

## John Calvin and the Jews: His Exegetical Legacy

by G. Sujin Pak

The topic of Calvin and the Jews is a much-debated topic within scholarship. Indeed, the lack of consensus in scholarship on Calvin's place in the history of Christian-Jewish relations ranges from seeing Calvin as one of the least anti-Judaic figures of his time<sup>1</sup> to one holding typical sixteenth-century views of Jews and Judaism<sup>2</sup> to being a firm antagonist of Jews and Judaism.<sup>3</sup> Achim Detmers's book *Reformation und Judentum* is the most thorough recent account on the topic of Calvin and the Jews, and in it he distinguishes between a first and a second way in which Calvin teaches about "Israel." The first way concerns biblical Jews and Judaism, whereas the second way concerns contemporary Jews and Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Detmers rightly points out that a key cause of the discrepancies in scholarship on the topic of Calvin and the Jews is that "Calvin's theological statements regarding biblical Judaism and his statements about contemporary Judaism have not been clearly enough

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of scholars who view Calvin as not very anti-Judaic and as offering strong potential for progress in Christian-Jewish dialogue include Calvin Augustus Pater, "Calvin, the Jews, and the Judaic Legacy," in *In Honor of John Calvin: Papers from the 1986 International Calvin Symposium*, ed. E. J. Furcha (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1987), 256–96; Hans Joachim Kraus, "Israel in the Theology of Calvin—Towards a New Approach to the Old Testament and Judaism," *Christian Jewish Relations* 22 (1989): 75–86; Jack Hughes Robinson, *John Calvin and the Jews* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); and Horst Krüger, *Erben des Evangeliums: Calvin und die Juden* (Kampen: Kok, 1985). Specifically, Pater emphasizes Calvin's positive attitude toward biblical Jews and argues that his theology is the least anti-Judaic "of the major classical theological systems" (290–91). Similarly, Kraus takes this a step further and offers up a Calvin that is very positive not only toward biblical Jews but also post-biblical Jews and contends, "One cannot accuse Calvin of being guilty of that ecclesiastical arrogance and pride towards Judaism which has everywhere been characteristic of the history of the Church" (85).

<sup>2</sup> See Anne Jippe Visser, *Calvijn en de Joden*, Miniaturen 2 ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1963), as well as Jacques Courvoisier, "Calvin und die Juden: Zu einem Streitgespräch," in *Christen und Juden: Ihr Gegenüber vom Apostelkonzil bis heute*, ed. Wolf Dieter and Karl Thieme (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1961), 141–46.

<sup>3</sup> See Salo W. Baron, "John Calvin and the Jews," in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 380–400 and Wilhelm Maurer, "Die Zeit der Reformation," in *Kirche und Synagoge: Handbuch zur Geschichte von Christen und Juden—Darstellung mit Quellen*, Vol. 1, ed. Karl Heinrich Regnstorff and Siegfried von Kortzfleisch (Stuttgart: Klett, 1968), 443–45. While Baron emphasizes the influence of Bucer's negative views of Jews on Calvin (382) and asserts that Calvin attacks both ancient and contemporary Jewish biblical interpretation, it should also be pointed out that Baron also states that Calvin is "somewhat more merciful toward Jews ... than toward Christian heretics" (391).

<sup>4</sup> Achim Detmers, *Reformation und Judentum: Israel-Lehren und Einstellungen zum Judentum von Luther bis zum frühen Calvin* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2001).

