup> Our English translation. "Parquoy, afin que le sens soit plus clair, il faut ainsi resoudre ceste sentence, Seigneur, sitost qu'il te plaira casser le bras du meschant, tu le peux exterminer en un moment, et faire que ses efforts violens esvanouissent, desquels il est mené à faire nuisance." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 70.

<sup>101</sup> Musculus also emphasizes the judicial aspect of the imprecation voiced in verse 15. "Non petit ut magistratus functio, omnib. Modis necessaria et utilis, e medio tollat. Culpa quippe tyrandidis et violentiae iniustae, non est gladii in se, sed impiorum et malignoru, qui re bona ad malicia exercenda abutunt." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 142.

fault and delay do justice to the oppressed. All of a sudden, the wicked will be broken and his arrogance destroyed so that law and order may be restored in human affairs.<sup>102</sup>

In Psalm 10, Calvin makes the application of the imprecation formulated by David against the wicked dependent upon God's providence, his judicial and kingship functions and his time. In other words, according to Calvin, the destruction of the wicked is wished by David, but accomplished solely by God, the king, through his providence, justice and in his time.<sup>103</sup> And the purpose of the destruction of the wicked is to reestablish law and orders disturbed by the evil actions of the wicked.

To conclude his comment on Psalm 10:15, Calvin encourages his readers to pray actively, like David, that God may purge his church from unfaithful Christians. Believers should pray that God may exterminate false Christians from their midst, but only for the sake of the church and not for their own egotistic reasons.

### **2. 1. 6. Psalm 11:6 (10:7)**

Following Augustine, most traditional commentators agree that the prayer voiced in Psalm 11 (10) originates from the historical narrative describing the flight of David from Saul (1 Sam. 18-29).<sup>104</sup> But Augustine argues also that the true meaning of the Psalm is found in its prophetic scope. Psalm 11 (10) describes the persecution of believers by heretics, "who, by rehearsing and exaggerating the sins of many in the

<sup>102</sup> "Aussi Dieu quand il met son bras en avant pour faire office de juge, il remet en estat et bon ordre tout ce qu'il y a de trouble et confusion." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 70. We mentioned previously that the theme of God as the universal judge is common to Calvin's doctrinal teaching and has influenced his exegesis of the psalms. See our analysis of Calvin's exegesis of Psalm 9.

<sup>103</sup> Bucer also links the understanding of the imprecations of verse 15 to divine providence. See Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum libri quinque*, p. 68.

<sup>104</sup> See Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 41; A. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 134-135. Aquinas agrees that the Psalm is related to David, but does not link to his struggle with Saul. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 135.



church, as if either all or the majority among themselves were righteous, strive to turn and snatch us away from the breasts of the one True Mother Church.”<sup>105</sup> But Augustine indicates that heretical attacks are brought to an end when God, from heaven rains his Word of truth which on the one hand makes true believers successful, but on the other hand destroys the wicked (the heretics).<sup>106</sup>

With traditional commentators, Calvin agrees that David voiced the prayer of Psalm 11 during his flight from Saul. But contrary to traditional exegesis, Calvin explains the content of the prayer historically. He argues that in Psalm 11, David feels abandoned by his fellow countrymen. The people, aware of his flight from the powerful Saul, encourage him and his followers to go into exile either in the desert or outside of the land of Israel. According to Calvin, people are pushing David to flee from Israel and renounce the kingdom promised to him by the Lord. But instead of fleeing, Calvin argues that David puts his faith and hope in God’s providence.<sup>107</sup> David’s faith in divine providence is based on the fact that he describes God as seated on his heavenly throne and acting as the just judge. Calvin indicates that David does not simply say that God “lives” in heaven, but rather he dominates and rules in his heavenly palace and holds his throne of justice.<sup>108</sup> And if God reigns in heaven and his throne is established there, then

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<sup>105</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 41.

<sup>106</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 43. Cassiodorus has a similar reading. He argues that: “Rains refers to preachers’ words pouring from heaven which serve as showers for the truly devoted but become fiery snares for the unfaithful. The first group yield fruit through understanding well the words, the second choke their souls with the noose of perversity by interpreting them wrongly.” Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, p. 137.

<sup>107</sup> “C’est-ci ceste assurance et gloire que j’ai dit: car David destitué de secours du costé des hommes, a son secours à la providence de Dieu.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 75.

<sup>108</sup> “Car il ne dit pas simplement que Dieu habite au ciel, mais qu’il domine en son palais royal, et qu’il tient là le siège de justice.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 75.

it follows that he cannot look away from the evil of the wicked, and will certainly bring judgment against them. Calvin discards the description of God in Hellenistic philosophy as a passive deity for whom they have arranged a bed for rest. Against Epicurus, and probably therefore, also against the Epicurean tendencies in contemporary Renaissance philosophy, Calvin argues that the God of David is a king and a judge who sits on his heavenly throne and upholds the law and order he has instituted in human affairs.<sup>109</sup>

Calvin indicates that from heaven God distinguishes between the actions of the righteous and the wicked, and will certainly bring the wicked to judgment.<sup>110</sup>

But Calvin is aware of the fact that injustice and lawlessness seem to rule the world. He encourages believers to imitate David and put their faith in God and wait for his judgment against the wicked. God's judgment against the wicked, although deferred, is certain. And God's judgment against the wicked, although deferred for a long time, will come suddenly. In verse 6, Calvin argues that the imprecations formulated by David asking God to rain fire and brimstone on the wicked teach that God's patient has a limit, and he can never let the faith of believers on his righteousness and judgment go unanswered.<sup>111</sup>

David's enemies are destroyed suddenly, not because God did not give them enough time to repent, but because they did not pay attention to the signs of divine anger in their lives. Calvin argues that the destruction of the enemies by fire and brimstone

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<sup>109</sup> "Mais voylà la gloire de notre foy, que Dieu créateur du monde, ne mesprise point et délaisse l'ordre que luy-mesme a disposé." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 75. A similar argument against the Epicureans is found in the *Institutes*. He argues: "Je laisse icy à parler des Epicuriens . . . lesquels en leurs resveries pensent que Dieu soit oysif et comme un fait-néant . . . qu'il laisse ce qui est dessous à fortune." Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 4. (Benôit, 1541).

<sup>110</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 75.

<sup>111</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 76.

falling from heaven is a reminiscence of the historical destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. According to Calvin, God always uses past biblical saving events, either to save his people or to destroy his enemies in the present. In the Old Testament, every time God's people were delivered from their enemies, the prophets always reminisced the exodus narrative to anchor the blessing of the people in the blessing of their forefathers. Calvin indicates that this is also true, but antithetically in the case of God's enemies. Their punishment is sometimes anchored in previous manifestation of God's anger towards his enemies.<sup>112</sup> David's enemies in Psalm 11 participate in the history of the manifestation of divine wrath against the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>113</sup>

According to Calvin, David grounds the imprecations of Psalm 11 in the nature of God as the righteous God, and in his function as the righteous judge. Calvin argues that David's description of God as the righteous God does not entail a "cold" description of an attribute of his essence. Rather, the righteousness of God described by David is a dynamic attribute that makes him involved in human affairs. According to Calvin, God is just and righteous because he governs the world and intervenes in human affairs to bring justice to the righteous and punishment to the wicked. Calvin encourages believers to have faith in God's providence. God will always intervene on behalf of the oppressed, not only because he is righteous, but also because he is the one who has established the

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<sup>112</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 76.

<sup>113</sup> Calvin's mention of Sodom and Gomorrah in his interpretation of verse 6 follows traditional exegesis. Most traditional commentators agree that verse 6 is a reminiscence of the manifestation of divine wrath against the wicked cities mentioned in Genesis 19. Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 100-101; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 140; Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*. But Calvin goes beyond traditional exegesis and provides a theological rehearsal of all past salvific events (mostly divine deliverance experienced by Israel in Exodus) as participating in God's present intervention on behalf of his people. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 70.

law and order being challenged by the wicked. Thus, for Calvin, the imprecations formulated by David against his enemies are but consequences of his understanding of the practical side of divine providence. God as both the ruler and judge of the universe can maintain law and order only by the destruction of those who challenge his universal kingship and his judicial function.

### 2. 1. 7. Psalm 12 (11):4-5

As indicated previously, traditional Christian exegesis interprets the LXX's title "To the eighth" as referring to the eighth day of creation or of the week. The eighth day is understood as the day of the eternal age, the eschatological day of judgment.<sup>114</sup>

According to most patristic exegetes, Psalm 12 (11) speaks of the lack of righteousness and righteous people in the world and the persecution of the faithful by the hypocrites and the proud. The imprecations expressed in verses 4 and 5 asking God to "destroy all deceitful lips" foretell the destruction of the proud and hypocrites who put their confidence in their speech to deceive men, and do not submit to God.<sup>115</sup>

The deceitful lips destroyed by the Lord in Psalm 12 (11) :4-5 are given historical faces in Theodoret of Cyrus and Aquinas. According to Theodoret and Aquinas, Psalm 12 (11):4-5 is a reminiscence of the arrogance and destruction of the historical Pharaoh, Saul, Rabshakeh, Nebuchadnezzar and Haman, who boasted about their power against God and his people and were destroyed by the mighty hand of God.<sup>116</sup> And Aquinas

<sup>114</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 44. See also Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 102; Cassiodorus, *Explanation on the Psalms I*, p. 139.

<sup>115</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 44. Cassiodorus argues that David's plea does not ask the physical destruction of his enemies but their conversion. He contends: "Note his piety as he says this, for he inveighs not against men, for many of them were to be converted, but against the vices themselves." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 141.

<sup>116</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 102-103; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 143-146.

further indicates that the imprecations can be applied to both human pride and vanity and ultimately to the Anti-Christ who will be destroyed in the end because of his malice.<sup>117</sup>

In his “argument” Calvin agrees with the tradition that in Psalm 12, David speaks about the general corruption of the human race, but especially of the people of God. But he argues that David does not only complain about the moral condition of the world or of Israel, but expresses his faith in divine intervention in order to restore law and order in the world and in the holy community. Calvin reads the psalm in the light of the conspiracy of Saul and the people of Israel against David, the anointed one. Calvin finds a correlation between the morally disorganized and corrupted world in which David lived and the morally disorganized and corrupted world in which his readers live. He encourages his readers to look into David’s experience as in a mirror and find, not only his suffering, but also find his faith that carried him through his trials.

Now, why do injustice and chaos reign in human affairs? Calvin answers that in David’s experience, chaos destroyed the holy community because of the capacity of the wicked to speak with a double heart and thus pervert righteousness and order. The imprecations voiced by David ask God to “cut off the flattering lips.”

Calvin sees two possible interpretations of the imprecations formulated in verses 4 and 5: either David is asking for the complete destruction of the wicked, or he is asking God to destroy the capacity of the wicked to harm believers with their tongues. But weighing both options, Calvin argues for the first one. He contends that David is asking for the total destruction of his enemies because they are not only simple flatterers, but are powerful people who stand in kingly courts and distort the truth without any concern for

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<sup>117</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 145-146.

the right of their victims and without any fear of God.<sup>118</sup> Because of their open challenge to the right of the innocent, recognized and defended by God, the wicked become God's personal enemies.<sup>119</sup> Calvin argues that because of his very nature and his providence in the direction of human affairs, God must destroy the wicked in order to stop evil from growing unfettered.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, Calvin sees a clear doctrinal message arising from the imprecations expressed in Psalm 12:4-5: the time of suffering in the life of God's people calls for the time of divine deliverance. Calvin encourages believers who experience unjust suffering to cry out to God and ask his punitive intervention against the wicked. But this must be done with patience. God will reestablish his people in their rights because he is faithful and never forsakes those who trust in him.<sup>121</sup>

#### **2. 1. 8. Psalm 17 (16):13-14**

Because of the lack of a historical or an eschatological heading, most traditional commentators follow Augustine and read Psalm 17 (16) christologically. Augustine assigns the prayer formulated in Psalm 17 (16) to Christ and to his body, the church.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Aquinas sees three possible interpretations for the imprecations formulated in verse 4: either David is not asking for the destruction of the wicked, but the unveiling of their malice, or he is asking their perdition by grace, or he is asking God for their destruction by making them become victims of their own malice and thus experience God's just judgment. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 145. Although he acknowledges two possible interpretations, Calvin seems to echo Aquinas' last option, the complete destruction of David's enemies. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>119</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 79.

<sup>120</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>121</sup> Calvin's practical encouragements are an echo of many traditional commentaries. Theodoret applies the same verses as follows: "guarded by your grace we shall not only escape the wiles of the present generation, but shall also be provided with everlasting salvation." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 103; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 145-147.

<sup>122</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 49. See also Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, pp. 167-168.

And according to Augustine, the message of the psalm concerns the tribulation of Christ, his passion and death on the cross.<sup>123</sup> The imprecations formulated by the psalmist asking God to “arise” and cast the enemies down speak of the eschatological destruction of the enemies of Christ and of Christ’s resurrection from death.<sup>124</sup> But Aquinas argues that although the Psalm does not have a proper heading, its content points to the persecution of David by the hands of King Saul.<sup>125</sup> Aquinas proposes a double reading of Psalm 17 (16). According to him, Psalm 17 (16) speaks about the suffering of David and his appeal to God for the destruction of his enemies. But it also speaks of Christ in his struggle against his enemies (the pharisees, Judas, Pilate who ambushed him) and the devil who used them to send him to the cross.<sup>126</sup> The imprecations articulated in Psalm 17 (16) are, according to Aquinas, historical on the one hand as they describe the destruction of Saul because of his wicked actions against David.<sup>127</sup> And on the other hand, they describe the eschatological destruction of the devil by Christ.<sup>128</sup>

With some traditional commentators, Calvin agrees that although Psalm 17 does not have a title that refers it to a specific event in David’s life and ministry, it should be

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<sup>123</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>124</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 50. Cassiodorus follows a similar spiritual and positive interpretation. He argues that “arise means ‘arise against sinners,’ so that they may know that he whom they believe to be inactive after the human fashion is awake, preventing the extension of their wickedness ... They too are happily overthrown who are brought back to the right path from debased vices.” Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 173. Thus, according to Cassiodorus, the destruction of the enemies means their conversion to Christ.

<sup>125</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 184.

<sup>126</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 175, 184-185. A similar historical reading is found in Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms I-72*, p. 119.

<sup>127</sup> “Lève-toi, Seigneur . . . afin de me secourir plus vite qu’il ne puisse me nuire. Et supplante-le, c’est-à-dire déjoue-le comme par astuce.” Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>128</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 184.

read in the light of his struggle with Saul. According to Calvin, in Psalm 17, David is complaining about the wickedness of Saul and the people around him.<sup>129</sup> Calvin argues that Psalm 17 is titled as a “prayer” because in it David calls for divine help knowing that God will never let the innocent who puts his trust in him be destroyed by the wicked. Calvin indicates that David puts God as a referee between himself and his enemies, because of his innocence, but mostly because of his faith in God’s providence and his government of the world. Calvin explains that David considers God as a referee because of his understanding of his judicial function. God is for David, the righteous judge because of his impartiality. David puts himself under the scrutiny of the heavenly judge in order to prove his innocence and the rightness of his cause.<sup>130</sup>

Thus, Calvin encourages believers who suffer unjustly, not only to rely on the rightness of their cause and their good conscience, but to put their faith in God, in his function as the righteous judge. This is especially important when believers face evil people who completely disturb law and order and the foundation of the human society. Believers, according to Calvin, must exercise patience and avoid to “scream with the wolves”, but rather trust God’s vengeance which certainly will come at the right time.<sup>131</sup> Calvin indicates that David’s assurance about his deliverance and the destruction of his enemies is based on God’s providence and preservation of his elected. Furthermore,

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<sup>129</sup> “Or, combien que le titre du Pseaume ne dénote aucun certain temps, toutesfois il est vray-semblable que David se complaind yci de Saül et des siens.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 108.

<sup>130</sup> “Plustost c’est que David concevant de sa sincérité et droicture une assurance, met entre luy et ses ennemis, Dieu comme arbitre, qui prene cognoissance de sa cause . . . il appelle à Dieu, le requérant d’en vouloir estre juge. Mais afin de ne le faire à la volée, il se soumet à un vray examen, d’autant que Dieu ne laisse point abuser par l’apparence externe, duquel le propre est de sonder les plus secrettes cachettes du coeur.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>131</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 109, 111.



Calvin indicates that David's certainty concerning the punishment of his enemies is founded on the fact that God's providence puts the elect in a special relationship with him.<sup>132</sup> The elect are under the protection of God, and by oppressing them, the wicked openly declare war against their protector.<sup>133</sup>

Calvin indicates that David's certainty concerning divine protection is expressed through the metaphors of the eyelid and the wings. Calvin explains that the metaphors serve to indicate that God acts as a shield for those who have faith in him. But Calvin points out that divine protection on believers' behalf is not only defensive. God does not only act as a shield for his people, but he acts also as a sword. The imprecations expressed by David in verses 13 and 14 emphasize the offensive side of God's providence. Calvin indicates that the imprecations voiced in Psalm 17:13-14 describe the punishment of the enemies in two strikes: first they are brought down, i.e., they are humbled in their pride, then they are destroyed by God's mighty sword. According to Calvin, God does not deliver his people only by shielding them from the enemies' attacks. He delivers them completely when he swings into the offensive mode and uses his mighty hand to break the wicked into pieces.<sup>134</sup> And the destruction of the enemies will happen here and now, because God has given them enough time to repent. Calvin encourages believers not to grow impatient by the present prosperity of the wicked. This

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<sup>132</sup> Calvin's reference to God's election as the ground for his intervention against the enemies of believers is an echo of Aquinas' reading of verse 13. Aquinas argues: "Sépare-les de la terre, et du petit nombre, c'est-à-dire de la société des élus, dans leur vie, c'est-à-dire tandis qu'ils vivent. Sépare-les du petit nombre, c'est-à-dire des chrétiens qui sont préservés." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 184.

<sup>133</sup> "Or il est dit que les iniques s'eslèvent contre la main de Dieu, pource qu'en molestant les fidèles, lesquels Dieu a prins en sa garde, ils luy dénoncent la guerre apertement." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 113.

<sup>134</sup> "Or il n'attribue point seulement à Dieu l'office de délivrer les siens, mais il l'arme quant et quant de puissance pour briser et mettre en pièces les meschans." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 115.

is actually a sign of divine judgment against them. Calvin writes that God fills their lives with every kind of privileges to “fatten” them and kill them on the day he has ordained. God hastens to deploy his vengeance against the wicked because they have misunderstood his patience and abused his liberality toward them.<sup>135</sup>

Now, Calvin concludes his commentary on Psalm 17 by indicating that the purpose of God’s harsh and expedient punishment of the wicked is the restoration of law and order in human affairs, disturbed by the wicked. In Psalm 17, Calvin presents God as the heavenly *arbitre*, the universal judge who referees between his innocent people and the wicked who unjustly oppress them. And the doctrine of divine providence is explained in Psalm 17 as a two-sided reality. Divine providence in Psalm 17 means on the one hand, God shielding his people from the harm intended against them by their enemies. But it also means on the other hand that God goes on the offensive and destroys once for all those who oppose him by opposing his people. It is not an exaggeration to argue that Calvin’s hermeneutics of Psalm 17 is dominated by a strong theology of an active divine providence, already found in his *Institutes*.<sup>136</sup>

### 2. 1. 9. Psalm 28 (27):4-5

Psalm 28 as been traditionally read as the prayer of “Christ himself.” In the Augustinian tradition, Psalm 28 (27) is considered as a prayer that speaks about the unity

<sup>135</sup> “Il s’ensuyt que quand Dieu les engraisse ainsi, c’est pour les tuer un jour qu’il a ordonné . . . Dieu se haste de desployer sa vengeance, puis qu’ils ont si longtemps abusé de sa libéralité et doux traitement.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 117.

<sup>136</sup> Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 4. (Benôit, 1541). For the discussion on Calvin’s doctrine of divine providence see S. E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory. The Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), pp. 7-37; *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, pp. 121-155; F. Wendel, *Calvin. Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. P. Mairet (Grand Rapids, 1997), pp. 177-184; R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence dans la prédication de Calvin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978), pp. 261-308.

of the divine and human persons of the Son and of his passion and resurrection.<sup>137</sup> But Theodoret of Cyrus and Aquinas accept also the historical dimension of the text and link it to David's struggle against his enemies.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, Theodoret indicates that Psalm 28 (27) is also the prayer of everyone who encounters calamities as experienced by David and petitions God to secure him through his providence.<sup>139</sup>

The imprecations formulated in the psalm asking God to pay the enemies according to their works are read spiritually by most traditional commentators. They all agree that David (or Christ) is not cursing his enemies but instead he is predicting what will befall them in the future. Cassiodorus argues that the enemies will be paid according to their works because through their evil works against Christ, whom they killed, they will receive repentance and salvation, which they have unwittingly, wrote.<sup>140</sup> The wording of the imprecations are not malevolent supplications, but rather "a presaging of the future . . . the word is an indication more of the prophecy than of the character of His anger."<sup>141</sup>

Calvin also agrees with the tradition that in Psalm 28, David is reminiscing about past divine deliverance from the attacks by Saul. According to Calvin, David starts his

<sup>137</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 65; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 271.

<sup>138</sup> Theodoret argues that David is praying against Doeg, the Edomite and the Ziphites who betrayed him to king Saul. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms I-72*, p. 178; Aquinas acknowledges that on the literal sense the prayer concerns David "himself," but David "himself" in the mystical sense means the true David, i.e., Christ, the Lord. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 328.

<sup>139</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms I-72*, p. 178.

<sup>140</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, pp. 273-274. Theodoret of Cyrus explains the imprecations of Psalm 28:4-5 as follows: "Let no one think, however, that the righteous person is cursing his enemies: the words are a mark not of cursing but of a just verdict . . . From this it is clear that he uttered the previous remarks in prophetic fashion, not to curse them but to prophesy the future: he did not say, 'destroy' but you will destroy and not build up again." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms I-71*, p. 179.

<sup>141</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 274.

prayer by calling upon the name of the Lord because of his faith in God and his innocence. Calvin argues that contrary to David, most people do not call upon the name of the Lord when suffering befalls them. Their complaint is for Calvin, a sign of both their lack of faith in God and of their guilt. But in the case of David, he does not only call upon the name of God, but also raises his hand toward the sanctuary for help.<sup>142</sup> David prays that God shouldn't punish him together with the wicked, but instead deliver him from their wickedness and treacheries.<sup>143</sup> The enemies are wicked, according to Calvin, because they speak with malice, with a double heart and with impunity, affect gravely the plight of their victim. Calvin indicates that the taunting, and the impunity of the wicked is so frustrating for David that he thunders imprecatory words against them in verses 4 and 5.

Now, David's fierce words against his enemies cause Calvin to pause and review the ethical issue that has plagued the correct interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter in traditional exegesis.<sup>144</sup> First, Calvin agrees with traditional exegetes and indicates that vengeance, as the expression of human anger and hatred is contrary to

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<sup>142</sup> Calvin shows uneasiness with the language of the psalm depicting David as raising his hand towards the sanctuary. He argues that David is not praying to the sanctuary, but instead to the God of the sanctuary. The sanctuary is referred to not as an object of worship, but instead as the place of the covenant, a mirror of the grace God has bestowed on his people. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 223.

<sup>143</sup> Calvin indicates that when David prays that God shouldn't punish him with the wicked, he is not saying that God does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, but rather is talking indirectly (*obliquement*) about his innocence. Calvin argues that David understands God as the one who discerns between the faithful and the reprobate and pays each according to his actions. "Il conclut par la nature de Dieu qu'il doit avoir bon espoir, veu que le propre d'iceluy est de discerner entre les fidèles et les réprouvez, et de rendre à chacun son juste loyer." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 224.

<sup>144</sup> Traditional exegetes have deemed the imprecatory passages of the Psalter to be morally offensive on the literal level, and following Augustine's hermeneutical principles, they read them spiritually and positively. Instead of describing David' anger and thirst for vengeance against his enemies, traditional commentators argue that the imprecations of the Psalter are the prayer of David foretelling the destruction of the spiritual vices of the enemies of Christ and the church, thus forecasting their salvation. See our previous analysis of traditional exegesis of the chosen psalms.

God's will and cannot be justified, even in the Bible.<sup>145</sup> Calvin argues that God does not want us to seek vengeance for our own private matters. And this kind of vengeance is not what drives David's imprecations in the Psalter. Calvin contends that as a *preud'homme*, a holy man, who has shown great restraint even when he had Saul under his power, David was incapable of raw anger and bitter vengeance as is the case with unbelievers or even the rest of human beings.<sup>146</sup> So, the imprecations of the Psalter are not expressions of David's thirst for revenge. Second, Calvin urges his readers to prudence when dealing with suffering caused by wicked people and calling upon God to defend their cause. Calvin indicates that believers should refrain from excessive zeal and not imitate the disciples of Christ who wanted to call fire from heaven and destroy the Samaritans because they didn't welcome the Lord. The Lord himself rebuked them for such haste and unhealthy zeal for his cause (Luke 9:55). In David's case, he showed zeal, not for his personal cause, but for the cause of the kingdom of God.<sup>147</sup> Finally, Calvin contends that one hermeneutical rule should guide believers when dealing with the imprecations in the Psalter or with the desire of vengeance in their own situation. Calvin argues that believers should seek above all, the salvation of their enemies. This is, according to Calvin what motivated David in his imprecations against his enemies. He did not seek revenge for himself, but acted as God's representative and did not ask for the immediate

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<sup>145</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 224.

