

# CALVIN AND THE PSALMS, A RENEWED UNDERSTANDING

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## *A. General observations*

The qualities of John Calvin's commentaries have often been underlined: his good knowledge of the Hebrew language, the rigour of his arguments, the theological depth, his spiritual insight and the greatness of his style. During the Seminary's last Symposium, two lectures were given on Calvin's method of the interpretation of scripture.

Emile Nicole<sup>1</sup> developed the five following points:

1. The impressive number of works devoted to the Bible. His commentaries, teaching and sermons underline the strong biblical orientation of John Calvin's thought.
2. The seriousness of his approach was demonstrated by his constant reference to the original and ancient versions.
3. The trust (the confidence) that John Calvin shows toward the text. He is eager to identify the literal meaning of the content.
4. The sobriety of the exegesis of the Genevan Reformer and the respect that he expresses towards God and His word. As God doesn't tell us everything, but essentially what is necessary to our salvation and edification, one must take into account such limits when commenting His word.
5. Calvin's commentaries manifest throughout a pastoral care which is down-to-earth, individual and communal as to the practical applications and psychological, moral and spiritual reflections.

As for Donald Cobb<sup>2</sup>, he developed four aspects of J. Calvin's exegesis:

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<sup>1</sup> « Calvin, interprète de la Genèse. » To be published in the *Revue Réformée*, n° 254, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> « L'exégèse de Calvin, actualité et spiritualité. » To be published in the *Revue Réformée*, N° 254, 2010.

1. His starting point was that: scripture has authority because God is its author. However, the Reformer is careful to emphasize the full humanity of the Word.
2. J. Calvin takes into account the debates of his day, being in continual discussion with his contemporaries as well as being very familiar with the Church Fathers. Neither conservative nor innovative, he shows independence in his interpretation of the Biblical texts.
3. As far as his method is concerned, J. Calvin seeks above all to shed light on the content and the literal meaning of the passage he is commenting on. In other words, to state the Biblical fact with clarity and sobriety is to allow the Word to unfold itself with total efficiency.
4. It follows that spirituality is closely linked to the meaning of the text. To get hold of the true meaning of the text in its simplicity, is to open oneself to its regenerative and edifying action for it is in this way that the living God has chosen to work in our lives. As far as practical application is concerned, it must essentially be perceived as an extension of the primary meaning of the Biblical text applied within new existential and cultural contexts.

In the light of these general considerations, I would like to develop some thoughts specifically in relation to the commentary of John Calvin on the Psalms.

The commentary on the Psalms which was published in Latin for the first time in 1557<sup>3</sup> is an important book within Calvin's work. First of all, as O. Millet has noted: "his preface is the only text of the Reformer that we may consider as partly autobiographical." And the author adds "Calvin deciphers ... the destiny of his vocation and of the trials which follow in the light of the life of David and the way the great king-prophet expressed his anxieties and miseries in the Psalms...."<sup>4</sup> One could also mention his faith, his comfort and his hope. What is striking however is the humility with which Calvin dares to make the comparison. When he

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<sup>3</sup> The first French edition was published in 1558.

<sup>4</sup> O. Millet, Calvin. *Un homme, une œuvre, un auteur*. In folio, Gollion, 2008, 123.

measures himself to the king, God's cantor, he does not add up. This is what he writes: "So that I know the more assuredly that whatever the most illustrious king and prophet suffered, was exhibited to me by God as an example for imitation. My condition, no doubt, is much inferior to his and it is unnecessary for me to take the time to show this. But as he was taken from the sheepfold and elevated to the rank of supreme authority, so God having taken me from my originally obscure and humble condition, has reckoned me worthy of being invested with the honourable office of a preacher and a minister of the Gospel."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this commentary allows us to appreciate all the richness and the depth of the spirituality which springs forth from the Calvinist Reformation. Let's listen again to the Reformer: "I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "*An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul*"; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here vividly portrayed all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, including all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.... In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine. Genuine and earnest prayer proceed first from a sense of our need, and next, from the assured faith in the promises of God."<sup>6</sup> Such a spirituality which touches the believer in his daily life is manifested on every page of Calvin's commentary. The Psalter is the fountain from which he never ceased to drink. This enables him to say, toward the end of his Preface: "my readers, too, if I mistake not, will observe, that

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<sup>5</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaire sur le Livre des Psaumes*. Meyrueis, Paris, 1859, VII. For the English translation I have referred to: John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, translated by James Anderson, in the reprint of *Calvin's Commentaries*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1998 vol. IV, V and VI. I have at times modified the translation according to the French original.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentaire.*, VI