distinguished.”<sup>5</sup> Detmers also appropriately calls attention to the fact that the history of Calvin’s actual contacts with Jews has not been adequately investigated. Indeed, Detmers provides one of the most thorough accounts available of what we can know about Calvin’s contacts with Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Achim Detmers is correct to urge a more clear distinction between Calvin’s theological statements about Jews and his statements concerning contemporary Jews—namely, how Calvin approaches the Jews of the Bible (biblical Jews) in his exegesis and how he deals with the actual Jews living in his time. Detmers indicates that the vast majority of Calvin’s statements concerning contemporary Jewry are negative, particularly negative toward Jewish interpretations of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> I do not disagree with these statements; however, I want to emphasize just how significant Calvin’s reading of Jews of the Old Testament is for the history of Christian biblical exegesis. Through a study of Calvin’s exegesis of certain key scriptural texts in the history of Christian-Jewish relations, I aim to demonstrate that, while in the end it is true that Calvin does not escape the anti-Judaism of his day, Calvin exhibits a real break with a long-standing tradition of Christian anti-Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament. Calvin interprets Old Testament texts that have been typically used by the Christian tradition to disparage Jews and Judaism in a very different

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<sup>5</sup> Achim Detmers, “Calvin, the Jews, and Judaism,” in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 199.

<sup>6</sup> This is the primary content of his article, “Calvin, the Jews, and Judaism.” In sum, Calvin would very likely have encountered Jewish life in his 1536 stay in Ferrara, his 1539 visit to Frankfurt, and during his years in Strasbourg, since when Calvin was there in 1539 Bucer was in the midst of a controversy over the Jews of Hess (203–207). Detmers argues that it is also likely that Calvin had contact with individual Jews, such as Josel of Rosheim, or Jewish converts to Christianity, such as Michael Adam and Paulus Italus (206–207). Finally, we do know that Calvin had contact with the Jewish convert Immanuel Tremellius, since he supported Tremellius’s efforts to obtain teaching positions at Bern and Geneva (207–208). In this article and in his book, Detmers also explores the question of Calvin’s toleration of contemporary Jews and concludes that there is no clear answer to this except that a 1561 letter from Ambrosius Blauere to Calvin indicates that Calvin answered this question with “nuance” (209–10, 217). See *Reformation und Judentum*, 313–14.

<sup>7</sup> Detmers, “Calvin, the Jews and Judaism,” 210–17.

manner. While in the end it is true that Calvin speaks about “biblical Jews” in these passages and not about contemporary Jews (and we cannot lose sight of that fact), I will argue that Calvin’s model of exegesis of these passages still leaves a far more positive legacy for Christian-Jewish relations than what was typical of the Christian exegetical tradition up until his time.

This is significant not only for the exegetical legacy it leaves, but also because the vast majority of references that Calvin makes concerning Jews appear in his exegesis. Indeed, Calvin seems to have very little to say about contemporary Jews and Judaism, and he did not feel inclined to write separate treatises on the topic, unlike a number of his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> We turn now to a survey of Calvin’s statements on Jews as they appear in his Old Testament exegesis in order to demonstrate how he makes a break from a prior tradition of anti-Jewish exegesis. To make my argument I focus on some of the most potentially volatile Old Testament passages in the history of Christian-Jewish relations.

### **Calvin’s Exegesis within the History of Christian Anti-Jewish Exegesis**

There are certain scriptural texts that consistently informed medieval Christianity’s views and teachings concerning Jews and Judaism. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to focus on Psalm 59, four other psalms that pre-modern Christians traditionally read as prophecies of Christ’s passion and resurrection (Psalms 8, 16, 22, 118), and Is 63:1–4. Psalm 59 is significant because Augustine used his interpretation of Ps 59:11–15 to

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<sup>8</sup> Here, Luther especially is an example. Luther wrote a number of treatises specifically dealing with Jews and Judaism: *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523), *Against the Sabbatarians* (1538), *On the Jews and their Lies* (1543), *On Von Schem Hamphoras* (1543), and *On the Last Words of David* (1543). There is only one extant treatise in which Calvin deals explicitly with questions concerning contemporary Jews and Judaism entitled *Response to Questions and Objections of a Certain Jew*. See Calvin, *Ad Questiones et Obiecta Iudaei cuiusdam Responsio Ioannis Calvini* in CR 37:653–74 and translated by R. Susan Frank in M. Sweetland Laver, “Calvin, Jews, and Intra-Christian Polemics” (PhD diss, Temple University, Philadelphia, 1987), 220–61.