<sup>146</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 225. The same ethical justifications are also visible in Musculus's observations on the meaning of Psalm 28:4. He argues that: "Primum David non loquitur de illis, qui sibi duntaxat adversabantur, sed qui erant omnis pietatis hostes: atque ideo magis Dei et populi, quam sui inimici. Jam quemadmodum dilectio Dei et proximi, si vera sit, exigit, ut inimicos privatos diligamus: ita postulat, ut Dei et populi sui hostes, summo odio prosequamur." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 440.

<sup>147</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 225.

physical death of his enemies but prayed for their final judgment. Calvin contends that David as a prophet, prayed that “someday, the enemies may be judged before the judicial throne of God.”<sup>148</sup> Thus, the imprecations of the Psalter are not curses against David’s enemies; they are David’s anticipation of God’s judgment against the wicked who oppose, not David as a private individual, but David as God’s appointed king.

Now returning to the meaning of the imprecations expressed in Psalm 28:4-5 asking God to pay the enemies according to their works, Calvin argues that these imprecations are motivated by the folly of David’s enemies. David’s enemies misunderstand God’s silence and patience towards their evil works. Calvin argues that the wicked believe that their temporary prosperity means that God loves them and does not care about their wickedness, and that the world is run randomly without being governed by God’s providence.<sup>149</sup> At this point, Calvin’s theological interpretation contrasts Musculus’ more literal and biblical interpretation. Musculus argues that the enemies of David are punished according to the prescriptions of the biblical *lex talionis*. He also compares the enemies misunderstanding of God’s silence and their stubbornness to Pharaoh’s as described in the book of Exodus.<sup>150</sup> Because of their stubbornness and blasphemy towards God, Calvin agrees that the wicked must be destroyed as voiced by

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<sup>148</sup> “Premièrement doncques il nous faut retenir ceste reigle commune, que nous ayons en grande recommandation le salut de tout le genre humain: par ce moyen il adviendra que nous ne donnerons pas seulement lieu à la miséricorde de Dieu, mais aussi désirerons la conversion de ceux qui semblent avoir conspiré et juré leur propre ruine et perdition . . . par cette prière il s’est admonesté et les autres didèles aussi, que les meschans, encores que pour un temps ils se laschent la bride à tout mal sans estre punis, qu’il faudra toutesfois qu’ils comparoissent un jour devant le siège judicial de Dieu.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 225.

<sup>149</sup> “s’enyvrans en leur prospérité, ils se font à croire que Dieu les aime, et qu’il n’a soin ne cure des bons qui sont oppressez de maintes adversitez et afflictions: puis, que le monde tourne à l’aventure et sans estre gouverné de la providence d’iceluy.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 225.

<sup>150</sup> Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, pp. 440-441.

David. But being aware that this might encourage believers towards vengefulness, Calvin argues that David is not asking God to destroy his enemies *hic and nunc*. Calvin reads the verbs in Psalm 28:4-5 in the future and contends that David, with the eyes of faith, sees as a present, the future destruction of his enemies when, “someday,” they will be brought before God’s judicial court!<sup>151</sup>

Now, being aware that his future prophetic approach to the imprecations of the psalm might bring his readers to despair because of the apparent impunity of the wicked, Calvin encourages them to gain a new understanding of the doctrine of divine providence. Calvin contends that divine providence means first of all patience in trials. He contends that God allows suffering in the life of his children to help them develop patience.<sup>152</sup> Calvin insists that although things seem disorganized and chaotic in daily experience, believers have to learn to see God’s action, his secret judgment against the wicked in human history. Faith, becomes in Calvin, the eyes of the Spirit that help believers discover God’s positive action in the seeming chaos of human affairs.<sup>153</sup>

Calvin’s interpretation of the imprecations expressed in Psalm 28:4-5, his insistence on the spiritual welfare of David’s enemies puts his exegesis within traditional

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<sup>151</sup> Calvin’s future-oriented interpretation of the imprecations voiced in verses 4 and 5 echoes Aquinas’ descriptive interpretation. According to Aquinas, the imprecations of Psalm 28(27): 4-5 announce the future punishment of the wicked, based on God’s judicial function. “Donne, pris sous forme d’annonce signifie: Tu donneras; ou bien, Donne en se conformant à la justice divine.” Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 331; Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 226.

<sup>152</sup> Patience in suffering and trial is a common theme developed in Calvin’s *Institutes*. Calvin affirms: “Au contraire, s’il nous advient quelque adversité, nous esléverons incontinent notre coeur à Dieu, lequel seul le pourra former à patience et tranquillité.” Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvii, 8; xvi, 6; III, xx, 52.

<sup>153</sup> “Parquoy apprenons de considérer diligemment tous les jugemens que Dieu exerce, qui sont autant d’enseignemens et espreuves de sa justice au gouvernement du genre humain.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 225.

hermeneutics.<sup>154</sup> Both traditional commentators and Calvin understand the purpose of the imprecations of the Psalm 28:4-5 to be the spiritual salvation of the enemies, although they arrive at this conclusion from different venues. Traditional exegesis arrives at the salvation of David's enemies through a christological and eschatological reading of the Psalter, while Calvin arrives at it through a historical and theological understanding of David's kingdom and the judicial function of God. However, Calvin's desire for the spiritual salvation of the enemies does not negate the certainty of their judgment and destruction by God, if they fail to repent and change their way of life.<sup>155</sup>

## 2. 1. 10. Psalm 31:17-18 (30:18-19)

Traditional commentators have considered Psalm 31 (30) as "another prayer of David himself." Since, however, David is the type of the Mediator, it is the Lord Savior who speaks throughout the psalm. Augustine argues that Psalm 31 (30) speaks about the panic of the people of God persecuted by the heathen and the failing out of faith throughout the world.<sup>156</sup> Cassiodorus indicates that Psalm 31 (30) contains also warning from the Son of God to the saints "now that they have earlier heard both the rewards of

<sup>154</sup> See Cassiodorus, and Theodoret's exegesis of Psalm 28:4-5. Cassiodorus argues that: "The frequent repetition of the terrifying sentiment is not idle; He strives to break their stony hearts with the fire of His great threat." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 274. Theodoret of Cyrus explains the imprecations of Psalm 28:4-5 as follows: "Let no one think, however, that the righteous person is cursing his enemies: the words are a mark not of cursing but of a just verdict ... From this it is clear that he uttered the previous remarks in prophetic fashion, not to curse them but to prophesy the future: he did not say, 'destroy' but you will destroy and not build up again." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-71*, p. 179.

<sup>155</sup> The necessity of the wicked to repent in order to avoid destruction is also underscored in Aquinas's exegesis of Psalm 28:4-5. He argues: "Il faut savoir que l'homme pêche fréquemment, et que de fait il est passible d'un châtement, mais puisqu'en vertu des nombreuses oeuvres de la justice divine l'homme est incité à la crainte, et que par les oeuvres de miséricorde il est incité à la repentance et guérit; mais si par habitude il s'endurcit dans le péché, et perd l'intelligence, il n'y a pas d'espérance de salut." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 332.

<sup>156</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 68. See also Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 355.



the good and the punishment of the wicked.”<sup>157</sup> And the punishment of the wicked is voiced in the imprecations formulated in verses 18 and 19. For most traditional exegetes, the imprecations asking God to shame the enemies and bring them down to hell refer to the eternal punishment of the enemies of Christ; the Jews, the Arians and Pagans. Augustine explains: “strike with dumb amazement the lips of them that invent falsehood of me . . . which speak iniquity against Christ, in their pride and contempt of him as a crucified man.”<sup>158</sup> A similar spiritual reading is also found in Cassiodorus: “It is fitting that those confined for torture in eternal punishment should be ashamed, for as they do not believe in God’s promised judgment, their deceitful lips blaspheme and prattle. But when they acknowledge the manifestation of the resurrection and note that they are subject to grave peril, they swiftly become dumb . . . are silenced by considerable fear.”<sup>159</sup> Starting from a historical reading of the text, Theodoret of Cyrus argues that Psalm 31 speaks of the betrayal of David by Ahitophel, his former advisor. Therefore, the imprecation of Psalm 31, according to Theodoret, “forecasts the death of Ahitophel who though a friend and adviser to David, uncovered the ancient plot and used words to the detriment of the one who had done him no wrong . . . he egged on the son to murder his father.”<sup>160</sup> Aquinas understands the imprecations of verses 18-19 as a warning to the wicked so that they may conform their will to God’s will in order to avoid God’s final

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<sup>157</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 290.

<sup>158</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 68.

<sup>159</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 299.

<sup>160</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 195.

judgment.<sup>161</sup> Luther follows also a similar reading in his first lectures on the Psalms. He argues that deceitful lips become dumb when they become silent about their own righteousness and acknowledge their own sins, and are removed by death in wrath of punishment because they oppose Christ.<sup>162</sup>

In his exegesis of the Psalter, Calvin does not associate Psalm 31 with a particular event in David's life. He argues against those who read the content of Psalm 31 in the light of David's flight before Saul. He contends that the psalm is a reminiscence of past deliverance experienced by David and his hope for present deliverance by God's providence.<sup>163</sup> Calvin argues that the whole Psalm turns around David's faith in divine providence, source of his past and present salvation. Although faced with the fierce attacks from his enemies, David, with confidence, puts his spirit, i.e., his life, into God's hand. Calvin indicates that the language suggest that David has complete faith in God's providence. And God's providence in Psalm 31 means his protection from evil and death.<sup>164</sup>

Furthermore, Calvin indicates that a second metaphor emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of divine providence in David's life. Calvin argues that David confesses

<sup>161</sup> "Il faut noter que cette prière doit être comprise plus sous la forme d'un avertissement que d'une oraison, autrement dit: qu'ils rougissent en conformant leur volonté à la justice divine." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 366.

<sup>162</sup> Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, p. 143.

<sup>163</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 241. Calvin might be following the much more elaborated discussion offered by Musculus calling into question the different contexts offered by traditional commentators. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 453.

<sup>164</sup> "En ta main. Derechef David propose sa foi en Dieu, et tesmoigne qu'il a en tel estime et honneur la providence de Dieu, que là-dessus il se discharge de toutes ses sollicitudes. Car quiconque se remet sous la main et garde de Dieu, non-seulement se rapporte à luy et de sa vie et de sa mort, mais au milieu de tous les dangers du monde se repose paisiblement sous la protection d'iceluy." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 242.

that his times are in God's hand. Calvin indicates that the use of the plural "times" instead of the singular "time," serves to emphasize not the space or span of David's life, but rather the diverse and many kinds of trials that fill one's existence. But although life is full of trials and accidents no human can control, David is certain that through his providence, God governs everything, good or bad. Calvin clarifies that David does not understand divine providence only as his "general government of the world," but also as his government of all the details pertaining to his personal life. In other words, God does not only govern events in the world, but also governs events in David's life.<sup>165</sup> Anything that happens in David's life, for good or for evil, is under God's control. Calvin uses this holistic understanding of the doctrine of divine providence to support a long tropological teaching where he encourages believers to carry out their calling even when confronted to death. God never abandons believers, even in death, since, according to Calvin, death affects only the body, but not the souls of believers. By his death, Christ has taken the souls of believers, therefore nothing can harm them ultimately. Their lives are hidden in Christ and redeemed from the negative power of death.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> "Mes temps sont en ta main . . . il n'imagine point de mauvaises adventures et événements gouvernez par Fortune, comme les hommes communément craignent telles choses . . . il se repose néanmoins assurément en la providence de Dieu, d'autant qu'il tient pour certain que par icelle sont dispensées et conduites toutes choses, et tant adversité que prospérité. Nous voyons premièrement comment il ne nomme pas Dieu gouverneur du monde seulement en général, mais afferme mesmes que sa vie est en la main de Dieu: et ce non pas simplement, mais qu'en quelque sorte qu'elle soit agitée, et quelque changement qu'il luy advienne, toujours elle est en la main de Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 248. Here, Calvin's exegesis enters into dialogue with his doctrinal teaching on divine providence. In the *Institutes* Calvin writes: "Or la foy doit bien passer plus outre, c'est de recognoistre pour gouverneur et gardien perpétuel celui qu'elle a cognu estre créateur, et non pas seulement en ce qu'il conduit la machine du monde et toutes ses parties d'un mouvement universel, mais en soustenant, nourrissant et soignant chacune créature, iusques aux petis oisels." Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 1.

<sup>166</sup> Notice one of the rare references to Christ in Calvin's interpretations of the Psalms containing imprecations! Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 245-246.

But Calvin contends that David's prayer shows that believers are not so easily given to death. The imprecations formulated by David in verses 18 and 19 ask God to put the enemies to shame and shut their mouths. Calvin argues that David is asking for the death of his enemies by the wrath of God, since death brings the wicked back to order by destroying their capacity to hurt the innocent.<sup>167</sup> And Calvin argues that the death of the enemies is caused by God's providence. He contends that when God's providence shines on the faithful, its rays blind the eyes of the wicked and weaken their hands.<sup>168</sup>

Calvin organizes and explains the imprecations of Psalm 31:18-19 in the light of his holistic understanding of divine providence. Divine providence in Psalm 31 fills the whole reality of human life to the point where death, the greatest threat to human beings, is integrated into the providence of God. The enemies' destruction is a direct consequence of this holistic understanding of God's providence. Since they act as agents of death and create disorder in human affairs, they are then given back to the power of death and thus brought back to order. Calvin's emphasis on David's deliverance through divine providence is not only an echo of his doctrinal teaching, but also an echo of traditional exegesis of Psalm 31. The theme is already visible in the hermeneutics of

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<sup>167</sup> "La mort range et réprime les meschans, à ce qu'ils ne puissent plus mordre et nuire." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 249.

<sup>168</sup> "Parquoi voyci un filtre par lequel David exalte magnifiquement la vertu de la providence de Dieu, asçavoir qu'icelle seule suffit pour repousser tout mal et nuisance, et que quand elle luit sur les fidèles, ses rayons sont pour esblouir les yeux de tous les iniques, et affoiblir leurs mains." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 250.

Theodoret of Cyrus.<sup>169</sup> Musculus, however, applies the imprecations of verses 16-17 to the attacks and defeats of the pharisees by Christ.<sup>170</sup>

## 2. 1. 11. Psalm 35 (34): 1-8

Psalm 35 (34), as many other psalms, is explained in the light of the passion of Christ by most traditional commentators. The imprecations opening the psalm are understood positively as Christ's demand "that retribution be exacted from his persecutors, seeking for them the reverses which would none the less assist their conversion."<sup>171</sup>

In his exposition of Psalm 35, Calvin agrees with traditional commentators that David is faced with a wide conspiracy organized by Saul, his immediate court attendants, and the people of the land. But Calvin argues that David did not concern himself with the hatred of the general public since he knew that error and folly caused their hatred. Instead David considers Saul and his entourage as his mortal enemies since they were actively working to destroy him. And since Saul and his people were powerful, they attacked David with an unrestrained cruelty, hoping to destroy him. But against them,

<sup>169</sup> See Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 193.

<sup>170</sup> Musculus argues: "No vulgares hic mendaces describuntur, sed qui in mundo dominantur, superbe ac temere contra pios quiduis iactant et grandia minantur, quales erant pharisaei et sacerdotes contra Christum." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 454.

<sup>171</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 79-80; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 336; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 414. Theodoret, however, offers a more historical reading of Psalm 35. According to him, the psalm was uttered by David when he was pursued by Saul with the complicity of Doeg and the Ziphites. The imprecations are read historically. Theodoret extends the historical meaning of the imprecations beyond the punishment of Saul and sees God's action through his angels against the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 212-213.

David confesses his innocence and asks God to intervene on his behalf and exercise his vengeance against them.<sup>172</sup>

Against his enemies, David asks God to take his shield and sword and to rise and come to his aid. Calvin indicates that David uses improper language to speak about the saving work of God. He argues that God does not need a shield or a sword in order to deliver us. A simple blow from his mouth or a movement of his head suffices to undo our enemies.<sup>173</sup> Calvin's interpretation of the metaphorical language of verse 2 is similar to Theodoret's. Both commentators emphasize the instrumentality of the powerful word of God for the salvation of his people. Theodoret argues that: "God did not use such weapons in punishing the wrongdoers; instead, he needed but a word of extreme punishment . . . God does not need such instruments: by word alone he punishes the one and benefits the other."<sup>174</sup>

But David, terrified by his ordeal, was unable to understand God's hidden and secret virtue that assures our deliverance. According to Calvin, David's incapacity to understand God's secret, infinite virtue comes from our common, natural *imbécilité*.<sup>175</sup> Because of his human limitations, David describes God first of all as a defender who puts himself between him and his enemies, as a rampart. Here, Calvin shows uneasiness with David's application of the metaphoric language to God. Thus, he moves beyond the

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<sup>172</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 283. The same historical context is also seen in Aquinas, Lyra, Musculus and Bucer commentaries.

<sup>173</sup> "Il est certain que ceci est improprement transferé à Dieu, qui n'a besoin ny de lance ny de bouclier: car ce luy est assez d'un petit souffle ou d'un croulement de teste pour desfaire tous ses ennemis." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 284.

<sup>174</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 212.

<sup>175</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 284.

immediate literal meaning of the text and explains it theologically. According to Calvin, God delivers believers not through human devices (swords and shields), but through his hidden and invisible virtue.<sup>176</sup>

Calvin contends that David does not pray only that God may frustrate his enemies' evil schemes against him. He prays also that God may attack them by returning their evil against them. Calvin argues that David asks God to send an angel and destabilize his enemies. Calvin explains that by the activity of the angel sent by God on behalf of his people, the wicked are destabilized. The wicked are troubled without anybody touching them. God has stricken them with a spirit of confusion to the point that they create trouble for themselves.<sup>177</sup> Calvin contends that believers should not concern themselves with the fact that God uses his good angels to punish their enemies.

According to Calvin, the angel of the Lord is the agent of God's judgment against David's enemies. Against those who would argue that the ministry of the angel of the Lord, or the holy angels is only to bestow God's grace towards the elect, Calvin contends that the Bible distinguishes between two groups of angels: the fallen angels and the elected angels. Calvin acknowledges that in Scriptures, God, in his sovereignty, uses fallen angels to carry out his punitive assignments.<sup>178</sup> This was the case of the evil spirit

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<sup>176</sup> But contrary to Calvin, Musculus stays with the literal meaning of the text and argues that the shield in verse 2 is an anthropopatic language that allows the psalmist to voice his trust and appeal for God's deliverance. Musculus emphasizes the literal antithesis between the enemies who use sophisticated weapons in order to undo David and God who uses his weapons to deliver his oppressed servant. "Et observa . . . comode utatur anthropopathia ista, vocans Deum ad arma capessenda, instar fortis athletae, quibus insontem et oppressum ac circumventu ab improboru violentia protegat, qui plurimu istius generis armis, minantes interitu insonti fidebant . . . Spirant adversaris mei bellum, instructi sunt armis, de quibus praesumunt: ego vero desertus ac destitutus omni auxilio, spem omnem in te pono." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 482.

<sup>177</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 285.

<sup>178</sup> Aquinas argues that sometimes God uses both good and bad angels to carry out his judgment against wicked people. "Car de même que par le secours des anges certaines choses prospèrent sous l'effet d'une

coming from God that bothered King Saul in 1 Samuel 18:10. But Calvin argues that although the main ministry of the elected angels is to protect the elect, however, they cannot effectively fulfill their mission on behalf of the elect without opposing those who oppress them, thus carrying out God's judgment against the enemies of his people.<sup>179</sup>

Thus, according to Calvin, the protection of the righteous by the Angel of the Lord entails the punishment of his enemies. But while the exegesis of Calvin's predecessors and contemporaries (Aquinas, Lyra, Musculus and Bucer) put the emphasis on the literal pursuit and routing of David's enemies, Calvin's exegesis of verses 5 and 6 goes beyond the literal and historical dimensions of the text.<sup>180</sup> Calvin reads into the angel's action against David's enemies, not only the destruction of Saul and his troops, but mostly the manifestation of God's providence and justice on behalf of believers. He argues that David uses God's providence as his rampart against the attacks of his enemies, and believers who want to experience God's protection and deliverance as David did "must necessarily have in their hearts a clear knowledge and assurance of God's providence,

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puissance plus grande, ainsi par l'intermédiaire des anges bons ou mauvais il arrive que les tribulations s'accroissent davantage: car Dieu punit aussi quelquefois les pécheurs par l'intermédiaire des bons anges." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 418.

<sup>179</sup> "Or si quelqu'un objecte sur cela, que ce n'est point chose convenable que les Anges, qui sont ministres de grâce et de salut, et ordonnez pour la garde des fidèles, servent à poursuivre les réprouvez, la solution est aisée, asçavoir qu'ils ne peuvent veiller pour la défense des fidèles, que quant et quant ils ne soyent disposez à combattre: ne les secourir par leur aide, qu'ils ne s'opposent aussi à leurs ennemis, et se déclarent adversaires d'iceux." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 286.

<sup>180</sup> Lyra explains the pursuit of David's enemies by the angel of the Lord in the light of Saul's defeat against the Philistine's army. "Hoc impletum fuit quado Saul confusibiliter de prelio fugiens seipsum interfecit: et similiter Doeck armiger eius et magna pars populi fugiendo in teriti et isti pluries quesierant David ad mortem. Fiant sicut pulvis ante faciem venti. Quia sicut pulvis non potest resistere ventorum impulsui sic nec Saul nec viri eius Phylisteorum invasioni et angelus domini coartans eos." Nicolas of Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*. Bucer considers the imprecations of verses 5 and 6 to be prophecies forecasting the downfall of the enemies of believers. "Versu sextus eandem rerum perturbationem et iactatio (nam), sed alia imagine canit, nempe insistentis viae lubricae, et omni luce destituti deniq; a persequente angelo Dei exagitati." Bucer, *Sacrorum Psalmorum libri quinque*, p. 177.



which not only precedes all of our passions, but also moderates them.”<sup>181</sup> As for God’s justice, Calvin contends that “David calls upon God’s justice so that he may punish the insolence of his adversaries.”<sup>182</sup>

A second imprecation asks God to punish the enemies by making them fall in the traps they have hidden. Contrary to traditional exegetes who emphasize the fact that the enemies of the psalmist receive a punishment proportionate to their fault, Calvin argues that God makes the evil of the enemies fall on their own heads, not so much that he punishes them according to their own schemes, but because he suddenly puts an end to their false sense of security.<sup>183</sup> Since, because of their power, the enemies consider themselves as untouchable and imperturbable. Calvin explains that David is asking God to strike the enemies’ false sense of security and terrorize them.<sup>184</sup>

God’s providence, his justice, and secret virtue become the three important theological concepts that direct Calvin’s understanding of the imprecatory passages of Psalm 35, and make him move beyond his predecessors and contemporaries’ literal and historical reading of the text. As indicated previously, these three theological concepts open a dialogue between Calvin’s exegesis and his theology.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 293.

<sup>182</sup> “David appelle la justice de Dieu, afin qu’en la desployant il réprime l’insolence des adversaires.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 294.

<sup>183</sup> Aquinas writes: “Qu’il lui vienne un piège qu’il ignore, etc., il expose le châtement proportionné à la faute; et cela, parce qu’ils sont jugés avec le jugement même selon lequel ils voulaient juger.” Aquinas, *Commentaires sur les Psaumes*, p. 419.

<sup>184</sup> “David prie que quelque malheur auquel ils n’ont point pensé, vienne sur eux soudain comme une tempeste, et les accable. Car il ne leur semble point advis que jamais il soit possible que leur ruses, finesses et meschans moyens, et toutes les embusches qu’ils dressent contre les bons et simples, tournent à la ruine d’eux-mesmes, qui en ont esté les inventeurs.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 286.

<sup>185</sup> See Calvin’s doctrinal treatment of divine providence and justice in the *Institutes*. Calvin, *Institution*, I, ii, 2; xv, 6; xvi.