in unfolding the internal affections both of David and of others, I discourse upon them as matters of which I have familiar experience.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, a last remark is necessary. This study will limit itself to Calvin’s interpretation of the messianic Psalms. As the Genevan Reformer provided a messianic reading of about 25 Psalms, our paper (because of time limits) will concentrate on some significant texts.<sup>8</sup> What transpires from Calvin’s exegesis, in addition to the topics already mentioned, is the precision and the theological coherence of his thought process, the importance of the analogy of faith, and its Christological dimension. However, he definitely sets aside the allegorical interpretation in favour of a figurative or typological reading which allows him to underline both the continuity of and the difference between the two Testaments without sacrificing however the unity of Scripture. As O. Millet has said “For Calvin... the Old Testament prophets are already eloquent ‘doctors’<sup>9</sup> (and therefore of utmost clarity!) who teach the Hebrew people, in relation to their particular circumstances, ‘the doctrine of life,’ threats, promises and the unique covenant of grace founded in Christ”<sup>10</sup>. This emphasis on the unity of the revelation and of the continuity of the covenant of grace did not prevent Calvin from emphasizing the limits of the Old Testamen, while taking into account the history of revelation. Here is what he wrote in his preface to the New Testament called *Epistles to the faithful showing how Christ is the end of the Law*: “In order to further confirm them by all kinds of means in their awaiting of the great Messiah, God gave them his written law which contained different ceremonies, purifications and sacrifices, these being only the figures and shadows of the great benefits that were to be bestowed by Christ, the body and truth of these things. For the law could in no way lead to perfection, but only demonstrated (manifested)

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentaire*, XII. For bibliographical material referring to studies on *the Commentary of Calvin on the Psalms*, cf. H. J. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), especially 22

<sup>8</sup> Psalms 2, 8, 16 (18), 22, 45, 110. Cf. also Selderhuis, *Theology*, 56-59; S. H. Russel, “Calvin and the Messianic Interpretations of the Psalms” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21 (1968), 37-47.

<sup>9</sup> This is also true of the authors of Psalms whom Calvin calls « prophets. »

<sup>10</sup> Millet, *Un homme*, 108.

and as a pedagogue pointed and showed the way to Christ, as St-Paul says, its finality and fulfilment.”<sup>11</sup>

## A. Some Messianic Psalms

Subsequent to these general observations, let us now examine how J. Calvin interprets a few so-called messianic Psalms.

### 1. Psalms 2 and 110

At the beginning of each poem, Calvin summarizes the theme of the Psalm he is to comment on. We will quote each time what the Reformer calls “argument” comparing it with the short notes we find in the Psalter (1562) which date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

#### a) Psalm 2

“David boasts that his kingdom, though assailed by a vast multitude of powerful enemies, would, notwithstanding, be perpetual, because it was upheld by the hand and power of God. He adds that, in spite of his enemies, it would be extended even to the uttermost ends of the earth. And, therefore, he exhorts kings and other rulers to lay aside their pride and receive with submissive minds the yoke laid upon them by God; as it would be vain for them to attempt to shake it off. All this was typical, and contains a prophecy concerning the future kingdom of Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

The Psalter is briefer: “we see here how David and his kingdom are the true figure and indubitable prophecy of Jesus Christ and of his reign.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J. Calvin, « Épître aux fidèles, montrant comment Christ est la fin de la Loi » in O. Millet ed., *Calvin Œuvres choisies*. Gallimard (folio classique), Paris 1995, 36.

<sup>12</sup> The exact title of the Psalter : *Les Psaumes de David mis en rime Française par Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze*. The first complete edition was printed by Jean de Laon in 1562. An incomplete edition was already published in 1539. Encouraged by Marguerite de Navarre, François 1er, Charles the Fifth, Clément Marot began to put the Psalter in poetic form in view of public worship. At his death, Théodore de Bèze, disciple of J. Calvin, pursued the versification of the Psalms. The Psalter is a literary landmark of the nascent French language and literature. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, its influence already extended to all of Europe. Cf. Anne Hofmann, « Le Psautier de Jean Calvin: genèse, rayonnement et enjeux. » To be published in the *Revue Réformée*, n° 254, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> J. Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Les Psaumes de David* (1562), (Nîmes: Ed. Vida, 1998), 2.

This last statement emphasizes right away the figure represented by the kingdom of David while the first one describes in more detail the Davidic kingdom, its battles, its victories, its scope and the submission of its enemies before mentioning the messianic kingdom.

Let us now have a closer look at the way J. Calvin approaches this Psalm, the messianic reading that he gives of it and the arguments he puts forward to justify it. In his commentary on Psalm 2, P. C. Craigie considers that this poem is a royal Psalm linked to the royal crowning. Although the authors of the New Testament have often quoted it and refer to it, Craigie does not consider to be explicitly messianic. Its messianic character was to appear upon the occasion of major transitions in “the biblical history and the religious thinking” of Israel. Those transitions were to happen during the exile which witnessed the end of the monarchy and incurred a new position of post-biblical Judaism. This radical change was to open the way to a new messianic reading of this Psalm well attested in the writings of the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> Such was not J. Calvin’s approach.

At the outset, the Reformer’s interpretation is literal. This Psalm primarily describes the Davidic monarchy, the reign of King David: the hostility of his internal and external enemies, the mocking laughter of the Lord of history and of rebellious nations, the vocation and the anointing of David, the determined commitment of God in favour of His anointed one, the promise made to the king that his dominion will reach the extremities of the world, the pressing invitation to men in high places to fear the Lord, to serve Him and to kiss the son in order to avoid judgment and to find happiness. However, Calvin doesn’t stop with the earthly description of the kingdom of God’s Psalmist. This kingdom is not an end in itself. Another “principle” is at work and comes to light. This is what he says: “And in order to learn to apply to Christ whatever David, in times past, sang concerning himself, we must hold this principle, which we meet with everywhere in all the prophets, that he, with his posterity, was made king, not so much for his own sake as to be a type of the Redeemer.”<sup>16</sup> This is what enables

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<sup>15</sup> P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC 19, Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1983, 68.