shape the medieval church's views on and policies toward Jews and Judaism—a legacy that retained a clear place in the Christian exegetical tradition at least up until the time of Calvin.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Psalms viewed consistently as prophecies of Christ's passion and resurrection typically carried negative consequences for the Jews, as the Jews were named in these psalms as the crucifiers of Christ and persecutors of the church. Finally, Is 63:1–4 is a prophecy against Edom, and its pertinence derives from an enduring pre-modern Christian exegetical tradition that equated unbelieving Jews with “Edom” and with Esau, the father of the Edomites.<sup>10</sup>

### Psalm 59

Augustine deeply shaped the trajectory of the exegesis of Psalm 59 for several centuries. He views it as a prophetic psalm foretelling the passion of Christ and, thus, as Christ's prayer for deliverance from his enemies, that is, the Jews who are the crucifiers of Christ. For example, the “men of blood” in verse two, according to Augustine, are the Jews who cried out, “May his blood be upon us and upon our children” (Matt 27:25). By focusing on Ps 59:11 in particular, Augustine develops a teaching concerning the necessary, ongoing witness of the Jews—a witness that has both positive and negative aspects. Positively, Jews are the custodians of the Law, Scripture and the biblical prophecies. Negatively, Jewish unbelief witnesses to the truth of Christianity, for Scripture prophesies this unbelief.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for examples, the discussions of Augustine's policy resulting from his interpretation of Psalm 59 in Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 14–32, esp. 14–15, 19–22; *ibid.*, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 15–16, 19, 29–41, 92–93; and Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 108–109.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's discussion in *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 133. Her footnote provides numerous sources of this view of Esau and Edom in the early church fathers' writings. Ruether notes the irony of the fact that “Esau” represents the Gentiles in Jewish exegesis. For more information on the role Esau takes in Jewish exegesis, see Albert S. Lindemann's *Esau's Tears: Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–8.

Moreover, argues Augustine, the state of the Jews as a scattered and oppressed people exemplifies the consequences of their rejection of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the text of Ps 59:11, "Do not slay them lest my people forget; make them totter by your power and bring them down," serves for Augustine, and the later medieval church, as an injunction both not to slay Jews but allow their existence as a witness to the truth of Christianity and also as an authorization of Christian oppression against Jews. That is, "let them totter and bring them down" means that Jews should not be allowed to thrive, for a thriving Jewish population would not bear the proper witness of the consequences of unbelief.

This reading of Psalm 59 is found in the exegeses of Denis the Carthusian, a key late medieval theologian, as well as in the readings of Calvin's contemporaries, most notably those of Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. Indeed, Denis the Carthusian not only upholds Augustine's views of this psalm as setting forth a prophecy of Christ's passion, as identifying the enemies with the Jews, and as teaching the necessary negative witness of Jews, Denis's tone is even harsher.<sup>12</sup> While Luther and Melanchthon recast the exegetical import of Psalm 59 more as teaching the contrast between righteousness and unrighteousness—where the Jews consistently represent a reliance on the wrong things for righteousness—they still read this psalm as a prophecy of Christ's passion, identify the Jews with the enemies in the psalm, and set forth the doctrine of the negative witness of the

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1849), 3:127–28, 131, 139, 146–47 and *City of God* 18:46.

<sup>12</sup> Denis the Carthusian, *Enarrationes Psalmos in Doctoris Ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia* (Monstrolia: Typis Cartusiae S. M. De Pratis, 1898), 6:107–108. For example, Denis turns to a greater emphasis on the verses following Ps 59:11 in order to underscore that Jews are "trapped by their pride" (vs 12) and "consumed in [God's] wrath" (vs 13).