## 2. 1. 12. Psalm 36 (35):12-13

In expounding Psalm 36 (35), traditional commentators agree that the message of the psalm is about the contrast between the wicked who do not obey God's commands and act as if God does not exist and the righteous who find their fulfillment in the blessings of the Lord. Because of their wickedness and their pride, the psalmist asks God to punish those who have rebelled against him by causing their fall and casting them out. For the first time, most traditional commentators do not offer a positive reading of these imprecations. Instead, they argue that because pride is the root of all sins, the wicked will be destroyed, that is, they will be sent to the eternal fire.<sup>186</sup>

Calvin also agrees that the psalm speaks about the folly of the wicked who live and act as if God does not exist or act as the heavenly judge.<sup>187</sup> But he contends that the message of the psalm is mostly about David's faith and hope in God's providence, although the wickedness of his enemies seems unstoppable.<sup>188</sup> Calvin warns believers to imitate David and not lose sight of God's secret providence in the world even though corruption and chaos seem to reach abysmal proportions. God's providence and judgment are more unfathomable than the evil that seems to disorganize the world.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 89-90; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, pp. 355-356; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 220-221; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 436-437.

<sup>187</sup> "Les hommes ayans esteint ou estouffé le sentiment de bien et mal, ne facent plus scrupule de rien, comme s'il n'y avoit point au ciel un Dieu juge des hommes." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 296.

<sup>188</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 295-296.

<sup>189</sup> "Il nous faut bien donner garde d'arrester nostre sens à la malice des hommes, qui renversent et troublent toutes choses: mais en ceste confusion si estrange il nous convient eslever nos esprits à contempler la providence secrette de Dieu, et l'avoir en admiration." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 298-299. This is similar to Calvin's teaching on the purpose of the doctrine of divine providence. In the *Institutes* Calvin argues: "Ainsi nous faut-il estre résolu, quand les choses estans troublées au monde nous ostent le iugement, que Dieu estant séparé loin de nous en la clarté de sa iustice et sagesse, sait bien

And Calvin argues that God's providence is seen when he shows mercy and justice towards David. Calvin indicates that God's justice shines towards his children when he "takes their defense, maintains their innocence, avenges them by punishing those who assail them."<sup>190</sup> And Calvin indicates that although the world seems to be fascinated by the prosperity and impunity of the wicked, David on the contrary, perched on the tower of faith, sees from afar their ruin. Calvin argues that David speaks about what will befall the wicked in the future as something that has already happened. He contends that David sees the destruction of the wicked by the eyes of faith, and believers should follow his example and trust God's providence because at the opportune time, he will bring judgment over the wicked.<sup>191</sup>

Thus, in Psalm 36, Calvin offers a prophetic reading of the imprecations formulated by David. It is important to notice that Calvin does not spend much energy on the wording of the imprecations, but rather takes his clue from the particle *Là* (there) in verse 13 and builds a theology of prophecy as a form of preaching applied by David in the imprecatory texts. According to Calvin, David who speaks the imprecations against his enemies in Psalm 36 is a prophet. He is a prophet who does not *foretell* the future from a mystical divine inspiration. David is rather a prophet who *broadcasts* the results

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modérer telles confusions pour les amener par bon ordre à droite fin." Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvii, 1. (Benoît, 1560). Benoît notes that this section was added in 1560, after the publication of Calvin's French commentary on the Psalter (1558). This might be an inner crossfertilization between Calvin's exegesis and his doctrinal writings.

<sup>190</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 301

<sup>191</sup> Musculus also encourages believers to put their faith in God for deliverance. But contrary to Calvin, Musculus does not ground God's intervention on believers' behalf on his providence as Calvin does. He founds believers' deliverance in God's goodness. "Observandum etiam est, quam fortiter sese consoletur fiducia divinae bonitatis: quae cum appareat tanta esse in reprobis, etiam bestiis, certe nequeat deferere rectos corde. Ita et Christus Matth. 6. Et 10." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 488.

of what his faith in God's providence and judicial function allows him to see. The theological theme of the "eyes of faith" in divine providence is central to Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations voiced in Psalm 36. The "eyes of faith" become also the foundation on which Calvin builds his tropology. Calvin's readers are encouraged to climb on the tower of faith and discover the fate of those who disturb their private and public lives.

## 2. 1. 13. Psalm 40 (39):15-16<sup>192</sup>

Traditional commentators consider Psalm 40 (39) as the prayer of Christ, offered during his passion. The imprecations asking God to shame the enemies and return their evil are read positively. Augustine argues that the text should not be read negatively. Christ wishes his enemies well by asking God to turn them backward. Because: "they who before were proud, so that they fell, are now become humble, so that they may rise again."<sup>193</sup>

In his commentary of Psalm 40, Calvin argues against commentators who maintain that in Psalm 40 David is praying for divine deliverance from a serious disease. Calvin contends that there is no ground for such interpretation. He argues that David was probably asking God to deliver him from the many dangers he faced from his enemies.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Calvin does not offer an interpretation of the imprecatory passages of Psalms 70 and 71. He asks his readers to consult his interpretation of Psalm 40.

<sup>193</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 127; Cassiodorus write on the same text: "We have often observed that prayers are kindly offered for evil men so that they may turn back from their pleasures and not continue in wicked activity. If they undergo confusion they escape, but if they enjoy the happiness of the world they perish." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 405. Although he follows a Christological reading, Theodore of Mopsuestia stays with the literal sense and explains the imprecations as the demise of the enemies who experience shame from God. Theodore, *Psalms I-72*, p. 242. Aquinas argues that the psalm speaks about the New Testament which is the end of the Old Testament, and teaches about Christian grace and charity. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 507.

<sup>194</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 339.

According to Calvin, Psalm 40 is a better example where David displays his faith in God's providence, amidst his trials and his praises after experiencing God's deliverance.<sup>195</sup> Calvin explains that David makes his praises to God known to the rest of the people so that through the mighty work of God on his behalf many may put themselves under the government of God and acknowledge him as the judge of the earth.<sup>196</sup> Calvin encourages believers to "close their eyes, and put their faith in God's government of the world, according to his good pleasure."<sup>197</sup>

But Calvin indicates that in Psalm 40, David does not only praise God for his providence and government of the world, he also acknowledges his own sinfulness and asks for God's mercy. Calvin indicates that David prays for God's mercy and favor especially because of the attacks of his enemies who are seeking to destroy his life. Calvin argues that David asks God to punish his enemies proportionally to the evil they have plotted against him. David prays that God should put his enemies to shame, and destroy them the same way they have been trying to destroy him. Calvin explains that when David wishes that his enemies should perish as a reward to their actions, he means that as the enemies endeavored to afflict pain and shame on him, in the same way God should return shame and confusion on their heads.<sup>198</sup> According to Calvin, the doctrine

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<sup>195</sup> Here Calvin echoes Aquinas' divine providence motif in his exegesis of Psalm 36:15-16. Aquinas argues that "et il demande d'être aidé pour atteindre les biens; car par ta providence le secours m'est donné." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 517.

<sup>196</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 340.

<sup>197</sup> "Par ce que nul ne met comme il appartient sa ferme fiance en Dieu, sinon celuy qui fermant les yeux se laisse gouverner au bon plaisir de Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 342.

<sup>198</sup> "Quand il souhaite qu'ils périssent *en récompense* de leur honte: le sens est, Comme ils ont eu ce seul esgard de m'accabler d'ignominie, afin qu'estant ainsi confus et esperdu ils feissent leurs risées de moy, aussi que pareille confusion puisse retomber sur leur teste. Car au second membre il spécifie quelle est ceste confusion, récitant le dicton de leurs faux triomphes, par lequel ils le diffamoyent, estant ainsi pressé de misères et afflictions. Or comme nous sommes yci enseignez, qu'après que nos ennemis nous auront

that comes out of this imprecation is that God will always treat people according to their actions against others.<sup>199</sup> Calvin quickly points out that as he has explained in the past, believers should know that David did not use these imprecations in a vindictive spirit and they should not use them to express their anger and furor against their enemies. Believers should restrain themselves and deal with their neighbors in a human and soft way.<sup>200</sup>

Calvin concludes his commentary on Psalm 40 by indicating that David's deliverance did not serve only himself but served also the whole community. God's action against David's enemies teaches the whole community to trust in his goodness towards the faithful.<sup>201</sup>

## 2. 1. 14. Psalm 41 (40):11-12

Traditional exegetes read Psalm 41 (40) in the light of the passion and the resurrection of Christ. The psalm speaks of the persecution of Christ by Jewish leaders, his death on the cross, but especially of his triumph after the resurrection.<sup>202</sup> The

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persécutez à outrance, ils auront aussi leur récompense, et que Dieu fera retomber et retourner sur leurs testes tout le mal qu'ils auront machiné à l'encontre de nous." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Psaumes*, pp. 348-349.

<sup>199</sup> Aquinas offers a double reading of the imprecation asking God to put the enemies in confusion. He argues that the enemies confusion means on the one hand, their repentance, and on the other hand their destruction if they fail to repent. "Il y a une double confusion: une bonne confusion qui vient de la pénitence. L'autre confusion vient du châtement." Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 518. Calvin follows the second reading and explains the confusion of the enemies as their destruction since they are unrepentant. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Psaumes*, p. 342.

<sup>200</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Psaumes*, p. 349.

<sup>201</sup> Calvin's emphasis on God's goodness toward the community of believers echoes Musculus'. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 524.

<sup>202</sup> Notice that even Theodoret who usually accepts a double reading of most psalms, favors a Christological reading of Psalm 41. Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 243-247. Aquinas, however, keeps a double reading of the psalm. According to him, the psalm speaks both of the trials of David and of the passion of Christ. But he offers a spiritual reading of the imprecations formulated in verses 11-12. According to Aquinas, Christ is asking God to punish the Jewish nation by scattering them all over the world and by destroying them in the final judgment. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 520-521, 529.

imprecations formulated in verses 11 and 12 are understood as expressing Christ's confidence in his resurrection and his mercy towards the Jews and the heretics opposed to his lordship.<sup>203</sup>

Contrary to most Psalms of lament where David speaks mostly about the wickedness of his enemies, in Psalm 41 David acknowledges his own wickedness and the righteousness of God's punishment against him. But Calvin argues that even when faced with his own sin and with affliction coming from God's hand, David still clings to God and confesses his faith in his mercy and forgiveness.<sup>204</sup>

But the question that focuses Calvin's interpretation of the imprecation of Psalm 41 concerns David's reaction against his enemies. In other words, Calvin wonders why does David, who has acknowledged his own guilt in the psalm, dare to seek revenge against his enemy?<sup>205</sup> How can he ask God to punish his enemies when he himself deserves punishment? Calvin gives two answers to his rhetorical questions: First of all, Calvin argues that David could ask for God's vengeance against his enemy, although he himself was guilty before the same God, since he was not a common man as the rest of men. Calvin argues that David was a special man because he was ordained king by God. And as a representative of God and of his people, he had the power to enact judgment against the enemies of Israel. Second, David did not ask for the punishment of his

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<sup>203</sup> "I will requite them: He spoke these words not in resentment or vengeance but with the prospect of patience, for by bearing with these men even today, He has won over a great number of them by the work of His clemency." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, p. 413; Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>204</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 350-355.

<sup>205</sup> Calvin argues that throughout the psalm David complains about the mockery of his enemies who rejoice about God's anger against him and cannot help but wish his destruction by God's hand. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 352-355.

enemies out of human passion, but out of the responsibility linked to his office as God's representative.<sup>206</sup>

Now, Calvin warns believers that they shouldn't imitate David in enacting revenge against their personal enemies. Believers should not use imprecations against their enemies because their condition is different from David's. As a representative of God, as a king, David could use the imprecatory language against his enemies, who actually were the enemies of his people and the enemies of God. Furthermore, as a representative of Christ in the Old Testament, David was endowed with a different heart than ours, a heart that couldn't give way to human passions. But we, on the contrary, have our hands tied. We are neither kings nor types of Christ.<sup>207</sup> However, Calvin acknowledges a possibility for believers to seek vengeance against their enemies. He argues that as a principle, believers shouldn't exercise vengeance, but if they have a perfect control of their hearts and passions, they can pray that God acts on their behalf as the heavenly judge who defends their cause and punishes those who offend them.<sup>208</sup>

It is significant to mention that confronted with the difficulties raised by the ethical aspect of the imprecations of the Psalter, Calvin, for the first time, has recourse to a christological interpretation that reads David as a type of Christ. Calvin is aware of the difficulty of justifying David's vengeful tone in verse 11. He acknowledges that the language of Psalm 41:11 (*et je leur rendray*) and of most imprecations in the Psalter is

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<sup>206</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 355.

<sup>207</sup> "David, d'autant qu'il estoit Roy, a peu exécuter de droict la vengeance contre les meschans: mais nostre part nous avons les mains liées. Secondement, comme il a représenté la personne de Christ, ainsi il avoit prins en son coeur des affections pures ainsi, il ne laschoit pas la bride à sa colère, mais s'employoit fidèlement à la vocation qu'il avoit de Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 355-356.

<sup>208</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 356.



passionate and vengeful. How can such words be on David's lips without making him sinful? Calvin, without having recourse to a full traditional Christological interpretation of the Psalm, borrows the traditional typology motif and applies it to David. The imprecations coming from David's lips, although harsh, did not contaminate his soul since he articulated them without the venom of hatred. As a type of Christ, he received a special grace that made him incapable of such passion. Thus, although a historical figure living and serving God in the context of the Old Testament, Calvin's David becomes a spiritual figure who participates in the purity of Christ on the tropological level. In other words, Calvin's tropological interpretation of Psalm 41:11 forces him to adopt a spiritual-christological reading of the text, thus forces him to join the chorus of traditional commentators.

### 2. 1. 15. Psalm 52 (51):7

Traditional commentators, notably, Augustine, Theodoret, Cassiodorus, and Aquinas, agree that in Psalm 52 (51) David prays against Doeg, the Edomite, who betrayed him to Saul and murdered Abimelech and the rest of the priests who assisted him during his flight from Saul (1 Samuel 21-22).<sup>209</sup> But according to Augustine and the commentators who follow his tradition, the struggle voiced in Psalm 52 is mostly between two kinds of men, the earthly and the heavenly. But contrary to heavenly men who glory in the Lord, earthly men glory in themselves, in their malice, and will be removed during the eschatological judgment of the world.<sup>210</sup> Aquinas offers a double

<sup>209</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 197; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 304; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms: volume II. Psalms 51-100*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 1; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 661.

<sup>210</sup> "'Wherefore God shall destroy thee at the end': though now thou seemest to flourish like grass in the field before the heat of the sun . . . 'God shall destroy thee at the end:' and if not now, certainly at the end He shall destroy, when that winnowing shall have come, and the heap of chaff from the solid grain shall

reading of Psalm 52 (51), and acknowledges it's christological dimension.<sup>211</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, however, limits his interpretation of the psalm to the narrative of the betrayal of David by Doeg, the Edomite. According to Theodoret, in Psalm 51, David prays against the malice of Doeg, the Edomite who used his tongue to destroy the innocent. The curses expressed by David against him will his physical destruction.<sup>212</sup>

Calvin's commentary on Psalm 52 follows the tradition and reads its content in the light of the struggle of David against Doeg, the Edomite who betrayed him to Saul. In the argument of the Psalm, Calvin acknowledges that in Psalm 52, David speaks about the malice and cruelty of Doeg, who not only betrayed him to Saul, but also killed the innocent Abimelech and the priests around him. Calvin argues that David confesses his faith in God, the righteous judge who sits in heaven and delivers his people by exercising his vengeance against their enemies.<sup>213</sup>

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have been separated." Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 199. Cassiodorus argues that Psalm 52 speaks of the struggle between Christ (David) and the Antichrist (Doeg). He contends: "So the whole of this heading is rightly to be applied to the second coming of the Lord in the time of Antichrist, for it is wholly appropriate to the appearance of Christ." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 1. But Cassiodorus offers two different readings of the imprecations formulated in verse 7. He distinguishes between the punishment of sinners, whose destruction in the present age brings them to salvation in Christ, and the destruction of the Antichrist in the end time for eternity! He contends: "God will in this life destroy to their great advantage those whom He has decided to build up again; but he who is destroyed unto the end is consigned to eternal punishment." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 4. Luther follows also a spiritual reading and identify the enemies of David to Judas and the Jews who were destroyed in their lives, morality and spirituality. Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, p. 245.

<sup>211</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 661.

<sup>212</sup> "In making this wicked choice, he is saying, you will not escape the sentence of God of all; he will promptly do away with you to utter destruction, mark you off from the list of the living pluck you up by the roots, and dispatch you to death. From this . . . will spring the greatest benefit for those sorely troubled at the prosperity of the wicked, to see their destruction." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms I-72*, p. 305.

<sup>213</sup> "Dieu est séant au ciel juste juge, tant pour donner secours et assistance à ses serviteurs qui se confient du tout en luy, pour prendre vengeance de l'orgueil de ceux qui le meprisans se permettent licence de faire tout ce qui leur vient en la fantasie." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 452.

In expounding the Psalm, Calvin stays close to the historical details of the Doeg narrative and indicates how Doeg's boasting and feeling of power (because of his association with Saul) frustrated David. Calvin contends that Doeg is acting as if he were unaware of God's providence and his protection over his people. Now, to better present his case to God, Calvin argues that David describes Doeg in gruesome terms. According to Calvin, David describes Doeg, not only as a liar and deceiver, but as a killer, who has no regard for justice and has no fear of God. But according to Calvin, David's description of Doeg is not meant as an insult to him, but as a way to get God to side with him and punish his wicked enemy. From David's description of Doeg and hope in God, Calvin finds encouragement for believers who should always understand that the time of divine deliverance is always near when their enemies reach a level of unspeakable wickedness, which is a direct challenge to God's righteousness and providence.<sup>214</sup>

God's deliverance comes in a flow of imprecations against Doeg. Calvin explains that David piled up words upon words in verse 7, not to express his anger, but rather to express his faith in the fact that although Doeg's position with Saul made him feel invincible, he was suddenly going to be destroyed and thrown out by God's anger.<sup>215</sup> Calvin indicates that David considers Doeg's destruction as certain because God has to punish him in order to create respect and reverence for him in the lives of the faithful.

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<sup>214</sup> "Car d'autant plus que les meschans se desbordent, il est certain que tant plus ils allument l'ire de Dieu: dont il nous revient une très bonne consolation, asçavoir que le temps de nostre délivrance est prochain, quand ceux qui pourchassent nostre mal injustement et sans cause, s'abandonnent à des meschancetez énormes." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 453.

<sup>215</sup> "Par cest amas doncques de paroles, Dieu te perdra, Destruira, Arachera, Desracinera, Ostera de la terre, David s'eslevant par-dessus la vaine assurance de cest orgueilleux, sollicite son coeur à bien espérer, et corrige la timidité qui pouvoit estre en luy: comme s'il disoit, quelque profonde racine que Doeg ait prins, et quelque grande force qu'il ait, que Dieu sera assez puissant pour l'arracher." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 454.

Furthermore, God's judgment against the wicked strengthens the faith of believers in his government of the world.<sup>216</sup>

In Psalm 52, Calvin's exegesis stands much closer both to the historical dimension of the text, and to the traditional interpretation of the text as concerned with Doeg, David's enemy, has been the case in the discussion of other passages. Usually, Calvin acknowledges the historical dimension of the text, but expounds it more theologically than historically. But in Psalm 52, God's providence, the dominant motif in Calvin's interpretation of the imprecatory passages of the Psalter, is referred to only twice. The malice of Doeg, the Edomite, and his physical destruction by God's anger, seems to be the motif that dominates the interpretation of Psalm 52, both in the fathers and in Calvin. Calvin's historical interpretation of Psalm 52:7 parallels that of Theodoret. Aquinas offers a more spiritual reading of these imprecations than usual.<sup>217</sup>

## 2. 1. 16. Psalm 54 (53):7

For many traditional commentators including Augustine, Cassiodorus, and Luther, Psalm 54 (53) speaks about the flourishing of evil men in the world, and the persecution of the righteous who live in their midst. In Psalm 54 (53), David, the type of Christ, is praying for God's intervention in face of mortal enemies who seek his death. Against them, he prays for their punishment. Augustine argues that the punishment of the wicked is an everlasting punishment.<sup>218</sup> But Theodoret and Aquinas offer a historical

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<sup>216</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 455.

<sup>217</sup> See Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 305; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 663-664.

<sup>218</sup> "So however green they are, so however they flourish, for the fire they are being reserved . . . These men flourish in the felicity of the world, perish in the virtue of God . . . for they flourish for a time, perish for everlasting." Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 208. Staying within the Augustinian tradition, Cassiodorus offers a positive reading of the imprecations of Psalm 54. He argues that the psalmist "strives on behalf of his enemies by every means to offer the prayer which the divine love is wont

reading and see in Psalm 54 (53) the prayer of David trusting in God's providence for his deliverance and the punishment of his immediate enemies, the Ziphites, who betrayed him to Saul (1 Samuel 23). On the meaning of the imprecations voiced in verse 7, Theodoret writes: "You will turn back on my foes . . . they sank a pit and dug it out, and will fall into the hole they have made . . . you will deem me worthy of providential care . . . you will encircle those responsible . . . and will deliver a righteous verdict against them." <sup>219</sup>

Calvin stands within the tradition represented by Theodoret and Aquinas and reads Psalm 54 in the context of 1 Samuel 23. According to Calvin, in Psalm 54 David is faced with "inhumane and barbaric enemies" who do not restraint from evil and have no fear of God.<sup>220</sup> The enemies, according to Calvin, cannot be restrained because they do not care about the fact that God sits in heaven as judge of the world and that all humans will be called to account for their actions before his judicial throne.<sup>221</sup>

Faced with such unrelenting enemies, David confides in God's justice. God sees his faith and innocence and intervenes as the heavenly judge, the defender of the

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gladly to accept. So he prays that ill-will be removed from his enemies, for he knew that they would be weighed down by it . . . when evil men approach the truth, they abandon their earlier intention; if a man does not forsake his wicked plan, he will not take part in goodly actions." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 16. Luther follows Augustine's spiritual reading and interprets the Psalm Christologically. Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms I*, p. 252.

<sup>219</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 312; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 674.

<sup>220</sup> "Quand il se plaint qu'il a affaire à des gens inhumains et barbares, qui n'ont aucune conscience pour estre retenus de malfaire, mais s'y jettent d'une audace desbordée." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 459.

<sup>221</sup> "Car le seul moyen pour les retenir et réprimer, estoit qu'ils eussent souvenance que Dieu est assis au ciel juge du monde, et qu'il faudra que tous rendent conte de leur vie devant son siège judicial: au contraire ayans rejetté de leurs esprits toute mémoire de Dieu, il n'estoit plus question qu'ils peussent modérer à quelque humanité." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 459-460. This echoes the judicial function of God developed in the *Institutes*. "En quoy il conclud, d'autant que Dieu ne peut estre despoillé d'office de iuge, que c'est par son conseil secret que les uns sont avancez, et les autres demeurent contemptibles." Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 6.

innocent. The imprecations expressed in verse 7 asking God to pay back to enemies according to their actions are explained by Calvin not as David's wish for vengeance, but as David's certainty that God will judge the wicked and take vengeance for his wrongly oppressed people. Calvin argues that the verb should not be read as an optative, but as a future tense. David's assurance about the punishment of the wicked comes from his faith in divine justice.<sup>222</sup> Calvin argues that God never lies to his people and is responsible for their protection, as long as they put their faith in him and live godly lives.

It is important to notice that Calvin's interpretation of Psalm 54 is founded on the image of God as the heavenly judge who brings to account all the actions of human beings. God's judicial function serves as the hermeneutical key to Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 54. Calvin's emphasis on the judicial function of God in his punitive action against David's enemies echoes both his own doctrinal teaching and Theodoret's exegesis as well. Theodoret argues that "but for my part, he is saying, I am instructed by your grace that you will deem me worthy of providential care, and with the troubles besetting me you will encircle those responsible for them, and will deliver a righteous verdict against them."<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> "Je trouve meilleur de retenir le sens propre, que David comme ayant déjà obtenu sa requeste, s'attend assurément de veoir l'accomplissement de ce qu'il a prié . . . que Dieu se montrera exécuter de juste vengeance en rendant aux iniques et meshans le loyer qu'ils ont cherché." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 460. Calvin's preoccupation with the proper rendering of the imprecation formulated in verse 7 and his emphasis on divine justice echoes two of the three explanations offered by Aquinas. In his exegesis of Psalm 54:7. Aquinas argues that all the imprecations read in the psalms can be understood in three ways: either as announcements, communicating God's will, or as prayer asking God to do something on behalf of the psalmist, or as a manifestation of divine justice. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 677. Calvin's exegesis emphasizes the third aspect of Aquinas' interpretation. The wicked are destroyed because of God's function as the righteous judge who vindicates the innocent by punishing the guilty.

<sup>223</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 312.