<sup>16</sup> J. Calvin, *Psaumes* I., 6.

Calvin to say that David's kingdom is the "figure" (type), the "shadow", the "representation"<sup>17</sup> of "the eternal kingdom which at length was truly established in the person of Christ"<sup>18</sup>. In order to understand correctly Calvin's exegetical approach, we must however take a new step. The Reformer saw in David "a prophet"<sup>19</sup>, not only a witness of a religious and spiritual experience, but also a spokesman for God. He thus clearly distinguishes himself from the allegorical interpretation which had dominated the exegetical studies until the end of the Middle Ages. Relying on the apostolic witness (Acts 4.24-28)<sup>20</sup> Calvin makes it clear that "those things which David declares concerning himself are not arbitrarily, or even allegorically, applied to Christ, but were truly predicted concerning him."<sup>21</sup> The fact that David's words were not accomplished during his lifetime is another argument used by Calvin to explain that they refer to the Messiah and his reign. Having recognized that the title "Son of God" (7) could apply to David in order to underline the pre-eminence of his function/royal status,<sup>22</sup> Calvin quickly adds: "By the Son of God, in this passage, we are therefore not to understand one son among many, but his only begotten Son, that he alone should have the pre-eminence both in heaven and on earth."<sup>23</sup> In the same manner, when he mentions the scope of David's kingdom, he remarks that in comparison to other monarchies, "it was confined within very narrow boundaries". This observation enabled him to go on to say: "Unless, therefore, we suppose this prophecy concerning the vast extent of kingdom to have been uttered in vain and falsely, we must apply it to Christ, who alone has subdued the whole world to himself and embraced all lands and nations under his dominion".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 6, 9, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13. The Reformer also speaks of « prophecy » in these passages.

<sup>20</sup> The community assembled in Jerusalem prays saying: ... You spoke by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of your servant, our father David... » This is followed by a quote from Psalm 2. 1, 2, accompanied by a commentary which specifies that these words of the Psalmist are accomplished in Jesus Christ.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 6.

<sup>22</sup> In favour of this interpretation, Calvin quotes Ps. 82.6 when he says that « Princes are called gods and sons of God (page 9).

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I., 9.

<sup>24</sup> J. Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 10.

Calvin's commentary is rich: he tries to think and to formulate his theology from a rigorous and sober<sup>25</sup> study of the biblical text. His thought is coherent and takes into account the whole of the witness of Scripture. The way he implements the analogy of Scripture<sup>26</sup> allows him to underline the unity of biblical revelation and its progressive nature. The exegesis of the Genevan Reformer is theological, but it also has practical aspects. Its goal is to chastise, comfort and exhort, in a word, to edify the people of God. So, having commented on the first verses of the Psalm which describe the attacks which threaten David's kingdom as well as Christ's, Calvin finds in this passage a double consolation which he addresses to his readers and to the Church:

“- the believers must not be alarmed because the manifestation of the kingdom of God and of Christ is accompanied by turmoil, conflict and hostility. In the world where sin is active, one must not be surprised;

- the believers must remember that they are not the target of this rebellious violence, but the Lord himself and that He will have the last word for he is faithful to his promises.”<sup>27</sup> Calvin thinks that, David having been established king in Zion, his “kingdom is sacred” and “cannot be separated from the Temple.” Maybe he affirms too much here. Whatever may be, he concludes that this passage (6) corresponds better to the kingdom of Christ which “we know to be both spiritual and joined to the priesthood.”<sup>28</sup> This double dimension, royal and priestly, does not apply to David, but it enables us to now consider Psalm 110.

#### b) Psalm 110

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<sup>25</sup> The thought developed by Calvin about the meaning of the verb *beget* (7) is interesting and nuanced. He does not think that this verb is used of « the eternal generation of Christ » but of his full manifestation as the Son to the world.

<sup>26</sup> Vv. 1-3 : Rom. 13.2 ; Acts 4.24 ; John 5.23. Vv. 7, 8 : Eph. 2.17 ; Ps. 82.6 ; Heb. 1.5 ; Acts 13.33 ; John 1.14 ; Rom. 1.4 ; Ps. 118.24 ; John 17.5 ; Phil. 2.10. V. 9 : Ps. 110.5 ; Is. 61.1 ; 1 Cor. 10.4 ; 2 Thess. 2.8 ; V. 12 : John 5.23 ; 6.27 ; Ps. 1 ; 2 Cor. 10.6 ; Joel 2.32.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 6, 7. In the Old Testament, there was a clear distinction between the offices of the king and of the priest. In emphasizing the link between kingship and the Temple, maybe Calvin says too much. But he is careful to specify that only the Messiah will enact this double office.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 8.

Here is how Calvin summarizes the theme of this Psalm:

“In this psalm David sets forth the perpetuity of Christ’s reign, and the eternity of his priesthood; and, in the first place, he affirms that God conferred upon Christ supreme dominion, combined with invincible power, with which he either conquers all his enemies, or compels them to submit to him. In the second place, he adds that God would extend the boundaries of this kingdom far and wide, and in the third place, that Christ having been installed into the priestly office with all the solemnity of an oath, sustains the honours of that equally with that of his regal office. Finally that this shall be a new order of priesthood, whose introduction shall put an end to the levitical priesthood, which was temporary, and that it shall be everlasting.”<sup>29</sup>

As far as the Psalter is concerned, the note is shorter, but it does not mention the priestly function of Christ.