Jews. Thus, they reiterate how this psalm speaks of the consequences of unbelief, the dispersion of the Jews, and the role of the Jew as witnesses to the law.<sup>13</sup>

John Calvin's exposition of Psalm 59 represents a real departure from this interpretation established by Augustine.<sup>14</sup> Calvin does not read this psalm as a prophecy of Christ's passion; hence he also does not identify the enemies in this psalm with the Jews. Instead, he reads it completely within the context of the historical life of David, where the enemies are quite literally Saul and his men who are seeking to kill David. Throughout his exegesis of Psalm 59, Calvin sets forth David as an example of faithfulness worthy of the Christian church's imitation. Thus, on the crucial verse "Slay them not, lest my people forget" (Ps 59:11), Calvin does not connect this to a mandate on how the church should treat the Jews. Rather he uses it to teach the church that God sometimes delays deliverance so that the church can learn patience, faith, and not forget all that God does for them. Calvin does make one brief mention of the Jews here, (and this is the only time he mentions Jews in his exegesis of this psalm). He quickly comments that this verse contains an "indirect censure conveyed to the people of Israel." Indeed, here Calvin identifies God's warning to the Jews to remember God's acts of deliverance as a warning of which the church itself is in need. For Calvin, the Jews in this text (namely, biblical Jews) still remain within God's

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<sup>13</sup> See LW 10:273–79; WA 3:331–35 and Philip Melancthon, *Commentarii in Psalmos* in CR 13:1141–44. For example, Luther writes, "Let Christians, terrified by the Jews' example, not forget God's law, seeing how even the Jews, while they were God's people, were punished because they forget God's law; lest the Christians perish likewise" (LW 10:277; WA 3:333).

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Nicholas of Lyra's exposition of this psalm almost singularly interprets it in terms of David fleeing Saul's attempts to kill him. Thus for Lyra, the "do not slay them" of verse eleven refers to God's command to David not to take revenge against Saul by his own hand but to wait for the time when God will avenge him through the hands of the Philistines. Furthermore, the "lest my people forget" is according to Lyra an admonition to remember the mercy of God in the midst of persecutions, of which David is an example. See Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla Nicolai de lira super psalterium una cum canticu* (Lyon: Perrin le Masson, Bonifacius Johannis & Johannes de Villa Veteri, 11 April 1497), comments on Ps. 59:12. Yet, at the end of his exposition of the Psalm 59, Lyra applies this psalm as a prayer of Christ during his passion and says concerning the Jews that they were rightly taken captive by the Romans and scattered throughout the world. See Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla Nicolai de lira super psalterium*, after comments on Ps. 59:18.

covenant, and when their faithfulness falters, they teach the church about the necessary steps for remaining in the covenant.<sup>15</sup>

#### Four Psalms Prophecy Christ's Passion and Resurrection

Psalms read by the pre-modern Christian church as prophecies of Christ's passion and resurrection more often than not identify the enemies in those psalms with the Jews. Here I will focus briefly on four psalms that the New Testament authors explicitly cite in reference to Christ's passion and resurrection: Psalms 8, 16, 22, and 118.<sup>16</sup> The entirety of Psalm 22—which begins with a cry the gospel writers place in the mouth of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—was read by interpreters such as those in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, Denis the Carthusian, Nicholas of Lyra and Luther as describing the events of Christ's crucifixion.<sup>17</sup> Hence, these interpreters equate the persecutors portrayed in this psalm with the Jews. Specifically, this includes those who mock (v 7), the bulls who encircle (v 12), the ravenous lion (vv 13 and 21), the dogs who surround (vv 16 and 20), the wild oxen (v 21) and the “company of evil doers” (v 16).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:380–91, there 388–89; CR 59:565–72.