## 2. 1. 17. Psalm 55 (54):10, 16, 24

The spiritual reading of most traditional commentators understands Psalm 55 (54) as a prayer of David forecasting Christ, the end of the law, and the beginning of righteousness for every man who believes in him.<sup>224</sup> Augustine argues that in Psalm 55 (54), Christ is praying about his persecution by evil men, the Jews and the heretics. According to Augustine, Jews and heretics are evil because of their actions, but useful because God uses them to train believers in obedience. The Jews and heretics will be converted so that they may face their own evil and learn obedience as well. The imprecations demanding the division of the tongues of the enemies, their death and descent into the pit are read positively. Augustine argues that Christ does not wish evil against his enemies, but instead is leading them to “lose their ‘one purpose’ in evil.”<sup>225</sup> Although most traditional exegetes agree that the imprecation asking for the death and descent of the enemies alive into hell is a reminiscence of the episode of the death of Korah and Dathan in Numbers 16:31, they argue that death is wished, not against evil men, but against their earthly desires.<sup>226</sup> Theodoret and Aquinas, although accepting the christological reading of most traditional interpreters, place the text in its historical

<sup>224</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 209; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 17.

<sup>225</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>226</sup> Augustine indicates that Christ’s prayer concerning the death of his enemies is not a wish for their physical death, but rather a warning for the judgement they will face if they do not believe in him. He contends: “God bringeth them down into the pit of corruption, not because He is the author of their own guilt, because He is himself the judge of their iniquities.” Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 217. Cassiodorus puts it more clearly: “We must interpret this in a more spiritual sense. After His usual fashion He demands that conversion rather than destruction be the lot of His enemies. Death is said to be the end of life, and he who is converted to a better way is rightly judged to have put an end to his earlier mode of living . . . By this image of the pit he warns us to fear the torment of hell. What unprecedented kindness of the Judge! All is foretold to men so that sinning deserving of punishment is avoided.” Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, pp. 24, 28.

context.<sup>227</sup> Psalm 55 (54) is, according to them, primarily about the struggle between David and Saul, although it also forecasts the struggle between Christ and Judas and the Jews. According to Theodoret, David's imprecations ask God to tactically disorganize his enemies by putting an end to the harmony of their plans (tongues), but also to destroy them physically and put an end to their wicked attitude once for all.<sup>228</sup>

Now, Calvin disagrees with commentators who interpret Psalm 55 in the light of the flight of David from Absalom. According to him, in Psalm 55 David is complaining to God about the attacks of his archenemy Saul. Calvin contends that David, a godly and patient man, is crying to God because of the excessive attacks of Saul and his people.<sup>229</sup> Calvin indicates that because Saul and his people showed no restraint in their attacks against David, God himself had to intervene in order to stop them. Calvin calls believers to understand that there is a clear doctrine that follows from this: every time evil people feel so powerful and unrestrained in their evil, God's time of vengeance is near.<sup>230</sup> According to Calvin, God must destroy the wicked urgently before they completely destroy the order he has established in the world and in his holy community. From the preceding Calvin draws the application that believers should never be evil to their

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<sup>227</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 314-315; Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 679-680.

<sup>228</sup> Theodoret agrees that the imprecations of Psalms 55 apply also to both Judas and the Jews "who were destroyed by their own wickedness against Christ." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 319.

<sup>229</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 462.

<sup>230</sup> "Car il nous faut tousjours retenir ceste maxime, que tant plus les hommes se précipitent desbordément à malfaire, tant plus prochaine est la vengeance de Dieu pour réprimer leur rage." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 464.



neighbors, especially to their brethren in Christ, since it is by God's providence that the body of Christ is built up and believers come together.<sup>231</sup>

Now, against his enemies, David asks that God may "divide their tongue," that "death may fall upon them," that they may "go down to the pit for ever."<sup>232</sup> Calvin agrees with traditional exegesis that the first imprecation asking that the enemies may go down to the pit forever is a reminiscence of Numbers 16:31. But he disagrees with traditional exegetes that the imprecations are prophecies forecasting the destruction of the wicked.<sup>233</sup> Instead, he argues that the image serves to indicate the sudden and permanent destruction and death of the wicked.<sup>234</sup> The wicked are taken down so suddenly because they glory so much on their own power and prosperity that they forget their true nature. Because of their might, wicked people believe that they are gods and forget that they are as fragile as the rest of human beings.<sup>235</sup> Calvin indicates that David asks God to confuse his enemies and kill them at once. David's fierce imprecations prompt Calvin to once again review the issue of the proper understanding of the imprecatory prayers found in the Psalter.

First of all, Calvin accepts the text in its literal and historical sense. He agrees that in Psalm 55, David is indeed asking for the physical death of his enemies, but he

<sup>231</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 465, 467.

<sup>232</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 464-467.

<sup>233</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 217; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, pp. 24, 28; Theodoret, *Psalms I-72*, pp. 318-319.

<sup>234</sup> "David prononce que la ruine de ses ennemis sera mortelle, d'autant que Dieu les renversera et jettera dedans le sépulcre où ils pourriront." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 472. Given the harsh tune of the imprecations, Aquinas argues that they are not the psalmist's wishes but announcements of what will befall the wicked. Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, p. 689.

<sup>235</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 467.

quickly points out that David's enemies are destroyed not because of David's personal hatred of them or because of his imprecations against them, but solely because of their guilt and the price they deserve for their evil actions.<sup>236</sup> Calvin here echoes Theodoret's concept of guilt as cause of the destruction of the wicked in Psalm 55. Calvin insists on the fact that David's imprecations are not caused by his hatred or defense of his personal cause, rather they are caused by David's zeal for the cause of God, who entrusted him with his holy calling which was jeopardized by the enemies attacks.<sup>237</sup>

Also, Calvin points out that David seeks God's vengeance against his enemies because they are reprobate and doomed for destruction.<sup>238</sup> The enemies are doomed because of their unrestrained thirst to destroy the innocent, not taking into account God's judicial function. Thus, according to Calvin, David's imprecations are not evil wishes against his enemies, but they are an anticipation of God's coming judgment against them. Calvin argues that with the eyes of faith, David sees his enemies already destroyed, since God as the heavenly judge, who discerns the actions of human beings, will not allow the wicked to escape his judgment.<sup>239</sup>

Calvin calls believers not to use the imprecations of the Psalter against their enemies in their private lives. Believers should not voice their anger and frustration against their enemies by using imprecations against them. David, Calvin argues, was not motivated by anger, but by his zeal for God.

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<sup>236</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 319.

<sup>237</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 467.

<sup>238</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 467.

<sup>239</sup> "Car comme ainsi soit que le vengeance de Dieu est pour tout certain apprestée sur tous ceux qui sont cruels et usent de fraude, il conclut que ses ennemis (desquels il avait expérimenté la cruauté et les fraudes) ne la peuvent eschapper." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 472.

From Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 55 and from the excursus he offers on the issue, it may be concluded that, contrary to traditional interpreters, Calvin did not understand the imprecations of the Psalter as prophetic words forecasting the eschatological destruction of the enemies. Neither did he find it necessary to read them spiritually and positively as expressing the future conversion of the wicked. Instead, Calvin read the imprecations of the Psalter both historically and theologically and understood them as expressing the actual destruction of the wicked. But, according to Calvin, David did not wish or describe this destruction of the enemy out of anger or thirst for vengeance, but rather he anticipated it by faith. Calvin argues that David's imprecations are so urgent and so certain because by faith he could see them happening because, in effect, he had been given objective knowledge of the judicial nature of God. In other words, according to Calvin, the enemies' cruelty against the innocent servant of God triggers an "automatic" punitive response from God. God's "automatic" punishment against the unrestrained wickedness of the enemies results from his righteous nature and his function as the heavenly judge who scrutinizes the actions of human beings. Thus, Calvin's David is not so much a prophet scrutinizing the future in order to discover God's punitive plan for the wicked. But, Calvin's David is a fervent believer, who with the eyes of faith sees and understands the dynamic nature and function of the covenantal God. Because of his righteousness and function as the heavenly judge, God never fails those who trust in him and call upon him when suffering unjustly in the hands of the wicked. According to Calvin, imprecations in the Psalter do not *forecast*, but *broadcast* the outcome of the activities of the wicked. For Calvin, the imprecations of the Psalter teach that, without exception, the enemies of David will be killed. The enemies will be killed

because their very evil nature stands against the very righteous nature of the God of providence who has taken his chosen people under his protection. It is important to notice that Calvin's understanding of the imprecations of the Psalter as a *broadcast* of God's punitive action against the wicked echoes Aquinas' understanding of the imprecations as an *annoucement* of divine's judicial activity against the wicked.<sup>240</sup>

## 2. 1. 18. Psalm 56 (55):8

The imprecation of Psalm 56 (55) asking God to "bring down the peoples" is interpreted, both in traditional exegesis and in Calvin along the line of the preceding Psalm. Traditional commentators understand Psalm 56 (55) as the prayer of Christ, or of the mother church persecuted by enemies and asking for God's deliverance.<sup>241</sup> The imprecation of verse 8 asking for the destruction of the enemies is read positively as in Psalm 55 (54). The peoples or nations to be brought down are, in traditional exegesis, unbelievers who have to be brought down from their evil and converted to Christ.<sup>242</sup> Theodoret on the other hand continues with a more historical reading of the psalm and argues that the enemies are David's enemies, mostly Saul and his people. The

<sup>240</sup> Aquinas, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, pp. 688-689.

<sup>241</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 219-220; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, p. 32.

<sup>242</sup> "Thou art angry and dost bring down, dost rage and save, dost terrify and call. Thou fillest with tribulations all things, in order that being set in tribulations men may fly to Thee, lest by pleasures and a wrong security they be seduced." Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 222. Cassiodorus comments on verse 8 follows Augustine's. He contends: "The Lord's justice, which is thought to be anger, breaks arrogant people in pieces. When he has shattered their hearts with afflictions and filled them with numerous diverse hardships, they are recalled from their wickedness and compelled to confess the Lord. This appears to happen through His anger, though He is known to be equable and unchangeable as He achieves the causes of our salvation." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, p. 34.

imprecation in verse 8 forecasts the physical destruction of the wicked, the enemies of God's people.<sup>243</sup>

Calvin's interpretation of the imprecation of Psalm 56 follows his previous treatment of the question in Psalm 55. With the tradition, Calvin follows the heading of the Psalm and explains its message in the light of the narrative of 1 Samuel 21. He argues that in Psalm 56 David is praying about the suffering and the exile he had to endure in the land of the Philistines because of Saul's attacks.<sup>244</sup> As in Psalm 55, Calvin explains the imprecation expressed in verse 8 in three points: 1. The excessive cruelty of Saul and his people, who acted without concern for the right of the innocent and without regard for the justice of God.<sup>245</sup> 2. The appeal to God as the heavenly judge who discerns the actions of human beings.<sup>246</sup> 3. God's punitive interventions against the wicked dependent on his own time and season.<sup>247</sup> As in Psalm 55, David's imprecation against the wicked is understood by Calvin not as an expression of his anger or ill wishes, but as an expression of his faith in God, a *broadcast* of what will befall the wicked because of God's righteous nature and his judicial function.

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<sup>243</sup> "It is simple and easy for you, he is saying, to banish them, lay them low, and dispatch them to death . . . not only them but all who choose to live in lawlessness you will consign to punishment that is fraught with wrath." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 325.

<sup>244</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 476.

<sup>245</sup> "Or il dit cela, pource que quand les iniques se sont desbordez en leurs maléfices outrageusement et sans empeschement, ils s'esgayent comme ayans obtenu une licence de faire tout ce qu'ils voudront . . . pource qu'il leur semble qu'ils sont exempts de la main de Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 476.

<sup>246</sup> "Après que David a ainsi proposé cela selon que les iniques font leur conte, il rembarre incontinent ceste assurance perverse, en appelant au jugement Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 477.

<sup>247</sup> "Combien, dit-il, qu'ils s'enorgueillissent si fort, si est-ce que quand le temps propre et la droicte saison de la vengeance sera venue, toy ô Dieu renverseras les peuples." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 477.

## 2. 1. 19. Psalm 58 (57):7-10

Psalm 58 (57) has been understood in traditional exegesis as the prayer of Christ and his body, the church, experiencing persecution from the Jews and from unbelievers. The imprecations asking God to break the teeth of the enemies in their mouth is explained in apologetical terms. The teeth of the enemies to be broken in their mouth is explained by traditional commentators as the confusion of the pharisees who had to confess from their own mouth the righteousness of Christ during the discussion concerning taxes owed to Caesar.<sup>248</sup>

Theodoret reads Psalm 58 (57) as the prayer of David refusing to destroy Saul, when he fell under his power. However, Theodoret agrees that the psalm is also a reference to the heretics, the Arians, the Eunomians etc. who are the enemies of the church.<sup>249</sup> The imprecations asking God to break the teeth of the enemies are read historically. Theodoret argues that David is asking God to punish Saul and his people, to bring about “their wasting and undoing.”<sup>250</sup>

Calvin does not attribute Psalm 58 to a specific event in David’s struggle with Saul, but he agrees that the mention of the cruelty of the enemies links it to Saul.<sup>251</sup> Calvin organizes the commentary of the psalm around the imprecations formulated in verses 7 to 10 that ask for the enemies’ teeth to be broken and their lives wasted away

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<sup>248</sup> “With their own mouth against themselves they should make declaration: He hath compelled them with their mouth against themselves to give sentence.” Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 232. See also Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, p. 45.

<sup>249</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 331.

<sup>250</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 334.

<sup>251</sup> Calvin is in agreement with Musculus concerning David’s conflict with Saul as the broader context of the psalm. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 632.

like running water. Calvin argues that David's use of the imprecations follows a clear order: 1. The description of the enemies malice; 2. David's confession of innocence and good conscience; and 3. The calling of God to intervene as advocate and judge on David's behalf.<sup>252</sup>

Calvin argues that David is asking God to punish his enemies, to frustrate their enterprises, to destroy their power, and put it under his feet, first of all, because of their wickedness. Calvin contends that David describes his enemies as corrupt from their mother's womb. He explains that David's words do not teach about the inherited depravity of all human beings. Calvin knows that all human beings are corrupted, but he indicates that David goes beyond that and teaches that his enemies have reached an unthinkable level of evil that makes them into real monsters.<sup>253</sup>

Furthermore, Calvin indicates that the wickedness of the enemies is not the only reason why David calls against them God's punitive action. Calvin contends that the second aspect that justifies David's call for God's vengeance against his enemies is his own innocence. Calvin argues that David had a good and clear conscience before his enemies and before God. Calvin argues that David dared to call God against his enemies only because he was conscious of his innocence and knew the rightness of his cause. Calvin indicates that God never defends evil causes.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> "David prononce que ses ennemis sont abruvez et remplis de malice dès le ventre de leur mère: comme s'il disoit, Que desloyauté et cruauté sont nées avec eux . . . Combien doncques que la corruption du péché originel règne en tout le genre humain, toutefois l'expérience monstre, qu'aucuns ont quelque honte et sont de bonnes moeurs: les autres ne sont corrompus que médiocrement: d'autres sont de nature si perverse qu'ils sont du tout insupportable . . . comme s'il disoit qu'il a affaire avec des monstres de toute perversité." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 485-486.

<sup>253</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 485-486.

<sup>254</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 486-487.

The third and final reason why David used imprecations against his enemies lies on his understanding of God as the defender (*advocat*) of his people and the judge of the universe. Calvin argues that because David, through the eyes of faith, could see God's heavenly throne of judgment, he could without hesitation *broadcast* the destruction of his enemies. Calvin explains that it was impossible for David, who understood God as the judge of the world and as the one who governs it through his providence, to fail to discriminate between the righteous and the wicked.<sup>255</sup> Calvin encourages believers not to lose hope and grow impatient when God suspends his vengeance and allow confusion and disorder to reign in the world. With the eyes of faith, they have to learn to see the impending judgment of God about to fall on the wicked.<sup>256</sup>

Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 58: 7-10 rests less on the explanation of the wording of the imprecations themselves than on their theological justification.<sup>257</sup> Three causes or reasons justify, according to Calvin, the use of the imprecatory language in Psalm 58 and in the rest of the Psalter: The absolute wickedness of David's enemies (Saul and his followers); David's innocence and the rightness of his case; and God's providence and its judicial consequences against the wicked.

## 2. 1. 20. Psalm 59 (58):6, 12-14

Traditional commentators follow the title of Psalm 59 (58) and agree that the psalm is the prayer of David voiced against Saul, who sent his people kill him at his

<sup>255</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 488-489.

<sup>256</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 487.

<sup>257</sup> Musculus, however explains the imprecations literally and argues that the teeth of the enemies to be broken represent their offensive power. "Precatur Deum, ut praeposteram illam potentiam et facultatem ipsorum, qua as oppressionem insontium utebatur, destruat et inanem reddat." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 614. Theodoret offers a similar interpretation describing the broken teeth of the enemies as their oppressive words. Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 334.



house. But as usual, David is understood as a type of Christ. Therefore, Psalm 59 (58) is read as the prayer of the Lord, speaking about his passion and the suffering of his body, the church persecuted by the Jews.<sup>258</sup> The imprecations formulated in the psalm asking God not to kill the enemies, but to make them wander, are read positively. The Jews will be spared total destruction. At the end of the world, many of them will believe in the Lord and be saved.<sup>259</sup>

Calvin follows the title of the psalm and interprets it in the light of David's escape while his house was surrounded by Saul's men (1 Samuel 18-19). But although the narrative attributes David's escape to the cunning of his wife, Calvin insists that David's deliverance came from God, to whom he voices his faith and trust.<sup>260</sup>

Calvin argues that in the whole psalm David laments over the cruelty of Saul and his followers, but confesses also both his innocence and the righteousness of God's providence and judgment. Calvin contends that those who suffer as innocents and call upon God should be certain that he will intervene on their behalf, since it is of the nature of God, as the righteous judge, to join the cause of the innocent. Therefore, anyone who attacks the innocent declares war against God himself.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 236; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 52.

<sup>259</sup> Even Theodoret agrees that the psalm speaks about Christ and his struggle against the Jews. The imprecations formulated against David's enemies are prophecies forecasting the enslavement of the Jews to the Roman conqueror and their conversion to Christ, after being cured by the remedy of repentance. Theodoret, *Psalms I-72*, pp. 336, 339.

<sup>260</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 490. For a similar view see Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 636.

<sup>261</sup> "Car puis que le propre de Dieu est de maintenir justice, et de defendre toute bonne cause, quiconques se prend à ceux qui sont innocens, il entreprend de luy faire la guerre." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 490.

And God's war against David's enemies is visible through the imprecations articulated in verses 6, and 12 to 14. Calvin indicates that David organizes his imprecations in two ways: first he asks God not to destroy his enemies at once, but rather to punish them progressively. Calvin explains that David asks God to progressively bring his enemies down from the pedestal of their power to the ground of their poverty and suffering. The purpose of this slow but progressive punishment of the wicked is to keep the mind of believers and the rest of the people of the land focused on the display of God's anger against the wicked.<sup>262</sup>

But in verses 12 to 14, David asks for the sudden destruction of his enemies. He asks God to consume them in his anger. Calvin indicates that David's second request might sound contradictory. Why does he wish the sudden destruction of his enemies when he argued at first that their progressive destruction will make God's judgment more visible to the world? Maintaining a strictly literal-historical reading, Calvin answers that the purpose of the sudden destruction of the enemies after a long delay is to bring God's judgment against them to a climax. Calvin compares the sudden destruction of David's enemies to the way Romans treat their captives in war. He explains that during battle, Romans capture their enemies and keep them alive until they win the war. Then they parade them and kill them afterwards. In the same way, the wicked are first of all kept suffering for a long time, to make evident God's judgment against them, then they are finally destroyed at the appropriate time to seal their fate and show the seriousness of

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<sup>262</sup> "Car il requiert que Dieu les arrache du degré honorable auquel ils sont montez, et les renverse aux pieds des autres, afin que traînants en misère et opprobre, ils servent tous les jours d'un spectacle auquel chacun puisse appercevoir tesmoignages évidens de l'ire de Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 494-495.

God's anger and vengeance towards wickedness.<sup>263</sup> Calvin's stress on David as the subject of these verses goes beyond the historical focus of others, like Theodoret and Musculus who add christological and eschatological readings at this point. Although he accepts the historical reading of the imprecations voiced in verses 12-14 and explains them as describing Saul's destruction, Musculus offers also a Christological-eschatological application of these imprecations.<sup>264</sup>

In Psalm 59, the theme of God's judgment dominates the interpretation of the psalm and especially the interpretation of the imprecatory passage. Calvin sees God's judgment as a slow but steady process that destroys the enemies inwardly before a final act of punishment destroys them outwardly. He argues that the purpose of this slow punishment is to bring God's people and the rest of the world to the knowledge of the hidden work of God's providence.

## 2. 1. 21. Psalm 63 (62):10-11

Psalm 63 (62) has been read by traditional exegetes as the prayer of the church, left in the desert of the world and thirsting for the Lord. The imprecations formulated in the psalm asking God to send the enemies "unto the lower places of the earth" (v. 10) are read spiritually. The lower places of the earth are understood as the lower places of the

<sup>263</sup> "Ainsi donc voilà toute la contrariété ostée, quand nous dirons qu'il prie qu'après que Dieu les aura fait long temps servir d'exemples de sa vengeance, finalement il les enveloppe d'une ruine extrême, àçavoir quand le temps opportun sera venu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 496.

<sup>264</sup> He argues that: "Hoc exemplo accendantur et nostra pectora pari contra obscuratores gloriae Christi fervore, qui multo amplius Christi gloriam hodie sua temeritate inulta et indomita in ecclesia Christi, et coram impiis Christi hostibus Iudaeis ac Turcis labefactant, quam Saul cum suis in Israele." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 642. Theodoret offers also a Christological reading of these imprecations applying them to the destruction of the Jewish nations because of their attacks against Christ. Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 340-341.

human soul, i.e., earthly lusts.<sup>265</sup> And the imprecation asking the destruction of the enemies by the sword is read as the destruction of the Jewish nation by the Romans.<sup>266</sup>

In his argument of the psalm, Calvin indicates that though the title of the psalm links it to the flight of David in the desert of Judah, he actually wrote it at a time of peace. According to Calvin, Psalm 63 is David's prayer and meditation over past persecutions and divine faithfulness and deliverance.<sup>267</sup>

Calvin argues that from the aridity of the desert, from his natural thirst and hunger, David sees and understands his thirst and hunger for God. David praises the Lord for feeling his life with his presence, and his deliverance.<sup>268</sup> The enemies who were plotting to kill him were destroyed violently by God who left their dead corpses to wild animals.<sup>269</sup> Echoing Theodoret, Calvin argues that the imprecations formulated by David are a remembrance of a scene of a battlefield full of dead corpses, scattered without a proper burial. Calvin argues that this was the punishment God reserved for his enemies.<sup>270</sup> But he also acknowledges that righteous people do become victims of war

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<sup>265</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 258-259; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 83.

<sup>266</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 262-263; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 88. Theodoret reads the imprecations of Psalm 63 as prophecies forecasting the overthrow of Saul by God. He argues: "I am aware however, that they shall be dispatched to death. Then he also prophesies the manner of their passing . . . they will suffer this at the right hand of the enemy . . . Now the immediate interpretation is that most of those who fall in battle will not be thought worthy even of burial, but will end up as carrion for the wild beasts" Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 359.

<sup>267</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 517.

<sup>268</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 517.

<sup>269</sup> "La substance du propos est, Que combien que ses adversaires ayent continuellement l'oeil sur luy, attendans l'occasion de l'empongnier et le destruire, ils périront toutesfois en brief: pource que Dieu les renversera d'une grande roideur, et non-seulement les mettra à mort, mais aussi fera que leurs charongnes seront délaissées sans sépulture." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 522.

<sup>270</sup> Theodoret. Theodoret, *Psaumes 1-72*, p. 359.

and their bodies sometimes are not properly buried. However, in his faithfulness and according to his promise, God always preserves their bones. But the bones of the wicked are scattered forever, a preparation for the eternal damnation waiting to befall them.<sup>271</sup>

To justify the cruelty of the imprecations formulated by David against his enemies, Calvin argues that David is acting as God's representative, and that the imprecations are words of faith, spoken by David as seeing the future deliverance of the people of God.<sup>272</sup>

In his exposition of Psalm 63, Calvin is less theological and mostly tropological. He emphasizes the importance of waiting for God's deliverance in life, even when it seems so removed in the future.<sup>273</sup> The imprecations of the psalm are read more militarily than theologically, the tone of the exegesis being less urgent as he understood that David formulated the prayer in time of relative peace and security.

## **2. 1. 22. Psalm 64 (63):8-10**

Most traditional commentators read Psalm 64 (63) as a prayer of David, foretelling the passion and resurrection of Christ.<sup>274</sup> The emphasis of traditional commentators fall on the vain efforts of Jewish leadership to accuse and convict Christ, the righteous Son of God. The imprecations formulated in the psalm are read as the ineffective attacks of the Jews against Christ and their confusion over his resurrection.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 522.

<sup>272</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 522.

<sup>273</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 517, 518, 519, 520.

<sup>274</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 205-206; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, pp. 90-91; Theodoret, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 361-362.

<sup>275</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 94.