“A Hymn celebrating the reign of Christ which began in Zion from there it reaches to the extremities of the earth and shall continue until Christ is universally worshipped and his enemies are at his feet.”<sup>30</sup>

Let us now look at the way Calvin comments on this Psalm. He emphasizes the difference between David and the Messiah. David is not perceived as a figure of Christ, but he speaks of Him in an explicit manner. This Psalm is the most quoted in the New Testament.<sup>31</sup> Calvin says that not only does Christ Himself testify that it speaks of Himself – it is also the testimony of the Apostles – but “this Psalm cries out that it can receive no other explanation.”<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, David is a figure of Christ, but this poem says things differently:

“I (Calvin) acknowledge that the kingdom of Christ is typified in the person of David, but it cannot be asserted of him ; or of any of his successors, that he should be a king whose dominion should be widely extended, and who, at the same time, was to be priest, not

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<sup>29</sup> J. Calvin, *Psaumes II*, 335.

<sup>30</sup> *Psaumes de David* (1562), 317.

<sup>31</sup> Matt. 22.43; Mark 12.36 ; Luke 20.42, 43 ; Acts 2. 34-36; 1 Cor. 15.25 ; Heb. 1.13 ; 5.6 ; 7.17, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes II*, 335.

according to the laws, but according to the order of Melchisedek and that forever.”<sup>33</sup> In this Psalm, David’s part is more explicitly prophetic when he describes the scope of the Messiah’s reign as well as his double function, royal and priestly. Is he not the sole and unique “Mediator”? As a matter of fact, in the first covenant, the scope of the Davidic kingdom is limited and the royal and priestly functions are distinct and depend upon two different ministries.<sup>34</sup> In order to introduce the Messiah’s double ministry (royal and priestly), we must refer to another model: that of Melchisedek because he also is king and priest. So, Calvin adds more precisely “... we must retain that the similitude refers principally to the perpetuity of his priesthood... that Melchisedek is described by Moses as if he were a celestial individual; and accordingly, David, in instituting a resemblance between Christ and him, designs to point out the perpetuity of his priesthood. Whence it follows... that as death did not intercept the exercise of his office, he has no successor”<sup>35</sup>. In his commentary on the Book of Genesis, the Reformer sees in Melchisedek an “image”, a “representation”, a “correspondence”, and an “effigy.” Calvin qualifies his thought as follows: “And as no one has arisen except Christ, who equalled Melchisedek in dignity, still less who excelled him, we hence infer that the image of Christ was presented to the fathers in his person”<sup>36</sup>. Thus the Messiah is seen as the unique and eternal priest who reconciles us with God after “having paid for our sins”<sup>37</sup> and who intercedes on our behalf. But he is also our King who maintains and upholds our salvation and guarantees our protection.

We find in this Psalm the same tonality as in Psalm 2. God is presented alongside the Messiah as the powerful warrior and the just judge who overthrows the foul plots of his adversaries

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<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes II*, 335. In his commentary, Calvin argues that the phrase « according to the order » means « in the way of.» (340)

<sup>34</sup> Kings exercised religious responsibilities in Israel in regard to the arch of the covenant (2 Sa. 6.1-15), in the temple (1 Kin. 5-7 ; 2 Kin. 12.4-7 ; 22.3-7 ; 23.4-7 ; 2 Chr. 6.31 ; 15.11-16 ; 16.4-42 ; 23.3-31 ; 25.1 ; 2 Chr. 17.7-9 ; 19.8-11 ; 29.25, 30 ; 31.2 ; 35.15-16 ; Ezek. 3.10 ; 8.20 ; Neh. 12.24, 36 ; 45. But kings were not supposed to undertake specific priestly functions (2 Chr. 26.16-18).

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes II*, 340.

<sup>36</sup> J. Calvin, *Le livre de la Genèse*. CAT 1 (Genève : Labor et Fidès, 1961), 221. Cf. also Heb. 7 and the argument developed by the author of that Epistle.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Genèse*, 221.

and reduces his enemies to silence. Although Calvin underlines this aspect of holiness and of divine justice all too often neglected today, he does not forget the loving-kindness of Christ. The one does not go without the other: "...as the shepherd is gentle towards his flock, but fierce and formidable towards wolves and thieves ; in like manner, Christ is kind and gentle towards those who commit themselves to his care, while they who wilfully and obstinately reject his yoke, shall feel with what awful and terrible power he is armed»<sup>38</sup>. With those words, the Genevan Reformer urges his audience to become aware of their need of salvation and of finding comfort and hope in the Messiah.

## 2) Psalm 8

J. Calvin summarizes the theme of this Psalm as follows: "David, reflecting upon God's fatherly beneficence towards mankind, is not content with simply giving thanks for it, but is enraptured by the contemplation of it."<sup>39</sup>

The introductory note of the Psalter puts the emphasis on the Creator: "With great admiration, David celebrates here the marvellous power of the Creator of all things, and the great goodness he condescends to manifest towards man whom he has made."<sup>40</sup>

Psalm 8 can implicitly be considered as a messianic Psalm. In the summaries quoted above, there is no explicit mention of the Messiah; however the New Testament interprets this poem in the light of the coming of Christ (1 Cor. 15.27; Heb. 2.6-9; Eph. 2.22; 1 Pet. 3.22). Verses 5 and 6 are of special importance in this debate: "You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet."

If, at the outset, David refers to man as created in the image of God even before the sin committed in the Garden of Eden, we must admit that man, this unique being, has become fragile and miserable. Calvin's words are strong: "... by the fall of Adam all mankind fell

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<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* II, 341.

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Les Psaumes de David*, 17.

from their primeval state of integrity... » ; « ... the image of God was almost entirely effaced from us... »; “...we were divested of those distinguishing gifts by which we would have been as it were, elevated to the condition of demigods...”; “...reduced to a condition of wretched and shameful destitution.” It follows that the generosity of God in such a « ...miserable unruliness and ruin” does not manifest itself « ...in the brilliancy and splendour that it would have” if the human beings had not sinned.<sup>41</sup> In other words, man is very far from embodying his calling as a creature created in the image of God such as it is described at the start of creation. In the light of this desperate and dramatic condition of the human creature, the Messiah alone, that is the new Adam, could fully incarnate, in his earthly life, the mandate that God entrusted to the first Adam. He has done this in view of the redemption of man, a condition essential to the restoration of his dignity and to the exercise of his creational mandate. According to Calvin, this means “that presently God has bestowed upon his Son an immeasurable fullness of all blessings, that all of us may draw from this fountain”<sup>42</sup>. God’s generosity is such, says the Reformer, “that what was bestowed upon Christ’s human nature was a free gift ; nay, the fact that a mortal man, and the Son of Adam, is the only Son of God, and the Lord of glory, and the head of angels, affords a bright illustration of the mercy of God » .<sup>43</sup>

To speak about the redemptive work of the Messiah, Calvin then relies and leans on the exegesis of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews who sees in this passage a reference to the death and the resurrection of Jesus (2.5-9). Calvin tells us that we are faced with an updated interpretation which does not rest upon the primary meaning of these verses of the Psalm, but which allows the Apostle to underline that Christ, first-born of all creatures, is also the restorer of all humankind. “The apostle, therefore, in quoting this psalm had not so much an

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<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 49.

eye to what David meant, but making an allusion to these words, ‘you have made him a little lower,’ and again, ‘you have crowned him with honour’, he applies this lowering to the death of Christ, and the glory and honour to his resurrection.”<sup>44</sup>

In the same way, what we are told about domination and submission in v. 7 applies primarily and only to the Messiah, that is to Jesus Christ, for the bliss and happiness of man. Calvin ends the commentary of this Psalm by saying: “David here confines his attention to God’s temporal benefits, but it is our duty to rise higher, and to contemplate the invaluable treasures of the kingdom of heaven which he has unfolded in Christ, and all the gifts which belong to the spiritual life...”<sup>45</sup>. This discovery and realization arouse the love and the fear of God and prompt the believer to worship and praise Him all the more.

Once more, the seriousness and the depth of Calvin’s exegetical approach is evident. He does not hesitate to integrate the Apostles’ testimony even when they simply “apply the biblical text to their contemporary context.”<sup>46</sup> Without minimizing the literal meaning of the Psalm, he seeks to put forward the theological and spiritual wealth of this poem in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, in his concern for the edification of the Church.

### 3) Psalms 22, 16 and 45

We have seen that Calvin puts great emphasis on the literal meaning of the content of the Psalms without, however, excluding their figurative meaning which he clearly distinguishes from an allegorical meaning. This is precisely what he does when expounding Psalms 22, 16 and 45. His approach presupposes a unified field of knowledge, the coherence and the

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<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes I*, 49. Calvin saw a similar outlook in Paul’s exegesis: Rom. 10.6 and Deut. 30.12., Eph. 4.8 and Ps. 68.19.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes I*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> J. Calvin, in his practice of exegesis, shows flexibility and insight. In v. 6, he translates *elohim* by “God” while the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews follows the reading “Angels.” He justifies his choice by claiming the Apostles’ freedom and adds: “not indeed, to wrest them to a meaning different from the true one, but because they reckoned it sufficient to show, by a reference to Scripture, that what they taught was sanctioned by the Word of God, although they did not quote the precise words.” *Psaumes I*, 48.

progressive character of divine revelation (general and special) whose aim and accomplishment are both in Jesus the Christ.

a) Psalm 22

Here is how Calvin summarizes the theme of this Psalm: “David complains in this Psalm that he is reduced to such circumstances of distress that he is like a man in despair. But after having recounted the calamities with which he was so severely afflicted, he emerges from the abyss of temptations, and gathering courage, comforts himself with the assurance of deliverance. At the same time, he sets before us, in his own person, a type of Christ, who he knew by the Spirit of prophecy behoved to be abased in marvellous and unusual ways previous to his exaltation by the Father. Thus the psalm, in the two parts of which it consists, explains that prophecy of Isaiah (chap. 53.8) He was taken from prison and from judgment; and who shall declare his generation?”<sup>47</sup>

The introductory note of the Psalter is much briefer and immediately christological: “The prophecy of Jesus Christ, his abasement to death on the cross, his glorification, the spreading of his kingdom to the extremities of the earth, and its everlasting duration.”<sup>48</sup>

Without minimizing the suffering and the misery experienced by David during his lifetime, Calvin argues right away that the Psalmist mentions, by a spirit of prophecy, the extreme misery and passion of Christ who takes upon himself the curse which lays upon all sinners without however falling into Satan’s temptations and attacks.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the French Reformer tells us that we must move onto another level of understanding for when David says “they share my clothes and cast lots for my robe”, (19) the Evangelists recognize that this actually happened literally. This is what Calvin says: “When the Evangelists quote this passage to the letter, as we say, and without figure, there is no absurdity in their doing so : for in order to

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<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes I*, 166.