Calvin considers Psalm 64 as a lament in which David complains to God about the cruelty of his enemies and confesses his faith in God's deliverance.<sup>276</sup> Calvin indicates that David is facing verbal attacks from his enemies who are slanderers. And knowing David's weakness, the enemies act without restraint, without any respect for God.<sup>277</sup>

But Calvin indicates that even before David experiences any deliverance from God, he already sees God as acting on his behalf and articulates imprecatory words anticipating the demise of his enemies. David announces that God will suddenly destroy his enemies. Calvin sees in David's imprecations a strong sign of his faith in God. He argues that although nothing has yet happened, David was patient and confident in God's judgments.<sup>278</sup> Calvin encourages believers to imitate David and find courage in their suffering. God's silence and patience towards the enemies does not mean that he approves of their evil actions. Calvin argues that God freely postpones his punishment against the wicked in order to "thunder on them horribly" when in their security and assurance he suddenly destroys them.<sup>279</sup>

Calvin indicates that David anticipates the destruction of his enemies by describing them as tripping on their own schemes; God returns against them the consequences of their evil plans. Calvin finds a doctrine here to encourage believers. He argues that believers should understand that God himself works as a watchman for them

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<sup>276</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 522.

<sup>277</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 523-524.

<sup>278</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 524-525.

<sup>279</sup> "Dieu diffère de propos délibéré de punir les meschans, afin de foudroyer plus horriblement sur eux: et quand ils auront dit, Paix et assurance, de les accabler d'une ruine soudaine et non attendue." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 525.

and returns all the evils directed at them against their enemies. Calvin insists that God does it in a powerful way so that all human beings can become aware of his judgments and of his providence, so far hidden to many.<sup>280</sup> Thus, according to Calvin, the purpose of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 64 is the universal recognition of both the judgment and the providence of God. The punishment of the wicked is so harsh; the enemies who terrorized the innocent with impunity are so suddenly and publicly destroyed, that their plight puts fear and respect for God in all human beings.<sup>281</sup>

## 2. 1. 23. Psalm 69 (68):23-29

Traditional exegetes consider Psalm 69 (68) as predicting the passion of Christ.<sup>282</sup> The imprecations voiced in the Psalms are understood as prophecies of the fall of the enemies of Christ. Augustine argues that “it is not from one wishing, but from one prophesying: not in order that it may come to pass, but because it will come to pass.”<sup>283</sup>

In his exposition of Psalm 69 Calvin argues that the psalm has affinity with Psalm 22. He contends that in both psalms David complains about the injuries caused to him by his enemies who act against him in a cruel way. But Calvin indicates that in the midst of his trouble, David patiently puts himself under God’s protection. David affirms that the

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<sup>280</sup> “Il déclare plus pleinement le fruit qui procédera du jugement de Dieu, asçavoir que ceux qui ne tenoyent conte de la providence de Dieu, estans resveilleez par un nouveau spectacle et non accoutumé, commenceront à considérer mieux ce qui leur estoit au paravant incognu, tellement qu’ils raconteront les uns aux autres.” Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 525.

<sup>281</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 525.

<sup>282</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 300; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 141; Theodoret, *Psalms I-72*, p. 395. But Calvin notes that Augustine is inconsistent in his hermeneutics when he does not know how to interpret passages where David speaks about his own weaknesses. Jean Calvin, *Commentaires de Jehan Calvin sur le livre des Pseaumes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie de Ch. Meyrueis et Cie., 1859), p. 3.

<sup>283</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 308; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, pp. 153-156; Theodoret, *Psalms I-72*, pp. 399-401.

enemies attack him because of his attachment to God. But because of the excessive cruelty of the enemies, Calvin argues that David ends up asking God to punish his enemies, to completely destroy them, since they deserve it.<sup>284</sup>

Commenting on the imprecatory passages of Psalm 69, Calvin seems intimidated by their harshness. He acknowledges that David's imprecations asking God to turn the enemies' tables against them and their children and to pour his wrath on them and erase their name from the book of life, are horrible.<sup>285</sup> But he quickly justifies them by calling his reader to remember the hermeneutical rules set previously concerning David's purity and lack of a vindictive spirit. According to Calvin, David's enemies deserve to be punished because of their unrestrained evil, and David's imprecations are but a genuine call for God's just judgment against the reprobate.<sup>286</sup>

But sensing the danger that his readers might use David's imprecations when confronted by the attacks of their enemies, Calvin warns that no one should use David as an excuse to justify his anger or vindictiveness. Calvin contends that believers should be prudent and distinguish between the reprobate who deserve to be cursed, and those who though wicked can still come to repentance. Evil people who do not belong to the reprobate ought not to be cursed. Now how can one distinguish between a wicked person who is reprobate and a wicked person who is not? Calvin answers this question in his commentary on verse 25.

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<sup>284</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 1-5, 6-8.

<sup>285</sup> "Ce sont-ci des imprécations horribles, et en icelles nous devons retenir ce qui a esté remontré ci-dessus, que David . . . estant conduit par le saint Esprit, il n'a point passé outre les limites, ains a seulement demandé à Dieu qu'il exerçast son juste jugement contre les réprouvez." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 11.

<sup>286</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 11.



Again, before he comments on the particular imprecatory verses, Calvin rehearses the conditions for the Christian use of the imprecations of the Psalter or of the imprecatory genre against their enemies. He argues that believers must follow three important guidelines. First, they must exercise prudence. Believers must be prudent in their use of the imprecations of the Psalter in order to distinguish between the reprobate and those who though wicked are capable of change. Second, believers must defend a just cause. They themselves should not be guilty of evil when they ask God to exercise his vengeance against their enemies. And finally, they must use moderation in the expression of their anger and passions. But Calvin points out that, “if we want to be good imitators of David, we should take the person of the Lord Jesus, so that he may yet give us the same answer he gave to his two disciples; you do not know what spirit leads you.” (Luke 9:55).<sup>287</sup>

From the preceding we can conclude that although Calvin acknowledges, on the theoretical level, the possibility of the use of the imprecations of the Psalter or of the imprecatory language by believers, he sees, on the practical level, no possibility for their correct use. Although not clearly stated, Calvin does not believe that believers have the wisdom and restraint to correctly use the imprecations of the Psalter without giving way to their passions for vindictiveness.

Expounding on the meaning of the wording of the imprecatory verses of Psalm 69, Calvin indicates that most of the imprecations are set in metaphorical language. From the flood of imprecations voiced by David against his enemies, Calvin distinguishes five specific curses asking God to destroy his enemies. The first imprecation asks God to

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<sup>287</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 11.

make the tables of the enemies become a snare for them and their children (v. 23).

Calvin indicates that the metaphor in verse 23 serves to emphasize the fact that all the good things of life (food, drinks, sun etc.) given for the enjoyment of common people will be turned against the enemies by God. Calvin contends: "Such manifestation of God's vengeance must make us tremble, when the Holy Spirit declares that all the helps intended to make us live good lives become deadly for the reprobate; even the sun which improves our health through its wings will bring them a scent of death."<sup>288</sup>

Calvin explains the second imprecation asking God to bring darkness to the eyes of the enemies as a metaphor expressing David's wish that God may strike both the reason and the intelligence of the enemies (v. 24). David asks God to affect the cognitive faculty of the enemies and debilitate them so that they may not be successful in their evil schemes against him.<sup>289</sup> This imprecation serves to destroy the offensive capacity of David's enemies.

The third imprecation asks God to pour his wrath against his enemies (v. 25). Here, Calvin distinguishes between two kinds of enemies and two kinds of punishments to be exercised against them. Calvin argues that David had in minds two kinds of wicked people: the *soft*<sup>290</sup> ones, the wicked who are still capable of being healed. Calvin argues

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<sup>288</sup> "Or une telle vengeance de Dieu nous doit certes bien faire trembler, quand le saint Esprit prononce que toutes les aides qui doyvent servir à faire vivre, sont mortelles aux réprouvez: en sorte que le soleil mesmes qui porte la santé en ses ailes, toutefois ne leur inspirera qu'odeur mortelle." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 11. The English translation is mine. Musculus indicates that although harsh, these imprecations are but the application of the *lex talionis* against David's enemies. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 721.

<sup>289</sup> Calvin's interpretation echoes both his own doctrinal teaching and Musculus' exegesis. Musculus emphasizes the cognitive faculty of David's enemies. He argues: "Tertium malum est rerum agendarum inconstantia, quae per lumbos labascentes intelligitur. Illa cecitatem concomitatur. Quod enim de oculis obscuratis et lumbis labascentibus dictum est, allegorice intelligendum est." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 721. For Calvin's theology see Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvii, 7.

<sup>290</sup> The expression is mine.

that against these *soft* wicked David prays that God may only chastise them by way of a punishment. But contrary to the *soft* wicked are the reprobate ones. The reprobate are, according to Calvin, wicked people who have reached such an unspeakable level of evil that they have become monsters, beyond the capacity of change. These monsters do not only deserve correction, but must be destroyed. Calvin contends that David prays that ruin may fall on their heads, that they may not escape the punishment ordained against them, punishment that they deserve.<sup>291</sup> It is important to notice that Calvin uses the doctrine of divine predestination to justify the harshness of David's imprecatory language against his enemies.<sup>292</sup>

The fourth imprecation asks God to add iniquity upon iniquity on the wicked. Calvin argues that this metaphor should not be misunderstood. David is not actually asking God to *add* evil to the evil of the wicked, this would be putting evil on God's account as well. Calvin contends that David asking God to let the evil of the wicked grow without God's restraining power. The wicked person abandoned to himself indulges in his wickedness to the point that his wickedness calls for God's punitive action.<sup>293</sup>

Calvin considers the last imprecation as the most fearful one. David asks God to blot out the enemies from the book of life. Calvin argues that in the preceding imprecations David took away the possibility for the wicked to repent, and in this

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<sup>291</sup> "Quelle horrible vengeance est apprestée pour leurs ennemis, voire ceux qui sont du nombre des réprouvez. Car quant à ceux où il y avoit quelque espérance de guairison, David eust bien voulu qu'ils eussent esté chastiez par punitions, mais quant aux réprouvez et désespérez il prie que la ruine tombe sur leurs testes, à ce qu'ils ne puissent éviter la punition, laquelle leur est ordonnée, et laquelle ils ont bien desservie." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 12.

<sup>292</sup> See Calvin, *Institution*, III, xxi, 5.

<sup>293</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 13.

imprecation he delivers the final blow; he asks for their eternal damnation. Calvin indicates that the reference to the book of life is a metaphor for the doctrine of divine predestination. Calvin argues that David's request asking God to blot the enemies out of the book of life is an inappropriate way of speaking. He contends that there is no such thing as a book where God adds or removes people from salvation. The book of life mentioned by David is an image of the eternal council of God. Calvin explains that in his eternal council, God has already ordained and predestined his people for salvation and that nothing can be changed afterward.<sup>294</sup> Calvin's understanding of the book of life as the election and predestination of the saints by grace through Christ echoes Musculus' although this is a fairly common understanding of the biblical phrase "book of life."<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, Calvin adds that those who have been adopted in the hope of salvation have been adopted before the foundation of the world (Ephesians. 1:4).<sup>296</sup> But those who seemed to be removed from the book of life are those who, for a period of time, have joined the body of believers, but are strangers and never will believe in God. Calvin concludes that the last imprecation is directed against the reprobate, those who never were part of the body of believers, but tried to mingle with them in order to create confusion and deception. Those are the enemies against whom David prays that they may be destroyed for eternity.

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<sup>294</sup> "Vray est, que ceste façon de parler n'est pas propre . . . le livre de vie n'est autre chose que le conseil éternel de Dieu, par lequel il a ordonné et prédestiné les siens à salut. Il est certain que rien ne peut estre changé en Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 14.

<sup>295</sup> Musculus argues that "Librum vitae intelligunt certam illam saluandorum, et ad vitam deputatorum electione et predestinationem." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 723.

<sup>296</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 14.

Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of Psalm 69 is mostly theological. In Psalm 69:23-29, Calvin is in dialogue with his *Institutes*, where he developed the doctrines of divine election and double predestination. David's harsh imprecations against the enemies are not unethical or spiritually offensive because they are but an echo of God's eternal decrees against the reprobate.

## 2. 1. 24. Psalm 109 (108):6-20, 29

Most traditional commentators follow the rereading of Psalm 109 (108) by Peter in Acts 2 and explain it as the prayer of Christ foretelling his persecution by the Jews and the punishment of Judas who betrayed him. Traditional exegetes insist on the fact that although harsh, the imprecations voiced against Judas are not evil wishes, but prophecies concerning the fate of Judas who died by his own hand.<sup>297</sup>

For the first time, Calvin also agrees that Psalm 109 is not only the prayer of David, but as he represented another person than himself, the prayer voiced in Psalm 109 applies to Christ, the head of the church, and applies to each believers as a member of the body of Christ.<sup>298</sup> Calvin argues that through his persecution, David is a figure of Christ and a model for the church, the body of Christ called to complete the suffering of its head, the Lord Jesus-Christ.<sup>299</sup> But contrary to traditional commentators, Calvin does not apply the content of the Psalm directly to the life and passion of Christ. Instead, Calvin

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<sup>297</sup> Jerome, *Homilies*, pp. 255-269; Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 537-538; Cassiodorus explains: "the wickedness of the traitor Judas and the faithless people, and the fate awaiting them for that heinous execration, are foretold." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 103; Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms II*, pp. 1-8; Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 200-201; Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.

<sup>298</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 323.

<sup>299</sup> "Maintenant ainsi qu'en David a esté la figure de ce qui a depuis esté accompli en Jésus-Christ, cognoissons aussi que de jour en jour les fidèles accomplissent le reste des passions de Christ: car iceluy ayant une fois enduré en soy, les appelle après pour compagnons et consors." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 324.

offers a historical and theological explanation of the Psalm based on the life and trial of David.<sup>300</sup> Thus, Calvin reads the imprecations in verses 6 to 20 in the light of trials experienced by David.

Again, before commenting on the imprecations themselves, Calvin reminds his readers of the three important hermeneutical rules to follow in the interpretation and application of the imprecations of the Psalter. First of all, he argues that the imprecations of the Psalter do not result from David's carnal passions; second, David did not call God's vengeance in order to defend his personal and private cause; and finally, David did not utter these imprecations under an excessive zeal. Calvin encourages believers to avoid misusing the imprecations of the Psalter, as is the case in Catholic circles, where private citizens hire monks in order to recite these prayers against their personal enemies.<sup>301</sup> Calvin urges believers to renounce personal vengeance or give way to their carnal passion or excessive zeal.<sup>302</sup> To those tempted to use David's imprecations as an excuse for personal cause, Calvin cites the words of Christ against his disciples: "You do not know what spirit leads you."<sup>303</sup>

<sup>300</sup> Calvin disagrees with Musculus who identifies David's enemies to Doeg the Edomite. According to Calvin, David's prayer and imprecations are formulated against an enemy who was a close friend. See Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1390, 1397; Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 325.

<sup>301</sup> This is an echo of Luther's exegesis of Psalm 109. On the same subject Luther writes: "It pronounces such curses and maledictions upon the enemies of Christ that some have made it a formula of imprecation for monks and nuns to pronounce against their enemies, and have said that if it is pronounced against anyone, he must die. But this is a falsehood and a fable." Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, p. 257.

<sup>302</sup> This also echoes Luther. "It is wrong to curse on your own account for personal vengeance or some other personal end." Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, p. 258.

<sup>303</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 325. It is important to notice that Calvin's preoccupation with the ethical dimension of the imprecations of verse 6 is absent in Musculus' exegesis. Musculus limits his interpretation to the literal and historical meaning of the text, identifying Doeg and king Saul as the enemies suffering God's judicial proceeding opened against them. However, Musculus follows a double reading of the text and applies it to Judas' betrayal of Christ as restated by Peter in the book of Acts, Musculus, *In Sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, pp. 1397-1398.

Now, returning to the words of the imprecations voiced in verses 6 to 20, Calvin argues that David asks God to appoint an evil man as a prosecutor against his enemy, because the enemy lives in contempt of God and endeavors to find wicked ways to destroy the innocent. Thus, he deserves to suffer the tyranny of another wicked person who would rule over him. But quickly Calvin contends that believers should guard against being in a hurry when they pray against their enemies. They should give way to the grace of God. Since by God's grace, the person who oppresses us today may become our friend tomorrow. Here Calvin joins traditional exegesis in his concern for the conversion of the wicked, but he does so without resorting to a Christological application of the text as found in the fathers and in his contemporaries.<sup>304</sup>

Returning to the text, Calvin explains the imprecations asking for the condemnation of the wicked as a judicial procedure in a human court, where the wicked after due process is found guilty and sentenced according to his guilt.<sup>305</sup> But expounding verse 8, where David asks God to reduce the number of days of the enemy and that his office be given to another person, Calvin suspends his historical approach and accepts Peter's rereading of the Psalm and its application to the plight of Judas.<sup>306</sup> Against

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<sup>304</sup> "Seulement que les fidèles se gardent d'estre par trop hastifs quand ils prient, mais qu'ils donnent lieu à la grâce de Dieu. Car il pourra advenir que celui qui aujourd'huy nous hait à mort, demain sera nostre ami." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 325. For a Christological reading and application of verse 6 see Augustin, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 537-538; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 103; Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 201; Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1398.

<sup>305</sup> Here, Calvin prefers to read the judicial court as a human court instead of the divine court. Although he does not reject the second interpretation, he argues for the first one. He contends: "On pourroit assez commodément entendre ceci du jugement de Dieu: mais puis qu'il convient bien aussi aux jugemens des hommes, je me tien à l'opinion plus receue." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 325-326.

<sup>306</sup> Musculus, on the contrary, offers a more literal and biblical interpretation of verse 8 before acknowledging its rereading in the New Testament and explaining it Christologically. Referring to the Genesis narrative, he quotes Jacob's response to Pharaoh concerning the shortness of his life span in

Jewish commentators who change the common meaning of the word “office” and read it as “administration” or “wife” or “soul”, Calvin indicates that this is due to their malice. Calvin contends that Jewish commentators change the text to avoid agreeing with Peter’s Christological application of the text to Judas.<sup>307</sup>

Another important point holds Calvin’s attention in David’s prayers against his enemies. In verses 13 to 15, David asks God to exterminate the posterity of the wicked and erase their name from the memory of humanity. Calvin argues that one should not misunderstand David as asking God to punish without discrimination the members of the family of the wicked. Calvin contends that it is contrary to God’s righteous nature to punish the innocent *pesle mesle* with the wicked. Instead, David asks God to deprive the reprobate of his grace and of the light of his Spirit so that they become the vessels of wrath and left to perdition, even before they are born.<sup>308</sup>

Discussing Ezekiel 18:20 that argues that God will not punish the children for the sins of their parents, Calvin contends that Ezekiel is not justifying the complaint of the people of Israel, but is instead confirming their guilt, since they were indeed being

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comparison to his fathers. Shortness of life is considered in the Old Testament as a lack of divine blessings. “Hoc innuit, cum dicit: Sint dies eius pauci. Alioqui cuiusvis hominis dies pauci sunt, quamvis prolixè vixerit. Unde et Iacob, Genes. Quadragesimoseprimo, cum Pharaoni loqueretur, dies vitae suae paucos et malos esse dicebat.” Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, pp. 1397-1398.

<sup>307</sup> Here is made apparent Calvin’s hermeneutical respect for the rereading of the Old Testament by New Testament authors. As indicated previously, Calvin never disagrees with them. This is made clear in Psalm 109 both by his mention of Peter’s rereading of Psalm 109:8 in Acts 1:20 and his refusal to give an historical explanation of the text in the light of David. Here, Calvin stays within the traditional Christological reading of the text.

<sup>308</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 328. Here, Calvin is drawing from his doctrinal teaching on the eternal damnation of the reprobate. He argues: “Pourtant ceux qu’il a créés à damnation et mort éternelle, afin qu’ils soyent instrumens de son ire et exemples de sa sévérité, pour les faire venir à leur fin ou il les prive de la faculté d’ouyr sa parole, ou par la prédication d’icelle il les aveugle et endurecist davantage.” Calvin, *Institution*, III, xxiv, 12. (Benoît, 1541).



punished for their own sins.<sup>309</sup> As for David's imprecation, Calvin maintains that by asking God to punish both his enemies and their children, David was asking God to execute his judgment against them by withholding his Spirit both from the parents and children and abandoning them to the power of Satan.

Now to those who would argue against the harshness of David's imprecations, Calvin argues that the enemies are actually the ones to blame since their cruelty toward the innocent is unspeakable. They oppress the weak with such cruelty as if they were beating on a dead dog!<sup>310</sup> Calvin sees an antithesis between the unrestrained cruelty of the enemies against the weak and God's rigorous and irrevocable judgment against them.

But to avoid any triumphalism or misuse of these imprecations by believers, Calvin revisits the subject and argues that believers should be patient with those who oppress them, since they are still unable to distinguish in this life between the elect and the reprobate.<sup>311</sup> Calvin encourages believers to pray for their salvation. Notice here that Calvin joins traditional exegesis on the tropological level. He too shares their concern for the salvation of the wicked. Traditional exegetes reach their conclusion from a spiritual and Christological level and Calvin reaches his conclusion from a theological and practical level. Calvin's doctrine of double predestination serves as the foundation of his practical application of the imprecations of the Psalter in the context of the church.

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<sup>309</sup> For a similar reasoning see Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1399.

<sup>310</sup> "Maintenant il montre que non sans cause il use de si horribles et atroces imprecations contre ses ennemis, pour autant que leur inhumanité a esté insatiable, et ont outragé l'homme povre et chétif avec une rage cruelle et obstinée, n'en faisant non plus de conscience que s'ils frappoyent sur un chien mort." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 328.

<sup>311</sup> "Que doncques les fidèles se contiennent en toute douceur, afin que leur abaissement de coeur monte jusques en la presence de Dieu. Et pource qu'il ne nous est pas encores donné de pouvoir discerner les esleus des réprouvez, apprenons de prier pour tous ceux qui nous molestent, de désirer le salut de tout le genre humain, et avoir soin d'un chacun en particulier." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 328-329.

However, this does not forbid believers, who are innocent and have purified themselves from vindictiveness from calling God to exercise his judgment and vengeance on their behalf against their enemies. Calvin argues that believers should not curse their enemies or wish their physical death, but they can pray God to defend their cause. And since God distinguishes in this life between the elect and reprobate, he will destroy those of their enemies who are part of the reprobate, since the reprobate are doomed from eternity.<sup>312</sup> In other words, Calvin sees the possibility of the use of the imprecations by believers, as long as they limit themselves to calling God's vengeance against their enemies and leaving its execution to God. God himself will chose among their enemies those who are vessels of destruction and those who are elect and cannot be cursed. Thus, the imprecations of the Psalter were used by David and may be used by believers against the reprobate, although only God knows the reprobate and can execute his judgments against them.

It is important to notice that although Calvin agrees with the tradition that in Psalm 109 David speaks as a figure of Christ and his Church, Christ himself is completely absent in his treatment of the imprecatory passages, but in verse 8 where he allows Peter's Christological rereading of verse 8 in Acts 1: 23 to briefly surface in his historical and theological exposition. Christ reappears in the concluding section of the Psalm, where Calvin treats David and believers' righteousness through Christ and not through their own works.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> "Cela n'empeschera de rien ce pendant que si nous avons les entendemens bien purifiez et rassis, nous ne puissions librement en appeler devant le jugement de Dieu, afin qu'il exterminé du tout ceux pour lesquels il n'y a plus d'espérance." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 329.

<sup>313</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 330-331.

It can be argued that Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 109 is built around the doctrine of divine predestination. As believers have been elected by God before the creation of the world for his glory, in the same way the reprobate have been designated before the creation of the world to face God's wrath. Calvin solves the ethical difficulty raised by the harsh imprecations voiced by David in Psalm 109 by identifying the wicked as the reprobate. Again, Calvin's hermeneutic of Psalm 109 is based on a dialogue between his theology (the *Institutes*) and his exegesis. His interpretation of Psalm 109 goes beyond the Christological application followed in traditional exegesis, and beyond the historical-literal reading followed by his contemporaries. Calvin follows a theological reading, which without negating the historical and Christological dimensions of the text, endeavors to answer the difficult question of the punishment of the wicked and of his offspring. The doctrine of divine predestination becomes the hermeneutical key that allows Calvin to unlock the meaning and application of the imprecations of Psalm 109 for his readers.