<sup>48</sup> *Le Psautier*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> The first pages of the commentary of this Psalm are centred on verses 2 and 3, and deal specifically with the trials of the king of Israel. It is only from the fourth page on that Jesus Christ’s passion is mentioned, thus the importance given by Calvin to the literal meaning of the Psalm closely knitted with the spiritual meaning. Cf. J. Calvin, *Psalms I*, 166, 169.

teach us the more certainly that in this psalm Christ is described to us by the Spirit of prophecy, the heavenly Father intended that in the person of his Son these things should be visibly accomplished which were shadowed forth in David»<sup>50</sup>. Calvin goes on to specify that it is because of our “roughness” and because we are “slow to believe”, and to “awaken us from our stupidity” that the Lord acts this way! He does this so that we acknowledge the “spiritual doctor”<sup>51</sup> in the Son.

Once more, Calvin seeks to demonstrate that this Psalm largely surpasses David’s experience and the scope of what he was able to live through during his lifetime, whether it be his recovery and the renewed glory of his kingship, the nature of the deliverance and of the banquet which accompanies it, the extent and the duration of his kingdom. Consequently, the justice that will be proclaimed to the future generations much more than a particular deliverance makes reference to the redemption revealed in Christ. It is not surprising that Jesus, during his agony on the cross, quoted this Psalm (Matt. 27.46; Mark 15.34).

#### b) Psalm 16

Calvin summarizes this Psalm as follows: “In the beginning David commends himself to the protection of God. He then meditates upon the benefits which he received from God, and thereby stirs up thanksgiving in his heart. By his service, it is true, he could in no respect be profitable to God, but notwithstanding he surrenders and devotes himself entirely to protesting that he will have nothing to do with superstitions. He also states the reason of this to be that full and substantial happiness consists in resting in God alone, who never suffers his own people to lack any good thing.”<sup>52</sup>

The note of the Psalter is quite different and explicitly christological, thus differing from Calvin’s synthesis: “David requests God’s deliverance, appealing to his faith and not to his works, which he confesses to be nothing before God. Despising all forms of idolatry, he

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<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 176. Cf. Matt. 27.35; Mark 15.24; Luke 23.24; John 19.24. Calvin also quotes Is. 53.4 and Matt. 8.17.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 176.

<sup>52</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 99.

considers that God is everything for him. Sure that his request will be granted, he gives thanks. He is convinced that he will receive a greater bliss after death in virtue of the resurrection of the Messiah which he predicts precisely (as understood in chapters 2 and 13 of the Acts of the Apostles). This psalm is a true model of prayer for the faithful who are experiencing the trials of life.”<sup>53</sup>

This short summary gives a perfect account of the content of this Psalm and of Calvin’s exegesis. The summary of the commentary recapitulates the literal meaning of David’s prayer. Once again, the Genevan Reformer strongly insists that this Psalm expresses first of all David’s experience, his desire for divine protection, his refusal of idolatry, his total commitment and his trustful expectation of happiness, including eternal bliss. But, once more, the king of Israel is a figure of the Messiah who appears more explicitly in verse 10<sup>54</sup> which, according to Calvin (this in the light of Peter and Paul’s testimonies) cannot be applied to David since he experienced corruption. The Lord’s poet conveys a prophetic and messianic meaning to this passage, thanks to the Spirit of prophecy that God had granted him. This concerns the resurrection of the Messiah, guarantee of the believers’ bliss as well as David’s. For Calvin, the words *Sheol*, sepulture, (“an insatiable pit which devours and consumes everything”) and *Shahat*, pit (“corruption”) “denote not so much a place as a quality and condition,<sup>55</sup> as if it had been said: ‘the life of Christ will be exempted from the dominion of the grave, inasmuch as his body, even when dead, will not be subject to corruption. Besides, we know that the grave of Christ was filled, and as it were embalmed with the life-giving perfume of his spirit, that it might be to him the gate to immortal glory’<sup>56</sup>. The word “soul”, therefore, has the meaning of “vital spirit” or of “life” and corresponds well to the word “body” which we find in the second part of the verse. It follows that “Christ was wholly and

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<sup>53</sup> *Le Psautier*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> “For you will not leave my soul in the grave; neither will you make the Holy One see the pit.” J. Calvin, *Psaume 1*, 106.

<sup>55</sup> In order to avoid saying that « Christ has also descended into the grave » or that God has brought back Christ’s soul from hell.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes I*, 107.

perfectly exempted from the corruption of the grave, that he might call his members into his fellowship, and make them partakers of this blessing, although by degrees and each one according to his measure »<sup>57</sup>.

c) Psalm 45

Let's consider once more Calvin's summary of this poem: "In this psalm, the grace and beauty of Solomon, his virtues in ruling the kingdom, and also his power and riches, are illustrated and described in terms of high commendation. More especially, as he has taken to wife a stranger out of Egypt, the blessing of God is promised to him in this relationship, provided the newly espoused bride, bidding adieu to her own nation, and renouncing all attachment to it, devote herself wholly to her husband. At the same time, there can be no doubt, that under this figure the majesty, wealth, and extent of Christ's kingdom are described and illustrated by appropriate terms, to teach the faithful that there is no felicity greater or more desirable than to live under the reign of this king, and to be subject to his government"<sup>58</sup>.

The short note of the Psalter at the head of this Psalm is succinct, but comprehensive: "It is the nuptial song of Jesus and his Church as figured by Solomon and his favourite wife, the daughter of Pharaoh"<sup>59</sup>.

There is no doubt in Calvin's mind that this Psalm "is composed concerning Solomon." As to its author, the question remains unanswered. The French Reformer thinks that it is "a prophet or a godly teacher" who composed this poem immediately after the king's death or even when he was still alive "with the design of showing that whatever excellence had been seen in Solomon had a higher application"<sup>60</sup>. Calvin, therefore, sees in this Psalm first of all a love song that celebrates "the mutual love which husband and wife ought to cherish towards each

<sup>57</sup> Idem. For a detailed discussion of the final verses of Psalm 16, cf. P. Berthoud's thesis: "Resurrection and Immortality in the Psalms with Special Reference to the concept of Life. The significance of M. Dahood's Hypothesis twenty years after the publication of his commentary." (Covenant Theological Seminary, St-Louis, 1991), 112-137.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes I*, 381.

<sup>59</sup> Le Psautier, 120.

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes I*, 107.

other”<sup>61</sup>. But as a type, the love of Solomon and his favourite wife is “a figure which describes and sets forth the holy and divine union of Christ and his Church”.<sup>62</sup> The application that Calvin develops is much more meticulous and detailed than usual. He was, however, quite conscious of its limitations when he says that “it is not necessary for us to examine every word minutely, in order to apply to the Church every detail that is said concerning the wife of Solomon”<sup>63</sup>.

Once again, Calvin argues that “certain things mentioned in relationship to Solomon don’t apply ‘perfectly’ to the person of the king”<sup>64</sup> Certainly, the kingdom of David’s son was excellent, but the dramatic circumstances of the end of his reign and of his succession allow us to think that it is the messianic reign that surfaces, in particular in verses 7 and 8<sup>65</sup>. Similarly, in the use of the name *Elohim*, there is more than the description of angels or political and judiciary authorities. This term calls to mind “the divine majesty of Christ.” At last, there is no doubt that the dazzling beauty of Solomon is used to bring to the light “under earthly figures... that which is spiritual in Christ”, that he is “adorned with excellent gifts and incomparable graces.”<sup>66</sup> Calvin argues in the same way, when at the end of the Psalm (17),<sup>67</sup> the psalmist describes the scope of the kingdom to come. The disastrous development of the kingdom of Israel suggests that the universal and eternal domination surpasses by far the splendour and greatness of Solomon’s empire.

## Conclusion

It is my hope that the above remarks on these few Psalms will have highlighted the theological wealth and the literary flavour of Calvin’s commentary. Contemporary exegesis has developed other tracks of study and reflection. It takes more into account the historical,

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<sup>61</sup> Idem.

<sup>62</sup> Idem.

<sup>63</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 389, 390. Calvin said the same thing about Solomon, especially concerning the multitude of his wives!

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 384.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 384, 391.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Psaumes* I, 391.

<sup>67</sup> Idem.

cultural and literary contexts and underlines the importance of textual criticism in order to establish the best lessons possible in the study of a biblical text. These new approaches, however important they may be, have not always kept their promises because they are often dependent on presuppositions that owe more to the pervading rationalism (whether modernist or ultra-modernist) than to biblical revelation. Therefore, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 500 years after his birth, Calvin's commentary in helping us to discover the richness of divine revelation, keeps all its theological, spiritual, human and practical relevance. Let us listen once more to the Genevan Reformer as he closes the Preface of the New Testament translation by this beautiful prayer:

*“May the Lord of lights, by his Holy Spirit use this godly and salutary Gospel to teach the ignorant, strengthen the weak, illuminate the blind and to establish the reign of truth on all peoples and nations so that the whole world may know one and only God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, one Faith and one Gospel. Amen.”*<sup>68</sup>

At the heart of the spirituality set forth by Calvin is the in-depth study and meditation of the Scriptures that leads the disciple to Jesus Christ. It is the fountain of communication and communion with Him, which the Reformer from Geneva calls the mystical union with the Lord.