## **2. 1. 25. Psalm 139 (138):19**

Traditional commentators typically consider Psalm 139 (138) as a prophecy of Christ uttered through David concerning his lowliness as a human being, but also of his suffering, death and resurrection, and the suffering of his Church.<sup>314</sup> Theodoret, however, explains the psalm historically and understands it as a prophecy of King Josiah, who refused to follow his father's idolatry but followed the path of obedience to God. According to Theodoret, King Josiah marvels at God's knowledge of his life and prays

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<sup>314</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 635-636; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, pp. 371-372.

against those who worship idols.<sup>315</sup> The imprecation uttered in verse 19 asking God to kill sinners is interpreted positively. Most traditional commentators argue that the imprecation does not ask the destruction of sinners, since Jesus came for their salvation. Traditional commentators argue that sinners are killed when they die to sin and live for God.<sup>316</sup>

Calvin considers Psalm 139 as a prayer in which David cleanses his heart from all hypocrisy, knowing that his life lies bare before God's searching eyes. Calvin argues that David's confession of God's knowledge of him is founded on two important facts: God knows David because he created him, and God knows David's actions in the world because he created the world, in which David lives and acts. Calvin indicates that David marvels at the complexities of his nature and the simplicity with which God not only knows it, but also made it. David is a marvelous creature, made by God's hands. David's consciousness about his nature makes him aware of the futility of trying to escape from the sight of the creator. Because God is the maker of David and of the world in which he lives, there is no area or place where he can escape his searching eyes. And God's searching eyes in Psalm 139 correspond, according to Calvin, to his judicial office. God searches human beings and knows about their nature and actions in order to hold them accountable for their actions. Calvin argues that God puts all humans before his eyes, as someone who puts his hand on someone else's neck and does not allow him to escape.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Theodore, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 329.

<sup>316</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 639-640; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 382.

<sup>317</sup> "Parquoy il sera beaucoup meilleur d'exposer, que Dieu met devant ses yeux tous les humains, comme mettant la main sur eux pour les arrester par le collet, ainsi qu'on dit, tellement qu'ils ne peuvent bouger le

Thus, Calvin attributes evil people's effort to conceal their wickedness before God to their stupidity. Wicked people, argues Calvin, are stupid because they act as if God will not see their evil actions.<sup>318</sup> Calvin indicates that if evil people were not that stupid, they would have acknowledged God's knowledge of their nature and actions and his secret judgment and would have come to him with fear and trembling, acknowledging their indignity. But wicked people abandon themselves to evil and forget that, although they temporarily escape God, they will one day answer to his judicial court.<sup>319</sup> Calvin indicates that since David knows that nothing escapes God's knowledge and action, he prays that those who invest themselves in evil against him may face God's just judgment.<sup>320</sup>

Against those who argue that the imprecation of verse 19 asking God to kill the wicked expresses David's wishes for divine vengeance against his enemies, Calvin contends that the text does not express a wish, neither does it express David's joy about the future destruction of his enemies. According to Calvin, David's intention is different. Calvin argues that by asking God to kill the wicked, David engages himself to consider God's judgments in order to profit from the fear and love that they create in him, when he exacts his vengeance against them. Calvin contends that God sets the wicked as an

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moins du monde, qu'il ne sçache . . . La somme du propos est, que David ne peut se bouger que Dieu ne le voye, voire mesmes le suyve de ses yeux quand il s'enfuiroit." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 533-534.

<sup>318</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 537-538.

<sup>319</sup> "Et combien que plusieurs par une nonchalance brutale se jettent à toute meschanceté, comme si jamais il ne leur faloit comparoistre devant Dieu, que c'est toutesfois en vain qu'ils se fouissent ainsi des cavernes, pource que bon gré mal gré qu'ils ayent, ils en seront tirez et amenez à la lumière, laquelle decouvrira tout." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 538.

<sup>320</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 531-532.

example so that the punishment he enacts on them may cause the elect to refrain from joining their number.<sup>321</sup>

Thus, Calvin's interpretation of the imprecation of Psalm 139:19 is founded on God's judicial function, which is based on his omniscience, not only of human beings in their nature, but also of the world in which they live and act. David's imprecation does not call upon the immediate destruction of his enemies, but calls upon God's judicial office, which depends on God's time and action. The enemies will be punished, but in God's time and will serve as an example in order to keep the elect from imitating their evil actions.<sup>322</sup>

## 2. 1. 26. Psalm 140 (139):10-12

Most traditional commentators explain Psalm 140 (139) as the prayer of the church asking the Lord to free her from both heretics and the devil, who try to sway her away from the faithful service of Christ.<sup>323</sup> The imprecations voiced by the psalmist are understood as the future judgment of those who oppose the church. The coal of fire that falls on the enemies of the church "are the tortures of repentance. Such fire springs from a shower of tears . . . The outcome for them is that they do not remain in their miseries, since through God's kindness they are transported to the side of the good."<sup>324</sup>

<sup>321</sup> "Et de faict, Dieu les propose pour exemple, afin que les punitions qu'il exécute sur eux, destournent les esleus de s'adjoindre à eux . . . quand Dieu aura exercé ses jugements, les habitans de la terre apprendront justice." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 538-539.

<sup>322</sup> See the relationship between God's judicial function and his providence in Calvin's theology. Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 6. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>323</sup> Jerome, *Homilies*, pp. 363-364; Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, p. 641; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 386. Theodoret interprets Psalm 140 in the context of the struggle between David and Saul and his followers. Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 335-337.

<sup>324</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 390.

In his commentary on Psalm 140, Calvin disagrees with those who argue that David is praying to God against Doeg, the Edomite. Calvin contends that from the content of the text, it can be deduced that David is praying against Saul and his counselors.<sup>325</sup> And Calvin indicates that David is voicing an urgent prayer to God because Saul and his followers have decided to destroy his life. Calvin contends that Saul and his people act wickedly without any fear or acknowledgment for God's providence and judgment. David's enemies act as if God's providence does not exist and think that they are the ones who govern the world.<sup>326</sup> And Calvin concludes that when faced with such irreducible enemies, who show contempt for God and are incapable of change, believers should pray that God may destroy their evil schemes.<sup>327</sup> And David asks for the complete destruction of Saul and his followers when he prays that God may rain against them fire and brimstones. Calvin argues that the Spirit of God uses the horrible destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to describe God's vengeance to strike fear in the enemies' hearts.<sup>328</sup> And Calvin indicates that the Sodom and Gomorrah language

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<sup>325</sup> Here, Calvin's position follows Theodoret 's and Musculus' who read the prayer formulated in Psalm 140 as directed, first of all, against Saul and also against his followers (possibly Doeg and others). Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 335; Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1621.

<sup>326</sup> "Mesprisans la providence de Dieu, ils pensent avoir tous événemens en leur manche (comme on dit) et à commandement, comme s'ils gouvernoient tout le monde à leur plaisir." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 544.

<sup>327</sup> "Parquoi quand nous voyons qu'il n'y a point de moyen de ramener nos ennemis à amendement, il nous faut prier Dieu qu'il luy plaise dissiper et renverser en un moment les machinations qu'ils ont couvées par un long temps." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 544.

<sup>328</sup> Theodoret and Musculus explain the destruction of David's enemies by fire and brimstone as the defeat and death of Saul under the hands of the Philistines. "This happened to Saul in the war against the Philistines: there he was cut down and reached the end of his life." Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 337; Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, pp. 1623-1624. "Virum iniquum, violentum videlicet, qualis erat Shaul, malum quod aliis struit, ipsum apprehendet ac subvertet."

has been used in the New Testament by the apostle Jude to warn the world that God will judge the wicked.<sup>329</sup>

Now, as to the ethical difficulty raised by David's request for the total destruction of his enemies, Calvin argues that as God usually heals those he punishes, David withdraws the possibility of divine forgiveness and healing for his enemies. Calvin contends that David sensed in his enemies a complete contempt for God. His enemies were completely incorrigible, without possibility for repentance and change, otherwise, he would not have asked for their total destruction. Here, Calvin follows his position on the imperative use of the imprecations on the reprobate since they are doomed for eternal destruction.<sup>330</sup> But in order to restrain believers from growing impatient with their enemies, Calvin concludes his exegesis of Psalm 140 by encouraging believers not to take things into their own hands but to patiently wait for the proper time and the right season of God's vengeance against their enemies.<sup>331</sup>

## **2. 1. 27. Psalm 141 (140): 10**

Traditional commentators find difficulties attributing the prayer of Psalm 141 (140) to Christ. Augustine argues that the wording of the psalm is obscure, and explains it as the prayer of the church crying to God because of the oppression coming from the world.<sup>332</sup> David's request that God may cause his enemies to fall in their nets is

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<sup>329</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 544.

<sup>330</sup> For an echo in Calvin's doctrinal teaching see J. Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, I, xvi. Edition critique par Jean-Daniel Benoît (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957).

<sup>331</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 545.

<sup>332</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, pp. 644-645; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, pp. 392-393; Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 341.



understood as a prophecy of believers who fell into the net of the church, from the sea of the world.<sup>333</sup>

In the introduction to his commentary on Psalm 141, Calvin argues that he cannot determine the time and historical context of the psalm. He accepts as possible the conjectures of those who interpret the psalm in the light of David's struggle with Saul. According to Calvin, David prays that God may help him contain his passion for revenge since his enemies' vicious attacks endanger his life.<sup>334</sup> But Calvin indicates that God can protect David effectively only if he delivers him from his oppressors. David asks that God deliver him by causing his enemies to fall in the traps they have set against him (v. 10). Calvin explains that David's imprecations asking God to cause his enemies to fall into the trap they have set against him stands in contrast with his previous request in verse 9. In verse 9 David asks God to keep him from the pitfalls and traps set by the enemies against him. On the contrary, in verse 10 David asks that the enemies may become victims of their own evil schemes. And Calvin explains that the purpose of David's imprecation is not the destruction of his enemies, but their incapacitation so that he may escape and be saved from their evil scheme.<sup>335</sup> Here, Calvin follows a strict literal rendering of the text, limiting himself to its verbal explanation.

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<sup>333</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 398.

<sup>334</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 546-547.

<sup>335</sup> "Maintenant à l'opposite des laqs lesquels les meschans avoyent tendus, il met les rets de Dieu, lequel a accoustumé de surprendre les rusez en la malice qu'ils songent . . . Il requiert doncques que ses ennemis se trouvent empestrez jusques à ce qu'il eschappe et viene à sauveté." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 551.

## 2. 1. 28. Psalm 143 (142): 12

Traditional commentators read Psalm 143 (142) as a penitential prayer.<sup>336</sup> A prayer, where a believer beset by evil people who cause him to sin, repents from his guilt and sin and seeks God's forgiveness and deliverance. And God's deliverance comes when he destroys his enemies, i.e., when he saves them from their wickedness.<sup>337</sup>

In his argument in the psalm, Calvin contends that, although much of David's suffering came from the repeated attacks of his enemies, in Psalm 143, David acknowledges that he is suffering mostly because of his personal sins. According to Calvin, adversity, although caused by enemies, often is the result of our personal sin and guilt. And God uses adversities to bring us to repentance.<sup>338</sup> David, acknowledging his own sin, calls upon God's mercy and forgiveness before he even mentions his enemies' evil actions against him.

Calvin explains that David's enemies are so cruel that they cannot find satisfaction, unless they take his life.<sup>339</sup> And David finds no other way of deliverance but to call upon God's personal intervention. David prays that in his mercy God may destroy

<sup>336</sup> Augustine considers Psalm 143 as the prayer of Christ requesting divine assistance against the Jews who oppressed him. Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, pp. 651-654; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, pp. 406-412; Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 343-345.

<sup>337</sup> "His enemies are destroyed by mercy when they are withdrawn from wicked purposes by the zeal of remorse. Undoubtedly this indicates people who escape the punishment which is their due by the remedy of supplication." Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 412.

<sup>338</sup> "Car dont que viennent les adversitez, il faut tenir pour résolu que ce sont fléaux de Dieu, par lesquels il nous sollicite à repentance . . . il est certain que nos péchez sont cause de ce qu'il nous traite rudement. Ainsi doncques David, combien qu'il eust combat avec des meschans gens, et que de son costé il ne se sentist aucunement coupable envers eux, confesse toutesfois sa faute devant Dieu, se présentant coupable, et requérant pardon." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 554-555.

<sup>339</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 556.

his enemies (v. 12). Calvin insists on the fact that David, aware of his own guilt and sin, does not ask God to punish his enemies because of his justice, but only because of his mercy. Calvin contends that David's imprecation is based on God's mercy. David wants God to show his mercy towards him by destroying his enemies, who without cause attack him and work to take his life. Calvin explains David's imprecation by putting side by side God's mercy and his anger. He argues that God's anger stands side by side with his mercy. When he extends his hand to protect his people, he also releases his wrath and thunders against their enemies. In other words, God comes to the rescue of his people with an armed hand.

Calvin concludes his exegesis of Psalm 143 by indicating that David's imprecation asking for divine deliverance is based on the fact that he confesses to be God's servant. But Calvin quickly indicates that David's confession does not entail self-righteousness, but his vassal relationship to God. God did not deliver David because he was righteous before his eyes. David's deliverance is based on God's free election, even before he was born.<sup>340</sup> It is important to notice that in Psalm 143 Calvin's interpretation of the imprecation of verse 12 is based on the doctrine of divine election of believers and their covenantal relationship with God.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 560.

<sup>341</sup> "Il magnifie en cela la grâce de Dieu, de laquelle luy estoit venu ce bien. Car cest honneur ne s'acquiert point par nostre labeur ou industrie, asçavoir que nous soyons du nombre des serviteurs de Dieu, mais dépend de son élection gratuite, par laquelle il luy a pleu nous enregistrer du nombre et du rang des siens, devant que nous fussions nais: comme David luy-mesme l'exprime ailleurs plus clairement, Je suis ton serviteur, ton serviteur suis, et le fils de ta servante. Car cela emporte autant, comme si se recognoissant vassal de Dieu, il remettoit sa vie en la défense et protection d'iceluy." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 560.

## 2. 2. Calvin's Hermeneutics of the Imprecatory Passages in the Communal Psalms

### 2. 2. 1. Psalm 74 (73): 3, 11

Traditional exegetes consider Psalm 74 (73) as a prophecy forecasting the future destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman occupant. The Jewish nation is considered as the one praying at the beginning of the psalm asking God to divert the imminent destruction about to befall her. The church replaces the Jewish nation in the end of the psalm and offers to God a prayer that wins both salvation for the Jewish nation and for their oppressors, the Romans who are won by the power of the gospel. The imprecations articulated in verses 3 and 11 asking God to lift up his hand against the pride of the enemies of his people and to consume them in his anger are read positively. The hand of the Lord is lifted not to destroy the Romans, but to save them: "the power of the Lord was raised among them, when the grace of humility transformed their arrogance and led them unto the end, that is, to the Lord Saviour."<sup>342</sup>

But against those who consider Psalm 74 as a prophecy uttered by David concerning the future affliction of the people of God, Calvin argues that certainly David is not the author of the prayer.<sup>343</sup> According to Calvin, the prayer could have originated from those who faced destruction and deportation during the time of the Babylonian

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<sup>342</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 212; Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 342-344. Even Theodoret follows the prophetic approach and reads it in the light of the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem. But he does not offer a positive reading of the imprecations. Theodoret argues that the psalmist foretold the destruction of the Jews who opposed the Lord. Theodoret, *Psalms 13-150*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>343</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 51-52.

exile, or by those who witnessed the defilement of the Jewish temple during the incursion of king Antiochus. Calvin considers both historical contexts to be possible.

Calvin explains that in Psalm 74, the Jewish nation is faced with a total desolation and the possibility that its name could go to oblivion. The enemies threatening the existence of the holy nations are unrelenting and blasphemous. They have invaded the temple of God and defiled it with the signs of their own idols. Now the people ask God to intervene in order to restore the glory of his name. The people of God are aware that they deserve the punishment that has befallen them, but in a movement of faith, they return to God and remind him of his faithfulness to the covenant and of his past salvation deed on behalf of the elected nation.<sup>344</sup> Calvin explains that in order to obtain grace and mercy, the people remind God of his covenant with them and of their new status as his children. The people call themselves the flock of God's pasture. Calvin contends that the people magnify their free election through which God has separated them from the rest of the nations.<sup>345</sup> The covenant, divine election and the privilege of protection linked to them become the foundation of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 74.

Against their enemies, the people of God formulate two imprecations. In verse 3, they ask God to lift his hands against the enemies of his sanctuary. Calvin translates the Hebrew word for "hands" by "fists." He argues that the people of God pray that God

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<sup>344</sup> Calvin exhorts believers to learn from the plight of Israel and endure suffering. According to him wicked people cannot attack believers if God does not allow it. And God allows believers to suffer in the hands of their enemies in order to punish their unfaithfulness to him. Thus, Calvin encourages believers to endure persecution and use it as a way of self-examination and repentance before God. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 52-53. A similar teaching on patience is found in the *Institutes*. Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvii, 8. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>345</sup> "Au demeurant les fidèles, afin d'acquérir grâce et miséricorde, ont yci leur recours à la mémoire de l'alliance par laquelle ils avoyent esté adoptez pour estre enfans de Dieu . . . ils magnifient l'élection gratuite par laquelle ils avoyent esté séparés des Gentils . . . Nous entendons maintenant dont c'est que le peuple a prins confiance et assurance de prier, asçavoir de l'élection gratuite de Dieu, des promesses, et du service divin qui avoit esté dressé entre eux." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 52-53.

strikes their enemies with a mortal wound according to their cruelty towards his sanctuary. Calvin contends that for the people, a normal punishment against the enemies will not be enough, given their unrestrained rage against the temple and the people of God. The people ask God to completely destroy the enemies because of their unspeakable corruption.<sup>346</sup>

Furthermore, in verse 11 the people ask God to consume their enemies, because with pride, they despise his name. Calvin explains that since the enemies believe that God stays passively in heaven, covered by a shadow, motionless, (incapable of moving even his hand), he should make them feel his power, not by moving his mighty hand against them, but by destroying them by his simple signal.<sup>347</sup>

The covenant and divine election become the foundation of the manifestation of divine power on behalf of the people of God and against their enemies. Calvin understands the imprecations of Psalm 74 as a consequence of God's faithfulness to his covenant and election of Israel. Calvin points out that a section that rehearses God's historic salvation in Egypt and his governance of the universe follows the imprecations formulated in verse 11. Thus, the imprecations formulated in Psalm 74 are embedded in the larger framework of the historic and universal divine work of salvation on behalf of his people.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> "Yci les fidèles prient Dieu qu'il frappe leurs ennemis d'une playe mortelle, selon qu'ils ont exercé cruauté envers le Sanctuaire de Dieu: comme s'ils disoyent qu'une punition moyenne ne suffiroit point à une fureur si desbordée et plene de sacrilège: et pourtant qu'il faut détruire totalement ceux qui se sont monstrez si grans ennemis du Temple et du peuple de Dieu, veu que leur impiété est du tout désespérée." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 53.

<sup>347</sup> This is a common motif developed by Calvin in his criticism of the Sophists and the Epicureans concerning God's government of the world. Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi, 3, 4. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>348</sup> This echoes Calvin's doctrinal treatment of the covenant as the foundation of Israel's petitionary prayers. Calvin, *Institution*, III, xx, 14, 25. (Benoît, 1541).

### 2. 2. 2. Psalm 79 (78): 6, 11

Psalm 79 (78) is understood by most traditional commentators as David's prophecy foretelling the future destruction of the Jewish nation by the heathen King Antiochus. Augustine argues that although the prayer articulated in Psalm 79 (78) comes from the Jewish nation, however, its content applies only to the faithful remnant of the holy nation that believed in Christ. It is this faithful remnant that is praying to God and asking to be delivered both from the attacks of heathen nations and from the attacks of unfaithful Jews who have crucified the Lord and have turned against the church. The imprecations formulated in the psalm are directed against these Jews whom Augustine considers as reprobate who rightly deserve God's punishment.<sup>349</sup> Theodoret agrees with the prophetic reading of the Psalm and ties it with Antiochus' defilement of the temple and explains the imprecations historically. The psalmist predicts the future destruction of Antiochus and his invading army.<sup>350</sup>

Again, in his exegesis of Psalm 79, Calvin insists that the psalm is not a prophecy forecasting the future plight of the people of God. Calvin argues that biblical prophets never forecast the future with such historical details as found in the prayer uttered in Psalm 79. Instead, Calvin contends that Psalm 79 was composed long after the death of David, probably during the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians or possibly after the defilement of the temple by Antiochus.<sup>351</sup> He thus retains much of the traditional sense of the subject of the psalm, but reads the text far more historically.

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<sup>349</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 380-381; Cassiodorus understands the imprecations positively and explains them as the conversion of heathen nations to Christ. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, p. 279.

<sup>350</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>351</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 103.

Calvin explains that the prayer articulated by the people of God in Psalm 79 is urgent. The people are complaining about the total destruction of the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem, God's sanctuary and land. Although the people acknowledge the fact that their guilt and sins are the cause of this disaster, they cannot help but fall into God's hand and ask for his vengeance because of the pride and the mockery of the enemies.<sup>352</sup> The people are complaining that the enemies are mocking God's name and pray that God may deliver them only because of the honor of his name. The name of God becomes the foundation upon which the people of Israel base their imprecations asking the complete destruction of their enemies.<sup>353</sup>

In verses 3 and 11, the people ask God to pour out his wrath and render seven times to their enemies' fold what they did to them. Calvin acknowledges the ethical difficulties raised by these imprecations. He agrees that the imprecations seem to go against the commandment of love for one's enemies articulated in the gospels. To answer this concern, Calvin rehearses again the three hermeneutical questions that guide his ethical approach of the imprecations of the Psalter: how believers should use the imprecations of the Psalter or the imprecatory language against their enemies; who can use these imprecations; and against whom may they be used.

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<sup>352</sup> Calvin argues that Israel is suffering because they are guilty of sin against God. Believers also must patiently endure suffering from their enemies because it is a sign of divine's punishment. Enemies can never inflict pain on believers unless allowed by God. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 105. See a similar development in the *Institutes*. Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvii, 8; III, iv, 31-32. (Benoît, 1541).

<sup>353</sup> "Les fidèles luy maintenant son nom au devant, en autre sens. Car il nous fait merci à cause de son nom . . . Mais yci les fidèles requièrent que Dieu ne veuille exposer son nom sacré aux blasphèmes et outrages des meschans. En quoy aussi nous sommes admonestez, que nous prions en vain sinon que nous conjoignons d'un lien inséparable le soin de nostre salut avec le zèle de la gloire de Dieu." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 108.



Concerning the first question, Calvin explains that the imprecations of the Psalter are not used for personal vengeance, but they are used only by those gained by a public zeal for the cause of the people or the honor of God. And those who use it for God's sake must exercise prudence and judgment, cleansing themselves from any personal vindictiveness.

Who can use the imprecations of the Psalter or the imprecatory language? Calvin answers that only those who are representative of the people of God. He argues that, "no one is allowed to pray these prayers unless he has been appointed as a representative of the people of God, and has shown restraint of his own passions and has espoused the cause of the whole church."<sup>354</sup>

And Calvin concludes by insisting on the fact that the imprecations of the Psalter cannot be used indiscriminately against all the enemies of the church. Only those enemies who are beyond repentance, the reprobate may be cursed since their destruction is imminent.<sup>355</sup> Calvin contends that those who have the public responsibility of the people of God must elevate their spirit towards God's judgment and be ready to forgive their enemies and never indiscriminately call against all of them the judgment of God, but against the reprobate.<sup>356</sup> Thus, believers do not rush on calling God's judgment against their enemies. They patiently wait until the heavenly judge discriminates between the reprobate and the elect.

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<sup>354</sup> "Que nuls ne peuvent prier de ceste façon, sinon qu'ils aient vestu la personne du public, et tout esgard d'eux-mesmes omis, aient espousé la cause de toute l'Eglise pour en avoir soin." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 106.

<sup>355</sup> Calvin's position is similar to Augustine's who distinguishes between two Israel's, the chosen one who believes in Christ, and the reprobate one who joins heathen nations in their rebellion against Christ and falls under the imprecations of verses 6 and 11. Augustine, *Expositions of the Book of Psalms*, p. 381.

<sup>356</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 106.

And returning to Psalm 79, Calvin concludes that the imprecations formulated by the representative of the people of God are completely dependent upon the honor that God has for his name and the celebration of his name by his people. The people of God await God's vengeance against their enemies only because by oppressing them they have blasphemed against God's name and glory. The people promise to celebrate the glory of God's name after he avenges himself against his enemies who are also the enemies of his people.

### 2. 2. 3. Psalm 83 (82):10-18

Augustine and the commentators who follow his tradition understand Psalm 83 (82) as the prayer of the church, the true Israel faced with numerous enemies. The enemies of the church are the Antichrist and his followers who endeavor to destroy the faith of believers.<sup>357</sup> Against them, the church formulates imprecations that do not wish them evil, but instead forecast their plight. Christ will destroy the Antichrist and some of his followers because of their obstinacy against the people of God. But some of the wicked who will let themselves be purified by the fire of God's judgment will be saved.<sup>358</sup>

In agreement with most commentators, Calvin argues that Psalm 83 might have been composed during the time of King Josaphat, who faced a wide coalition of nations

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<sup>357</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, pp. 397-399; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, pp. 306-312.