For the Christian churches who have benefited from the Reformation, the Word of God, written and incarnate, has been the means of grace par excellence (sermons, lectures, catechism, *lectio continua*, etc.). Within the spirituality of the Word, the Psalter has occupied a special place. It is the prayer book of the Christian church at all times (Acts 4.23-31). To pray the Psalms, to study the Psalms and to sing the Psalms is a specific characteristic of Reformed spirituality especially as Calvin instigated it in Geneva. The above mentioned threefold process

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<sup>68</sup> J. Calvin, *Préface au Nouveau Testament*, 50.

takes place in the context of the ecclesiastical community. It also takes place in the midst of the family unit everyday of the week. These edifying exercises seek to enhance the growth of the believer and therefore to strengthen his faith. Thus, the Geneva Psalter remains one of the major contributions to Christian spirituality. Together with the spirituality of the Lord's Day and the spirituality of Holy Communion, the spirituality of the Word nourishes the whole life of the disciple in depth. Daily, family, professional activities are perceived as a divine calling. Ordinary life manifests a godly dimension (Luke 12.42-48; Matt 25. 14-30). Dutch painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century stresses this spiritual aspect. In the same way, the chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta family witness to the manner the Gospel of Jesus Christ meets the believer at the heart of his existence and of his daily occupations.<sup>69</sup>

In concluding, one can define such a spirituality along the following three lines:

1. A covenant spirituality that encompasses the individual, the couple, the family, the Church and even implicitly the city.
2. An incarnate spirituality that allows the believer to live his daily life with its sorrows and joys in the presence of and in union with the Triune God.
3. A spirituality of faith that binds knowledge, consent and confidence together.

Pierre BERTHOUD  
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La Baume, Aix-en-Provence

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<sup>69</sup> H. R. Rookmaaker, "Seventeenth Century Dutch Art: Christian Art?" in M. Hengelaar – Rookmaaker, ed., *The complete Works of Hans Rookmaaker* 4 (Carlisle: Piquant, 2002), 132-140. E. R. Charles, *Our Neighbour: Martin Luther. Chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964). A. Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin* (Genève–Paris: Librairie de l'Université, Albin Michel, 1959).

## KEY WORDS

Allegory / Allegorical  
Christ  
David  
Figure / Figurative  
Interpretation  
Kingdom  
Literal  
Messiah  
Prophecy / prophetic  
Solomon  
Type / Typological

## SUMMARY

The Book of Psalms had a most significant impact on the theology and spirituality of John Calvin. In fact, his commentary on the Psalms offers many insights on his theology and his spiritual biography. In the last edition of *The Institutes* the Psalter is the most quoted biblical book after the Epistle to the Romans. It has been said that his *Commentary* is the practical version of *The Institutes*. This present study deals more specifically with John Calvin's method of interpretation, with special reference to some messianic Psalms. While maintaining the unity of Scripture and the progressive character of revelation, J. Calvin combines the literal, prophetic and figurative readings of the Psalms. His exegesis is sober, rigorous, coherent and relevant. He is careful to highlight the theological, spiritual, human and practical dimensions of God's Word as it is revealed in the Psalms.

## RESUME

Pierre BERTHOUD studied theology at Lausanne University (Switzerland) and at Covenant Theological Seminary in St-Louis (USA) where he obtained the following diplomas: Bachelor of Divinity, Master of Arts and Master of Theology. Thesis “Resurrection and Immortality in the Psalms with special reference to the concept of life”, the significance of M. Dahood’s hypothesis twenty years after the publication of his commentary, 1991 (251 pages).

He taught biblical languages at the Free Evangelical Seminary of Vaux-sur-Seine (1969-1971).

From 1971 to 1975, he worked with Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer, head of the study centre, l’Abri Fellowship in Huémoz (Switzerland). He participated in the French translation of several of F. Schaeffer’s books.

In 1975, he became professor of Old Testament at the Free Reformed Seminary of Aix-en-Provence. He taught Old Testament and Apologetics there until August 2009 when he retired. He still teaches Old Testament at the Seminary. He was Dean of the Seminary for 19 years, from 1984 to 2001 and from 2007 to 2009.

He is president of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians since 2008, and a member of the Board of World Reformed Fellowship

He has written many articles on different themes related to the Old Testament and to Apologetics. He co-edited the proceedings of the Symposium of the Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée (2004 and 2006): - *Texte et Historicité. Récit biblique et histoire*, Cléon d’Andran: Excelsis/Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 2006 ; - *Sacrifice et expiation*, Cléon d’Andran: Excelsis/Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 2008. His book, *En quête des origines. Les premières étapes de l’histoire de la Révélation : Genèse 1 à 11*, Cléon d’Andran: Excelsis/Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, was published at the end of 2008.

Among his articles : « La vie et l’éternité dans l’Ancien Testament, en particulier dans les Psaumes », *La Revue Réformée*, N° 206, 2000, pp. 1-20. « L’alliance, le cadre du message social et politique du prophète Amos », *La Revue Réformée*, N° 242, 2007, pp. 1-40 ; « Liberté et justice sociale : l’apport de l’Ancien Testament dans la pensée des Réformateurs et de Jean Calvin en particulier », *La Revue Réformée*, N° 244, 2007, pp. 85-102. « The compassion of God: Exodus 34.5-9 in the light of Exodus 32-34 » in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, editor B. L. McCormack. Baker Academic/Rutherford House, Grand Rapids, Mi., 2008. “Discerning Spirituality” to be published in *The European Journal of Theology* in 2010. “L’intelligence de la creation ex-nihilo” to be published in 2010 in the proceedings of the Symposium (2008) of the Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée : *Origine, Ordre et Intelligence, la Science et la Foi*, Excelsis/Kerygma.