<sup>358</sup> "Some persons can be confounded and ashamed for their salvation in this world, when they accept the gifts of conversion; but those who will be condemned to eternal vengeance are confounded and troubled for ever and ever . . . He both spares the converted and condemns the obstinate to eternal vengeance." Cassiodorus, *Exposition of the Psalms II*, p. 312.

that have conspired against Judah.<sup>359</sup> The complaint calls upon God to intervene on behalf of his besieged people because of his covenant. Calvin speaks of the secret virtue of God that assures the protection of those who belong to him. Calvin indicates that the complaint of the psalmist is urgent, not only because of the large number of enemies attacking the people of God, but especially because of the cruelty with which they seek to destroy them.<sup>360</sup> Against the coalition formed against Judah, the psalmist articulates a series of imprecations based on the reminiscence of divine historical acts of salvation on behalf of his people. The psalmist asks God to treat their enemies as he treated Midian, Sisara, Jabin, Oreb, Zeb, Zebbee and Salmana. All these past warriors and kings conspired against God's people during their installation in the Promised Land. But God defeated them by his power. The psalmist prays that God may treat their present enemies as he treated the past enemies of his people. Calvin explains that the psalmist reminisces all these past deliverances to help believers not grow impatient and desperate in face of their adversaries. Although the present enemies are cruel and strike fear in the heart of God's people, the psalmist reminds them of God's past salvation actions to help them understand that God is the only one who is so powerful that he cannot abandon those who

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<sup>359</sup> Musculus argues that the psalm should be explained in the light of David's struggle with his son Absalom. Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 928.

<sup>360</sup> Calvin sees the difficulties faced by the people of God in the Old Testament as a mirror of the difficulties faced by the new community of believers in Geneva. As Judas, the people of God in Geneva are faced with a double conspiracy against them. Outside the church, the pope inflames all the nations against the new reformed communities and inside the church, false Christians endanger the lives of believers. But Calvin encourages his readers to patience and to faith in God's judgment against their enemies. Calvin argues that believers should climb on the tower of faith and exercise their eyes to see from afar the impending destruction of their enemies. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 130.

call upon him. Calvin contends that God works in so mysterious ways that a simple blows from his nostril will thrust the enemies on the ground and leave them for dead.<sup>361</sup>

Now, the psalmist prays that God may frustrate the evil plans of the wicked in order to bring them to acknowledge his name (v. 17). Against traditional commentators who understand this verse as meaning the repentance and conversion of the enemies, Calvin argues that this is not the case. He contends that when the prophet says that the enemies will seek the name of God he does not mean that they will experience true repentance and conversion. Calvin agrees that repentance and humiliation are a first step toward conversion, but humiliation in the case of the reprobate does not come from a truly repenting heart but a forced recognition of the lordship of God. In other words, according to Calvin, the reprobate are humbled, not because they understand the gravity of their evil and repent. They are humbled because their pride is broken by the powerful hand of God and are forced to acknowledge his power against their will.<sup>362</sup> Calvin argues that the enemies of the people are incapable of true repentance because of they are incapable of change. This is seen in the fact the psalmist asks for their total destruction. According to Calvin, the psalmist cannot ask for the complete destruction of those who

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<sup>361</sup> "Acelle fin doncques que les fidèles ne tombent en désespoir, estans saisis de trop grande frayeur, ils se proposent de bonne heure ces exemples de délivrance, par lesquels Dieu avoit monsté, qu'en luy seul il y avoit assez de puissance pour maintenir les siens, toutes fois et quantes qu'estans destituez de forces humaines, ils auront recours à luy. Au reste, de ceste façon délivrer du tout incroyable et non accoustumée, ils recueilloient que Dieu est un ouvrier merveilleux à sauver son Eglise, à ce qu'au seul souffle d'iceluy ils auroient assez de force pour ruer leurs ennemis par terre." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 131.

<sup>362</sup> "Nonobstant il dénote ce pendant une cognoissance esvanouissante sans fondement, n'ayant nul sentiment vif: car les réprouvez et orgueilleux ne s'assujettissent pas à Dieu ny à bon escient ne de bon coeur: lesquels maugré eux sont tirez à une feinte obéissance, ou bien n'osent pas monstrier et escumer une rage ouverte, entant que Dieu les reprime. C'est doncques-ci (à bien dire) une cognoissance d'expérience, laquelle n'entre point jusques au coeur, ains est arrachée par nécessité et par force." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 133.

are capable of repentance and are not among the reprobate.<sup>363</sup> Here one notices the clear influence of Calvin's doctrine of divine election directing his exegesis. Even Calvin's psalmist is aware of the doctrine of predestination and can only condemn to complete destruction those who are doomed for eternal destruction.

#### 2. 2. 4. Psalm 94 (93):1-2, 23

Traditional commentators read Psalm 94 (93) as a prayer that teaches believers patience in a world where evil and lawlessness seem to prevail. The psalmist's description of God as the God of vengeance and his call for his judicial intervention is understood as a warning rather than an imprecation. The psalmist warns the wicked to heed the coming judgment of God and change their behavior according to God's will.<sup>364</sup>

Although he acknowledges Psalm 94 as a lament of the people of Israel, Calvin does not link it to a specific historical threat. According to him, the psalmist who prays on behalf of the holy community does not lament mostly about the attacks from foreign enemies, but laments mostly about domestic enemies who are destroying the people of God from the inside.<sup>365</sup> Calvin argues that the oppression experienced by the people is so great that the psalm opens by a descriptive call to God as the God of vengeance.

<sup>363</sup> Notice that Calvin agrees with one side of Cassiodorus' interpretation. Where Cassiodorus sees two different groups of enemies; those who come to repentance and conversion by acknowledging God and those who are obstinate to total destruction, Calvin sees only the latest group. According to Calvin, those cursed by the psalmist are the reprobate who are incapable of repentance. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 133. On the incapacity of the reprobate to come to repentance see Calvin, *Institution*, III, iii, 31-33. (Benôit, 1541).

<sup>364</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, pp. 459-460; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms II*, pp.399-400; Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>365</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 206. Calvin's position is similar to Theodoret's who argues that the Psalm speaks of the lawlessness and injustice of the rulers and kings of the Jews who committed murders and betrayed the blood of the innocent for bribes. However, Calvin does not follow Theodoret's prophetic hermeneutic which argues that David foretold ahead of time what would happen to the people of God. Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 117.

The psalmist asks God to rise, he who is the judge of the earth, to shine forth and pay back the proud what they deserve. Calvin explains that the petition of the psalmist asking God to rise and shine is a locution commonly used in the Bible and means that God makes himself and his action known in the world when he acts as the universal judge. When God judges the earth, then he is understood as the one who steps on his throne of judgment in order to punish the wicked and display his virtue by bringing the world into obedience.<sup>366</sup>

Now, Calvin points out that the psalmist's impatient cry: "How long!" does not display his lack of faith, but rather the urgency of his plight, and he pleads for God to put an end to his patience on behalf of the wicked. Calvin argues that because God has been patient towards the wicked for so long, they have hardened themselves against him and act without restraint towards the weak. Calvin contends that the enemies, having forgotten all sense of shame and modesty, are not afraid to boast that they will do anything that suits them with impunity.<sup>367</sup>

Commenting on verse 7 where the psalmist quotes the wicked saying, "God will not see, the God of Jacob will not know," Calvin argues that the psalmist does not mean that God will not see nor understand. According to Calvin, even the wicked themselves cannot pronounce such blasphemies, saying that God is as ignorant of things as a tree trunk. Instead, the psalmist rebukes the wicked because they act as if the world was not governed by God's providence. Again, perhaps echoing Theodoret, Calvin indicates that

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<sup>366</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 207.

<sup>367</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, pp. 207-208.

their denial of God's providence and judicial function is a monstrosity, since these wicked people are not from heathen nations, but from Israel, the people of the law.<sup>368</sup>

The only way God can restore law and order disturbed by the wicked in the public arena is to put an end to lawlessness and to correct the inequalities introduced in the life of the holy nation. And this happens only when God protects the offended and pays back the offenders. And God pays back the offenders when he returns on their heads all the ills they intend against the righteous. By asking God to pay back the wicked with their own malice, the psalmist asks that the wicked die by their own devices, and after endeavoring to destroy the innocent, they may kill themselves with their own sword.<sup>369</sup> Then, God's admirable judgment will be known to all.

In Psalm 94, Calvin bases his interpretation of the imprecatory passages on two theological themes he finds in the body of the text: the theme of God's providence shown through his government of human affairs and his function as the judge of the world. The domestic enemies of the nations are destroyed because of their lack of understanding of these two theological themes underlying Israel's faith and life.<sup>370</sup>

## **2. 2. 5. Psalm 129 (128):4-6**

In traditional commentaries, the rehearsal of the suffering of Israel, the historical people of God expressed in Psalm 129 (128) is not only applied, but also transferred to the Church, God's true Israel. The Church suffers oppression from the wicked people

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<sup>368</sup> The theme of the wicked person's lack of understanding God's providence is already visible in Theodoret. Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 117.

<sup>369</sup> "Qu'eux-mesmes périssent en leur astuce: et qu'après avoir esprouvé toutes leurs forces, ils se tuent de leurs propres glaives, alors le jugement admirable de Dieu se cognoist mieux." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes*, p. 216.

<sup>370</sup> For the development of these themes in Calvin's theology see Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi.

opposed to the gospel.<sup>371</sup> But against her enemies, the church triumphs when she voices imprecations that do not wish them evil but salvation. The Lord cuts the necks of the sinners when he destroys their pride and puts upon them the yoke of his humility.<sup>372</sup>

Given the difficulty of finding the historical context of Psalm 129, Calvin acknowledges that he can only offer a conjecture. According to him, it is possible, from its language, that Psalm 129 was composed sometime between the return from the Babylonian exile and the invasion of Jerusalem by Antiochus.

Calvin agrees with most commentators that Psalm 129 is a rehearsal of all the dangers experienced by the people of God throughout its history. Against those who argue that the psalm tells of the suffering of the people from Egypt to the time of its composition, Calvin contends that the history of suffering for the people of God starts with Abraham, his forefather. But Calvin points out that the accent of the prayer does not fall on the rehearsal of the suffering *per se*, but rather on the failure of the enemies to undo the people of God. God has always come to the rescue of his people and has frustrated the evil plans of his enemies.<sup>373</sup> And Calvin insists on the fact that the salvation of God's people comes from the psalmist's description of God as the righteous God. Therefore, Calvin contends that the salvation of believers is linked to God's justice. This important remark introduces Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations expressed in verses 4 to 6.

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<sup>371</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, pp. 610-613; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, pp. 359-365; Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 306-311.

<sup>372</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, p. 309.

<sup>373</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 488-489.



Calvin agrees that the imprecatory section of the psalm is expressed in the future tense, foretelling the destruction of the enemies of the people. The imprecation that draws Calvin's attention is the metaphor of the enemies compared to grass that grows on the roof of Middle Eastern houses. Calvin argues that although the grass that grows on the roof is elevated compared to the grass that grows on the ground, its life span is shorter because of lack of proper soil. It does not last and burns quickly. Calvin concludes that this is the fate that will befall the enemies of believers. Although in their pride they climb so high to the point of reaching the sun, they will be consumed by the heat of the same sun they crave to reach. Thus, the end of the wicked is certain and will arrive sooner than expected, since their life is built on a shaky ground. Their fruitless and short lives make them the object of public imprecation.<sup>374</sup>

Now, aware of the ethical difficulties that might result from the harshness of the imprecations articulated by the psalmist, Calvin rehearses once more how believers should use the imprecatory language of the Psalter.<sup>375</sup> Calvin argues that the psalmist prays the imprecations out of his zeal for the sake of the people of God and not for his personal concerns. Calvin calls believers to use prudence and good judgment before using imprecations against their enemies since only the reprobate deserve God's destructive judgment. Furthermore, to be justified, imprecations should be used only by representatives of the church cleansed of any passion for personal vengeance. But since only God can separate the elect from the reprobate, Calvin encourages believers to

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<sup>374</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 490-491.

<sup>375</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 106.

exercise patience against their enemies to allow God to discriminate between the elect and the reprobate and exercise his judgment against the latter.<sup>376</sup>

As mentioned previously, Calvin bases his interpretation and justification of the imprecations expressed in Psalm 129 on the psalmist's confession of God's justice and divine election. It is because of his justice that God will, without fault, shorten the lives of the enemies of his people and bring them down from the heights of their pride. And the enemies of the people of God deserve destruction because their stubbornness in evil confirms that they are reprobate destined to eternal doom.

## 2. 2. 6. Psalm 137 (136): 5-9

Most traditional commentators agree that the people of Israel prayed Psalm 137 (136) in captivity in Babylon. However, many exegetes read it spiritually and apply its content to the struggle that the church (the new Israel) has to endure in the world (the new Babylon).<sup>377</sup> The imprecations formulated in the psalm are directed against those who persecute the church. The imprecations do not wish them evil but prophecy about God's judgment against those who will not repent and join the church.<sup>378</sup> Lyra however offers a more historical-literal reading of the psalm. He argues that the psalm was sung by the people of God exiled in Babylon and explains the harshness of the imprecations

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<sup>376</sup> "Ils ne mettent doncques pas ce propos en avant à la volée, Que Dieu perde ceux-ci ou ceux-là: et n'anticipent point le jugement de Dieu, mais souhaitent aux réprouvez la condamnation qu'ils méritent, ils attendent ce pendant en patience que le Juge céleste sépare les réprouvez d'entre les esleus." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 106. Here, Calvin's exhortation echoes Musculus'. "Confusio et aversio impiorum non est in manu piorum, sed in manu Dei. Igitur orandum est, et pio desiderio optandum, ut confundantur et avertantur." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1568.

<sup>377</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, pp. 630-632; Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, pp. 359-365; Theodoret, however, offers a historical-literal interpretation of the psalm. Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 323-325.

<sup>378</sup> Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms III*, p. 363.

formulated in verses 5-9 as pertaining to the language of war and as prophecies forecasting the destruction of the Babylonians.<sup>379</sup> Similarly, Theodoret argues: “In other words, since they for their part treated their infants cruelly, the inspired author prophesied the like punishment for them. Consequently Cyrus is declared blessed for punishing them and freeing the Jews.”<sup>380</sup>

In his commentary on Psalm 137, Calvin stays very close to the historical sense of the text. Calvin reads Psalm 137 in the light of the geo-political context of the ancient Near Eastern world and the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Against those who argue that Psalm 137 is a prophecy of David foretelling the future exile of Israel and its suffering in Babylon, Calvin contends that the author of the psalm is unknown.<sup>381</sup> But he argues that the author, a prophet, wrote a lament on behalf of the people of God in exile in Babylon to encourage them to cling to the service of the true God, and hope for their salvation, inspite of the difficulty of their social and political situation.<sup>382</sup> Calvin indicates also that the mention of the people’s cry and tears is a sign of their repentance and humility before God. According to Calvin, the prophet and the people exiled in Babylon acknowledged their past sins and hoped for God’s forgiveness and

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<sup>379</sup> “Et loquitur de futuro per modum preteriti propter certitudinem prophetie. Previdit enim regnum Babylonis destruendum per Cyrum et Darium ideo subditur.” Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.

<sup>380</sup> Theodoret *Psalms 73-150*, pp. 324-325.

<sup>381</sup> Thus, Calvin distances himself from the tradition represented by Theodoret and Lyra that accepts the historical-literal dimension of the text, but avoids the ethical difficulty raised by the imprecations formulated in verses 5-9 by considering them as prophecies foretelling God’s future judgment of Babylon instead of considering them as imprecations voiced by the people of God. Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 522-523.

<sup>382</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 523. See also Musculus’ discussion of the authorship and the context of the psalm. He argues: “Psalmus hic non est in Babylone a captivis, sed a liberatis jam post illius expugnationem et uastationem compositus.” Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1600.

deliverance.<sup>383</sup> The people's repentance and hope becomes the foundation for their use of the imprecatory prayer against their enemies.<sup>384</sup> Calvin indicates that the imprecations formulated in Psalm 137:5-9 target two main enemies of the people of Israel: the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, and the Babylonians, the invaders and oppressors. Calvin explains that the psalmist (prophet) calls God's vengeance against the Edomites, because they were guilty of treason. They betrayed Israel by siding with the Babylonians who destroyed the holy nation. Now the prophet is asking God to avenge the wrong done to his people. Calvin indicates that the psalmist is not throwing out curses without control. By using imprecations against Edom, the psalmist acts as God's trumpet and confirms previous oracles of destruction made by Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Obadiah against them.<sup>385</sup> Calvin argues that God's judgment against Edom was inevitable as it confirmed Israel's election against those who would doubt it because of the exile. Calvin contends that the psalmist is not prophesying God's judgment against Edom, but rather is asking God to actualize the punishment he has already promised against Israel's unfaithful relative.<sup>386</sup> In other words, according to Calvin, the imprecations formulated by the

<sup>383</sup> Calvin's repentance motif echoes Lyra's moral sense. In his commentary Lyra explains: "Moraliter potest exponi psalmus iste de quolibet penitente qui lamentatur se fuisse in captivitate demonis per peccatum mortale et petit punitionem demonis et membro suorum in gehenna scam ordinem divine justicie cetera patent." Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.

<sup>384</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 523.

<sup>385</sup> Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations against the Edomites in verse 7 in the light of the prophecies of Ezechiel and Abdiah echoes Musculus's. But Calvin distances himself from Musculus' Christological application. Musculus contends that "Hunc die vastationis praecesserant dies propheticae visitationis, verum frustra. Recte ergo sequutus est dies vastationis, qui quonia ei civitati impenitenti acerbelli destinatus fuerat a Deo, dies Hierusalem vocatus est. Sic et post tepora Christi accidit. Visitationis tempus respucrat Hierusalem, recte ergo sequuti sunt dies vastationis omnium atrocissimae." See Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, pp. 1601-1602.

<sup>386</sup> "Mais il faut noter que le prophète ne jette point yci des malédictions et imprécations à la volée: mais il est comme trompette de Dieu pour confermer les oracles précédens. Car Dieu avoit prédit par Ezéchiél et Jérémie qu'il feroit la vengeance des Iduméens." Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 526.

psalmist do not *forecast* God's punishment of the Edomites, as defended by Theodoret, but *broadcast*, announces, as a "trumpet" what God had already foretold through his prophets Ezekiel and Obadiah. And Calvin justifies these imprecations, although gruesome, by returning to the theme of the reprobate and the elect. He argues that Edom will be punished because it has not been elected by God and is part of the reprobate. Calvin encourages believers to find comfort in the fact that they can call upon God to judge their enemies. But they should pray that God judges and destroys only the reprobate. Calvin maintains that believers should pray for the repentance and salvation of any enemy who is not part of the reprobate. Again, the doctrine of predestination becomes the foundation of Calvin's justification of the ethical aspect of the imprecations found in Psalm 137.<sup>387</sup>

The second enemies the psalmist prays against are the Babylonians. Calvin argues that with the eyes of faith, the psalmist sees God's hidden judgment against the Babylonians. Calvin insists that the psalmist does not prophecy, but sees the destruction of the enemies by the eyes of faith looking into the mirror of the Word, the prophetic Word uttered by God. Calvin contends that the imprecations asking God to destroy the Babylonians and to kill their children by striking them against the rock happened through the military hands of the Persians kings.<sup>388</sup> Cyrus and Darius become God's hired agents through whom he inflicts judgment and death against the enemies of his people. Calvin argues that no one should blame the prophet for the harshness of his imprecations. The Babylonians must be treated the way they treated the nations they conquered. As their

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<sup>387</sup> For the discussion on how Calvin distinguishes between the reprobate and the elect see our comments on Psalm 35 and 109.

soldiers killed Israel's children without mercy, in the same way Cyrus and Darius' soldiers should strike their little children.<sup>389</sup> Here, again Calvin's historical reading of Cyrus and Darius is similar to Theodoret's, although he does not consider these imprecations as prophecies. Theodoret writes: "In other words, since they for their part treated their infants cruelly, the inspired author prophesied the like punishment for them. Consequently Cyrus is declared blessed for punishing them and freeing . . . the Jews."<sup>390</sup> Furthermore, Calvin indicates that the psalmist is not speaking from the movement of his own soul, but is taking words from the mouth of God himself and is praising his just judgment.<sup>391</sup>

Thus, following some traditional commentators who read Psalm 137 historically, Calvin provides a historical-literal exegesis of the psalm. But although he puts Israel in Babylon during the time of his exile, Calvin, unlike his predecessors, does not consider the imprecations uttered in the body of the psalm as prophecies concerning the future demise of Israel's traditional enemies (Edom and Babylon). Calvin argues for a more practical reading of the imprecations formulated in Psalm 137. According to him, they are but words of faith, uttered by the psalmist in anticipation of the application of God's promised judgment against the enemies of his people. But on the ethical and theological levels, Calvin argues that the Edomites and the Babylonians are going to face God's

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<sup>388</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, p. 526. Here Calvin echoes Lyra's historical and military reading of the text. See Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam*.

<sup>389</sup> Musculus observes that: "Observandum est hoc loco, quod secundo felicem eum praedicat, qui Babylonem, populi Dei vastatricem, caepit, vastavit, et parvulos eius faxo illicit. Non est igitur crudele, civitatem impiam, et vastatricem Israelis vastare, ac femina illius prorsus extinguere. Quis dicet crudeles esse leones, sicubi lupos, ovium raptos, una cum catulis ipsorum discerpserint." Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium Commentarii*, p. 1603.

<sup>390</sup> Theodoret, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 324.

<sup>391</sup> Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Pseaumes II*, pp. 526-527.

judgment, not only because they are wicked, but because they belong to the number of the reprobate, who are the eternal vessels of God's wrath.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude the present chapter on Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations found in the individual and communal Psalms, it can be argued that Calvin followed three main hermeneutical principles. First of all, Calvin read the imprecations of the Psalter historically and literally, i.e., he explained them in the light of David's and Israel's struggles against personal and national enemies. Calvin acknowledged that the imprecations of the Psalter were directed against Saul and his followers, or against Absalom and his accomplices (in the individual Psalms) and were directed against the individuals inside Israel or the nations outside Israel that threatened the existence of the people of God.

Calvin also read the imprecations of the Psalter theologically. He endeavored to ground the language and the meaning of the imprecations of the Psalter in the theological concepts and language already available in his doctrinal writings, namely the *Institutes*. The doctrines of divine providence and its corollaries; divine justice, election, judgment, covenant become in Calvin's exegesis indispensable hermeneutical tools for unlocking the meaning of the imprecations of the Psalter for his readers.

Finally, Calvin read the imprecations of the Psalter tropologically. Calvin used the language of the imprecation of the Psalter and the theology he built around it as ground for the practical encouragement for believers faced with trials and suffering from their enemies in their daily life. The following chapter will provide an evaluation of the preceding hermeneutical principles in the light of traditional and sixteenth century

exegesis in order to indicate elements of continuity between Calvin and his predecessors and contemporaries. The chapter will also evaluate in the light of our study key questions raised by modern scholarship concerning Calvin's Old Testament hermeneutics.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE IMPRECATIONS OF THE PSALTER

#### 1. Introduction

As argued in the conclusion to the previous chapter, the purpose of this last chapter is to provide, in the light of the preceding exegetical analysis, the key characteristics of Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter. Our analysis of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter has revealed that the reformer of Geneva had three main interpretive directions. Specifically, Calvin interpreted the imprecations of the Psalter historically, theologically and tropologically. Analysis of these three directions both underlines Calvin's connections with the earlier tradition and demonstrates his individuality as an interpreter. On the issue of connection and continuity, the historical, theological or doctrinal, and tropological readings correspond with three out of the four elements of the *quadrige*. On the issue of Calvin's own individual contribution, the historical or literal foundation has become far more accentuated and of consistently greater importance to the framing of the doctrinal and moral dimensions than in nearly any one of Calvin's predecessors or contemporaries. The characteristics of Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter can now be laid out in dialogue with traditional and sixteenth-century exegesis in order to establish more specific elements of continuity and discontinuity.

## **2. Calvin's Hermeneutics of the Imprecations of the Psalter**

### **2. 1. Calvin's Historical Interpretation of the Imprecations of the Psalter**

It was argued in the preceding chapters that traditional biblical commentators approached the imprecations of the Psalter in two ways. They approached them either spiritually or both historically (literally) and spiritually. Following Augustine's hermeneutical principle which argues that the purpose of biblical interpretation is to promote the love of God and the love of neighbors, and that any biblical text that could not promote such love on the literal level had to be read spiritually, most traditional commentators explained the imprecations of the Psalter either allegorically or christologically. Most Fathers could not accept the harshness of the imprecations of the Psalter on the literal level. Following Augustine, they argued that the imprecations of the Psalter were not descriptions or prescriptions of David's thirst for vengeance against his enemies. Rereading Jewish and rabbinical eschatological interpretation of the Psalter in the light of the life and ministry of Christ, church fathers argued that the imprecations of the Psalter were prophecies forecasting the eschatological demise and destruction of the enemies of Christ and of his church.

Now, read as prophecies forecasting the eschatological destruction of the enemies of Christ and his church, traditional commentators endeavored to add a second hermeneutical level to the imprecations of the Psalter in order to completely remove their ethical difficulty. They argued that although prophecies, the imprecations of the Psalter did not actually forecast the literal destruction of the enemies of Christ and the church; instead they forecast their spiritual demise, i.e., their spiritual transformation. As argued in the previous chapters, most traditional commentators explained the imprecations of the

Psalter as forecasting the spiritual destruction of the moral vices and the unbelief of the enemies of Christ and the church. Thus the death wished by the psalmists upon their enemies did not mean their physical destruction but their spiritual death to the world and to its pleasures, which implies their conversion to Christ.

In order to achieve this eschatological and christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter, traditional commentators had to have recourse to a hermeneutics of correspondence. Historical events and people traditionally associated with the understanding of individual or collective psalms (usually David and the hosts of his enemies: Saul and his troops or Absalom and his conjuration in the case of the individual psalms; or Israel and hostile foreign nations: the Edomites and Babylonians in the case of communal psalms) were now associated with historical events and people in the life and ministry of Christ and his church. The historical and literal David corresponds in traditional exegesis to the historical and literal Christ. So also is the case for the historical Absalom, the unfaithful son of David who corresponds to the historical Judas, the unfaithful spiritual son of Christ; and Babylon, the mighty nation corresponds to Rome the mighty eschatological empire to be destroyed soon. Thus, the first tendency in traditional hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter acknowledges the historical level of the text, but only as it serves as a “springboard” that allows the development of the *true* meaning of the text, i.e., the eschatological-christological (spiritual) meaning.

Another important group of traditional commentators accepts the eschatological and christological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter, but only in the context of their immediate historical and literal meaning. Traditional and sixteenth century biblical commentators like Theodoret, Aquinas, Lyra, Luther, Bucer and Musculus acknowledge

two hermeneutical levels to the imprecations of the Psalter: the historical and the christological (spiritual) levels. Traditional and sixteenth century commentators who practice a double reading of the imprecations of the Psalter argue that the imprecations mean what they state on the literal level. They argue that the imprecations of the Psalter are meant to actually either disarm or destroy David's or Israel's enemies, on the historical-literal level. But to avoid the ethical difficulty raised by the historical-literal reading of the text, Aquinas and biblical commentators who follow the same approach accept the traditional, commonly held position that the imprecations of the Psalter do not describe or prescribe the punishment of the enemies, but foretell their demise. Thus David is a prophet who does not describe his feeling of vengeance against his enemies. Instead, he is a prophet who forecasts God's personal decision to punish his enemies and the enemies of his people.

Now, as our analysis of Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter has shown, the reformer of Geneva shared the same historical-literal methodology followed by his predecessors. Like his forerunners and contemporaries, Calvin acknowledges that David voiced the imprecations of the Psalter in his function as the representative of God and the representative of his people, Israel. With traditional commentators, Calvin agrees that the enemies against whom David and Israel are praying are the historical characters described in the narrative books of the Old Testament. Calvin explains most individual psalms in the light of David's struggle against Saul, and most collective psalms in the light of Israel's struggle against foreign nations (Edom and Babylon). But Calvin disagrees with traditional commentators on the nature of the imprecations of the Psalter. According to Calvin, the imprecations of the Psalter are not prophecies foretelling the

future punishment of David's or Israel's enemies. Calvin contends that it is uncommon to biblical prophecies to forecast future events with such historical accuracy. On the contrary, Calvin argues that the imprecations of the Psalter, although harsh and gruesome, do mean what they say on the historical and literal level. The imprecations of the Psalter do indeed describe the physical destruction of the enemies of David and of Israel. Calvin explains that instead of explaining the imprecations of the Psalter as prophecies that *forecast* the future, they ought to be explained and understood as David's and Israel's confessions of faith that *broadcast* or anticipate God's impending judgment against the wicked.

It is important here to mention the theological difference between the understanding of the imprecations of the Psalter as prophecies or as confessions of faith. Prophecy is a prediction, a foretelling in advance of God's future action. A confession, in the contrary, is an utterance based on the faith and understanding of divine nature and action. In other words, traditional commentators see David as a mystical character that foresees the future and witnesses to God's punitive action against his enemies and the enemies of his people. Calvin's David, on the contrary, is a strong believer, a theologian who understands the nature and action of God on his behalf and on the behalf of his people based on his past promises and action in history. This opens the door to the second characteristic of Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter: his theological reading of the text.

## **2. 2. Calvin's Theological Interpretation of the Imprecations of the Psalter**

We argued in the preceding lines that instead of understanding the imprecations of the Psalter as prophecies foretelling the future punishment of David's enemies or of the

enemies of his people, Calvin understood the imprecations of the Psalter as David's confession of faith in God's nature and action. The preceding exegetical analysis of Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter has shown that Calvin's hermeneutics is based on his doctrinal teaching on divine providence. As argued previously, Calvin's David is not a prophet who foresees the future and foretells the demise and destruction of his enemies, as argued in traditional exegesis. Instead, Calvin's David is a believer who has a strong faith, a theologian who has a clear understanding of God's providence. In other words, Calvin's David does not forecast the future destruction of his enemies out of an ecstatic or mystical experience. Calvin's David broadcasts the physical destruction of his enemy out of his noetic vision of the workings of God's providence in human history.

Throughout his exegesis Calvin bases his interpretations of the imprecations of the Psalter on two important aspects of God's providence: his universal rule and role as the overseer of human affairs; and his judicial function as the heavenly judge who saves the innocent (the elect) and punishes the guilty (the reprobate).

Calvin explains the imprecations of the Psalter as the expression of David's faith and understanding of the workings of divine providence as manifested in his universal rule and his overseeing of human affairs. Over and over again, Calvin argues that David's (and Israel's) enemies are foolish in their unjustified attacks against him because they fail to acknowledge God's universal rule and his overseeing activity over human affairs. Calvin compares David's enemies' lack of understanding of divine providence to that of Greek philosophers, the Sophists and the Epicureans. According to Calvin, David's enemies are "atheists," not in the sense that they deny the existence of the true

God, but in the sense that as the Sophists and the Epicureans. They believe that although God exists, he lives passively in the heavens and does not interfere in human affairs.<sup>1</sup> According to Calvin, only the blindness of David's enemies to divine providence, to his universal rule, explains their unrelenting attacks and their unspeakable cruelty against him.

But contrary to the enemies' blindness, Calvin's David is endowed with a special vision, the capacity to see with the eyes of faith the heavenly throne of God, from where he carefully watches and controls both the course of the universe and the workings of human history. But David's providential God does not only oversee human affairs. From heaven, he acts as the universal judge who discriminates between the innocent (the elect) and the guilty (the reprobate).

Calvin's David understands God's providence in its second manifestation, as the expression of his judicial function. God's providence in Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter manifests itself through his discriminating and judging activity against the reprobate. Here, the doctrine of divine election is closely intertwined with the doctrine of divine providence in Calvin's theological understanding and ethical justification of the imprecations of the Psalter. Contrary to traditional exegesis which had recourse to a christological and allegorical reading of the imprecations of the Psalter in order to justify them ethically, Calvin follows a theological reading that justifies both historically (literally) and ethically the imprecations of the Psalter.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin's description of David's enemies as "atheists" is common to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century understanding of false believers as "practical atheists" because of their denial of God's action in human history. Calvin's explicit mention of the Sophists and Epicureans does not imply only these ancient philosophers but implies also contemporary Renaissance philosophers who deny God's providence in the natural world. See the discussion in Calvin's *Institutes*. Calvin, *Institution*, I, iv, 2; v, 4; v, ii.

Calvin agrees that the imprecations of the Psalter are harsh and gruesome on the historical and literal level, however, he maintains that they are both theologically and ethically sound because they express God's providence through his judging activity against the wicked, who are the reprobate, doomed for destruction. Calvin contends that the imprecations of the Psalter are but David's confession of faith in divine judgment. He argues that David confesses that God is the providential God who from his heavenly throne discriminates between the elect and the reprobate and actualizes in history his eternal punishment against the later. In other words, for Calvin, Saul and his troops, Absalom and his accomplices, the Edomites and the Babylonians, all the wicked referred to in the Psalter, deserved David's imprecations not only because of their cruel attacks against him or his people, but mostly because of their incapacity to change, to abandon their wicked actions, which is a sign that they belong to the group of the reprobate.

Calvin's doctrine of divine predestination as expression of God's providence becomes the ground for his ethical justification of the imprecations of the Psalter.<sup>2</sup> According to him, the imprecations of the Psalter are theologically and ethically sound because they are but the manifestation of David's faith in God's active discrimination between the elect and the reprobate in human history. In other words, David and Israel use the imprecations of the Psalter against their enemies not because they want to express their desire for vengeance or self-vindication, but because they express their faith and anticipation of God's favor and deliverance of the elect and his judgment and wrath

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<sup>2</sup> The relationship between divine predestination and divine providence in Calvin's ethical justification of the imprecations of the Psalter is a motif already present in Calvin's doctrinal argument. Both in his 1539, 1543, 1550 editions of the *Institutes* as well as in the 1552 treatise *Concerning Eternal Predestination* Calvin had linked providence and divine predestination. See Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, vol. 3, éditeur J. Pannier (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1961), pp. 57-131; *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London, 1961). For the discussion see Wendel, *Calvin*, pp. 177-184; Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, pp. 7-37.



against the reprobate. According to Calvin, the imprecations of the Psalter are the actualization in human history of God's eternal decree through which he saved through grace some from the fallen humanity and passed by some and predestined them for eternal damnation. This opens the important tropological question concerning David's capacity to use the imprecatory language in the Psalter without falling into sin.

### **2. 3. Calvin's Tropological Interpretation of the Imprecations of the Psalter**

In his commentary on the imprecations of the Psalter, two to three times, Calvin rehearses the difficult ethical questions raised concerning David's use of the imprecatory language. In other words, how could David use such a harsh language without falling into sin? Calvin gives three hermeneutical rules to be followed by those who want to understand the ethical meaning of the imprecations in the context of the Psalter and in the context of the Christian life.

First of all, Calvin argues that the imprecations of the Psalter do not result from David's carnal passions or his personal vindictiveness. Calvin contends that David was a *preud'homme*, a godly man, who has shown so many times that he was incapable of such passions. Calvin cites David's patience towards Saul, as twice he spared his life while he was pursuing him and his people urged him to kill the unsuspecting king. Furthermore, Calvin argues that as God's anointed and a type of Christ in the Old Testament, David enjoyed a special endowment from the grace of Christ that made him incapable of such negative feelings. Secondly, Calvin argues that David's imprecations were not caused by his excessive zeal for his personal and private cause, but only by his zeal for the cause of God. David did not ask God to punish his enemies because they oppressed him personally, but because by oppressing him they were calling into question his anointing

as God's servant. Thus they were calling into question God's divine election. Calvin explains that David asked God to punish his enemies only because they were opposing God himself. And finally, Calvin indicates that David used the imprecations of the Psalter as a representative of the holy nation. He used the imprecations not for his own sake, but for the sake of the people of God. In other words, Calvin argues that David's third use of the imprecations is acceptable only because he used them as a representative of the people of God.

After laying out the three hermeneutical principles for understanding David's use of the imprecations in the Psalter, Calvin lays out three ethical rules that should guide Christians in their use of the imprecations of the Psalter. Our exegetical analysis indicated that Calvin acknowledged that Christians are allowed to use imprecations against their enemies, but only if they meet the following conditions: First of all, according to Calvin any believer who wants to use the imprecations of the Psalter or the imprecatory language against his enemies must be free of any spirit or feelings of personal vindictiveness. Calvin argues that believers who are led by the desire for personal vengeance cannot adequately use imprecations against their enemies without falling into sin. Calvin discourages believers who are tempted to use the imprecations of the Psalter to defend their personal and private cause. He argues that as David, believers must always ask themselves before considering the use of the imprecatory language if they are facing personal enemies, or are facing enemies who are opposed to God and to his people. Second, believers can use the imprecations of the Psalter or the imprecatory language only if they are representatives of the body of Christ. And third, Calvin explains that even as representatives of the body of Christ, believers should be careful not

to be possessed by an excessive zeal even for the cause of God. Calvin reminds his readers of Jesus' rebuke against his disciples who were asking the permission to command fire from heaven to destroy the inhabitant of the Samaritan village who did not welcome them (Luke 9:55).

From the preceding conditions it is clear that Calvin acknowledges the use and applicability of the imprecations of the Psalter and the imprecatory language in the context of the church on the theological and theoretical level only. On the practical level, Calvin agrees that it is almost impossible for believers to fulfill these moral conditions. Furthermore, Calvin argues that believers cannot use imprecations indiscriminately against their enemies since on the theological level, only the reprobate deserve to be cursed because they have been eternally predestined for destruction. And Calvin points out that on the human level and in history, believers are incapable of distinguishing the elect from the reprobate. Calvin explains that all the enemies of believers are not *de facto* part of the reprobate. Some among believers' present enemies are part of the elect who will in the future repent and come to the saving knowledge of Christ. Thus, to avoid indiscriminately condemning the not yet converted elect with the reprobate, believers should leave in God's hands their cause and case and call for his providential justice against those of their enemies who are reprobate and deserve to be punished. In other words, Calvin encourages believers not to use imprecations directly against their enemies, but to call God to intervene on their behalf and defend their cause. Since he is the providential God who rules the universe and oversees human affairs, he will certainly punish in his time, the reprobate who oppress them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Calvin's treatment of the punishment of the reprobate (enemies) in the light of the doctrine of predestination in Calvin's *Institutes*. Calvin, *Institution*, III, xxi, xxii, xxiii, xxiv. See the discussion on

The inability of believers to distinguish between the elect and the reprobate becomes the foundation of Calvin's practical exhortation to his reader to develop patience and faith in divine providence in their trials. Calvin argues that believers should be patient with those who oppress them and never use the imprecations of the Psalter nor the imprecatory language lightly against them. Because among them, God will bring up those he has elected through his grace from eternity, but are yet unrepentant. Instead of cursing, believers should pray for the active repentance of those of their enemies who will become their brethren in the future.

Calvin's concern for the salvation of believers' enemies stands in continuity to traditional commentators' practical concern for the salvation of the enemies of Christ and his church. Although reached from different starting points, Calvin's tropological analysis of the imprecations of the Psalter locates his exegesis within the moral and spiritual concerns that guide traditional hermeneutics. With traditional commentators, Calvin agrees that believers, because of their limited understanding of divine election, should wish the salvation of their enemies instead of wishing their destruction as expressed through the imprecations of the Psalter.

The preceding conclusions about Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter allows us to argue that, in general, Calvin's hermeneutics follows the general framework laid out by traditional commentators. In other words, Calvin models his hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter according to the three main patterns that govern traditional exegesis. Like traditional exegesis, Calvin's exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter is historical-literal, spiritual (theological) and tropological.

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Calvin's doctrine of divine predestination in Wendel, *Calvin*, pp. 263-284; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin. An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster, 1995), pp. 113-121.

On the historical and tropological levels, Calvin's hermeneutics of the Psalter is similar to traditional hermeneutics. With traditional exegesis, Calvin agrees that the imprecations of the Psalter are historical-literal prayers uttered by David against historical-literal enemies who threatened his life and the life of the elected nation he represented. With traditional exegesis, Calvin agrees that on the tropological level believers should not use the imprecations of the Psalter or the imprecatory language against their enemies, but exercise patience and pray for their salvation instead. Believers' genuine appeal for justice should always be directed to God, the righteous judge, the only one who can rightly punish those among their enemies who deserve his punishment.

The only noticeable difference between Calvin and traditional hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter resides on the spiritual level. Traditional hermeneutics followed a spiritual reading that was based on an eschatological-christological understanding of the text. In traditional exegesis, the imprecations of the Psalter are but prophecies foretelling the future judgment of the enemies of Christ and of his church. Calvin however distances himself from the traditional eschatological-christological reading of the text. Instead, he argues for a theological reading that emphasizes the historical faith of the psalmist in divine providence as it manifests itself through God's judicial function. The imprecations of the Psalter are for Calvin, on the spiritual level, not David's prophecies, but David's confession of faith in divine providence.<sup>4</sup> This explains why in Calvin's hermeneutics, there is no need for a christological reading of the text. Traditional commentators needed a christological reading of the text in order to base its ethical validity on the life and ministry of Christ. But Calvin bases the ethical

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institution*, I, xvi; xvii; xviii; II, iv, 6-7; III, xx, 40. See the discussion in Wendel, *Calvin*, pp. 177-184; Parker, *Calvin*, pp. 43-49; Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, pp. 121-155.

value of the imprecations of the Psalter not on its eschatological relationship with the life and ministry of Christ, but instead in its direct relationship to David's faith in divine providence, i.e., his government of human affairs and his judicial function.

Divine providence becomes the hermeneutical key that allows Calvin to unlock the meaning of the imprecations of the Psalter both on the historical-literal, theological and tropological levels. David is a mirror for Calvin and his readers not because through him believers of all time learn to foresee or foretell the future destruction of their enemies. David is a mirror for Calvin and his readers only because through him, believers of all times learn to see, by the eyes of faith, the manifestation of God's providence in human history. The enemies, although cruel and seemingly unstoppable, are not a real threat for believers who cling to God's providence. Because through his providence, God not only oversees the universe, but he intervenes actively in human affairs in order to discriminate between the innocent and the guilty and to punish the latter. David is a mirror, because through his faith in God's providence, he teaches believers to rise over actual trials and suffering and witness to the impending judgment of God against their oppressors. This brings us to the important question of the assessment of modern scholarship on Calvin's Old Testament exegesis.

### **3. Assessment of Modern Scholarship on Calvin's Old Testament Exegesis**

We argued previously that there are modern scholars like Reuss, Tholuck, and many others who consider Calvin as the exegete *par excellence*, whose hermeneutics is less dependent on traditional and sixteenth-century commentators' influence. But this study has shown that Calvin's hermeneutics is generally based upon traditional and sixteenth-century exegetical patterns. Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the

Psalter reflects in general, the historical-literal, spiritual and tropological hermeneutics followed by his predecessors and contemporaries like Theodoret, Aquinas, Lyra and Musculus.

Against modern scholars who excessively praise Calvin for his historical consciousness and consistency, and thus consider him as a forerunner of modern historical-critical reading of the text, our exegetical analysis of Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter has made clear that Calvin did not initiate the historical reading of the text. Instead, Calvin stands within a long hermeneutical tradition that reads the biblical text historically before opening it up to its spiritual meaning. In many instances, our analysis of Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter has shown that church fathers and sixteenth-century commentators like Theodoret, Aquinas and Musculus practiced a historical reading of the text that was much closer to the letter of the text than Calvin's. Therefore, against modern scholars such as Fullerton, Clavier and Vincent, who contend that Calvin's exegesis of the Psalter is characterized by a "strong historicism" and make him a forerunner of modern historical criticism, we argue that in many instances Calvin's historical reading of the imprecations of the Psalter did not emphasize enough the historical scope of the text, but rather focused more on its theological meaning. In other words, in many instances Theodoret's, Aquinas's and Musculus's reading of the imprecations of the Psalter was more historical than Calvin's. Our exegetical analysis of Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter has shown that in many instances Calvin did not dwell enough on the historicity or literal meaning of the imprecations voiced by the psalmist. Instead, Calvin used the historical-literal wording of the text as a "spring-board" for his theological exposition on divine

providence as the foundation of David's imprecatory prayers. Thus, it can safely be argued that on the historical-literal level, Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter was neither innovative nor better than that followed by his forerunners or contemporaries. The same is also true for his tropological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter.

However, as we argued previously, the only innovative approach introduced by Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter is his strong literal-theological reading of the text as a genuine imprecation uttered against a present enemy. Contrary to traditional and sixteenth-century interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter, which was dominated, on the spiritual level, by the presence and person of Christ, Calvin's interpretation is strangely "unchristological." This is contrary to Childs's position, which argues for the christological scope of Calvin's interpretation of the imprecations of the Psalter. We previously argued that Calvin's hermeneutics of the imprecations of the Psalter is willingly "unchristological," (as is his interpretation of the rest of the Psalter). Indeed, Calvin follows a spiritual reading of the text that is theological, based on his threefold doctrinal development on divine providence as the manifestation of God's universal kingship, on his judicial activity in human affairs and on his eternal predestination of the elect and the reprobate. This, however, does not substantiate Mays's claim that Calvin's exegesis of the Psalter is not historical but solely theological. As argued previously, Calvin's theological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter is completely based and dependent on the historical-literal meaning of the text. Contrary to traditional exegesis of the imprecations of the Psalter, Calvin does not dogmatize nor theologize the imprecations of the Psalter in order to escape their difficulty. Instead, he



addresses the difficult ethical aspect of the text both historically and theologically.

According to Calvin, the imprecations voiced by David are directed against historical enemies because they belong to the reprobate and are doomed from eternity.

Thus, contrary to Mays, for Calvin, the David who is praying the imprecations of the Psalter is not a theological character. Calvin's David is primarily a historical character, in conflict with historical enemies. Calvin's David never loses his historicity. Instead, Calvin's historical David becomes the mirror through which Calvin and believers in Geneva see their lives only because he is able to read God's providence in the historical realities of his life. This substantiates what Pitkin correctly pointed out, namely that in order to avoid making a clear distinction between David's faith in his historical context and the faith of sixteenth century believers in their historical context, Calvin willingly downplayed one of his central assumptions concerning the christological dimension of faith. Instead, he raised David's faith in divine providence in its Old Testament context as a paradigm for believers in Geneva, without transiting through Christ. In other words, Calvin's theological hermeneutics allows him to go from David, who believes in God's providence in the context of the Old Testament, to Christians who believe in God's providence in the context of Geneva. What is peculiar to Calvin is the fact that he uses his theological hermeneutics based on divine providence to go directly from David in the Old Testament to believers in Geneva, without passing through Christ.

Thus, our study allows us to argue that Calvin interpreted the imprecations of the Psalter by staying in dialogue with traditional and sixteenth century commentators concerning the correct understanding of the text in its historical-literal and tropological levels. On the spiritual level, however, Calvin initiated an internal dialogue with his own

doctrinal work. The doctrine of divine providence expounded in the *Institutes* becomes the foundation of Calvin's hermeneutics and helped him understand both the nature and the scope of the imprecations of the Psalter, both in their Old Testament historical setting (in the life of David and Israel), and in their ecclesiological setting (in his own life and the life of believers in Geneva), without using the traditional Christological route common to his predecessors' and contemporaries' exegesis.

## APPENDIX

### DEFENSE PROPOSITIONS

#### FROM THE DISSERTATION

1. The headings of the Psalms functioned in traditional Jewish and Christian exegesis as hermeneutical markers for their messianic interpretation. However, this messianic interpretation was abandoned in Jewish scholarship because of the christological claims of the church.
2. The four senses of Scripture followed in traditional Christian exegesis were but an echo of the Jewish fourfold senses of Scripture known as PaRDes: *Peshat* (literal sense), *Remez* (allegorical sense), *Derash* (homiletical sense) and *Sod* (mystical sense), already practiced in early Judaism.
3. The LXX, in its very nature is not a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, but is a rereading of the Jewish faith in the light of Hellenistic philosophy. For example, the Hebrew text of Exodus 3:14 reads: *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* (I am who I am or I am who I will be) but the LXX translates: *Ego eimi o ôn* (I am the being).
4. In his exegesis of the Psalter, Calvin was in constant dialogue with Jewish sources, but it is probable that he did not have direct access to them, probably because of his inability to read their unaccented Hebrew consonant text. Calvin could have dialogued with Jewish exegesis through the commentaries of Bucer and other Reformers who had a better understanding of the Hebrew language.
5. Calvin's theological reading of the historical David as a paradigm of faith allowed him to go from the Psalter to the lives of believers in Geneva without transiting through Christ.
6. Calvin's theological reading of the imprecations of the Psalter forced him to acknowledge both the possibility of their application in the context of the Christian church on the theoretical level, and the impossibility of their use on the practical level because of believers' incapacity to distinguish between the elect from the reprobate in the masses of their enemies.

### FROM PH.D. COURSE WORK

7. The free will defense argued by Plantinga based on an incompatibilist understanding of human freedom offers a better answer to the discussion concerning the so-called logical contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil in the world.
8. The view that anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms used in Scriptures warrant the belief in God's suffering is based on an incorrect view of the Trinity, since, in the Godhead, only the Son experiences suffering.
9. Augustine's argument that evil does not exist because it is not a nature, but is only the deterioration of a nature, makes sense only within the logic of his doctrine of free will.
10. The biblical description of time as an *'et*, a created reality, excludes the possibility of the understanding of God's eternity as his everlasting existence in time.

### MISCELLANEOUS

11. Modern biblical historicism is based on modern scholarship's blindness on its presuppositions concerning the nature of history and historical investigation.
12. The position that although completely debunked, the historical-critical method should still be used in biblical scholarship because of the lack of a new dominant approach is based on desperation.

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