<sup>16</sup> Hence, since these psalms are cited in reference to Christ's passion and resurrection, there is little dispute in Christian tradition that these psalms rightly read this way. Even Nicholas of Lyra, who tends to read the Psalms more in their original historical context, confirms that the literal sense of these psalms is the prophecies of Christ they convey. See Nicholas of Lyra, *In se continens glosam ordinariam cum expositione Lyre litterali et morali, necnon additionibus ac replici, super libros Job, Psalterium, Proveriorum, Ecclesiasten, Cantica canticorum, Sapientie, Ecclesiasticum* (Basil: Froben & Petri, 1506), 113b, 149b, and 260c. Specifically, Matt 21:15–16 quotes Ps 8:2 and Heb 2:6–10 quotes Ps 8:4–6. Acts 2:25–31 cites Ps 16:8–11 and Acts 13:34–39 quotes Ps 16:10. Matt 27:46 and Mk 15:34 quotes Ps 22:1 and Jn 19:24–25 explicitly says that the soldiers casting lots for Jesus's clothing fulfills Ps 22:18. Heb 2:12 quotes Ps 22:22, and Matt 21:9 cites Ps 118:25. Matt 21:33–45, Mk 12:1–2, Lk 20:9–19, Acts 4:11, I Pet 2:7 and Rom 9:33 each quote Ps 118:22.

<sup>17</sup> *Biblia Latina Cum Glossa Ordinaria*, Facsimili Reprint of the Editio Princeps Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81 (Brepols, 1992), 2:478 [here forth cited as *Glossa Ordinaria*]; Nicholas of Lyra, 113b; Denis the Carthusian, 5:529, and Luther, WA 5:598–672.

<sup>18</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria* 2:478, 479, 480; Nicholas of Lyra, 113b, 114a–d; Denis the Carthusian, 5:529–31, 532–33, 534–38; Luther, WA 5:620–21, 627, 628–29, 632.

Interpreters in the Gloss, Nicholas of Lyra, Denis the Carthusian and Martin Luther also read Psalms 8, 16 and 118 as containing not only prophecies of Christ's passion, but also prophecies of Christ's incarnation, resurrection and ascension. Hence, Psalm 8 prophesies Christ's passion in the phrase "You have made him a little lower" (v 5a) and prophesies his resurrection and ascension in the subsequent description of being crowned with glory and honor (v 5b).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, these commentators view Psalms 16 and 118 primarily as prayers of Christ during his passion.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, they apply the assurances that his body will rest secure and not see corruption (Ps 16:9–10) to the promise of Christ's resurrection.<sup>21</sup> Psalm 118, for these exegetes, also describes Christ's sufferings in his passion (Ps 118:10–13) and proclaims the promises of his resurrection and ascension (Ps 118:15–19).<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, any reference within the text that designates an enemy is identified with the Jews. Thus, the "enemy and avenger" in Ps 8:2 are the Jewish chief priests and scribes, and some interpreters also equate the idolaters with their "drink offerings of blood" in Ps 16:4, as well as the kidneys who rebuke in Ps 16:7, with the Jews.<sup>23</sup> These readers also equate the Jews with the bees who surround Christ (Ps 118:12) and the "builders" who have rejected Christ (Ps 118:22) in their readings of Psalm 118.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria* 2:465; Nicholas of Lyra, 96d, 97b; Denis the Carthusian, 5:451–52; and Luther, LW10:87–88, 12:126–30; WA 3:81–82, 45:239–43, 5:271–74.

<sup>20</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 2:471, 606; Nicholas of Lyra, 105b, 261c–d; Denis the Carthusian, 5:485, 6:538–40; and Luther, LW 10:104, 14:96; WA 3:104, 5:443, 31/1:171–72.

<sup>21</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 2:472; Nicholas of Lyra, 105d–106a; Denis the Carthusian, 5:487–88; and Luther, LW 10:104; WA 3:104, 5:443, 463–64.

<sup>22</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 2:605–606; Nicholas of Lyra, 260c, 261c–d; Denis the Carthusian, 6:534–36, 537; and Luther, LW14:96; WA 31/1:171–72.

<sup>23</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 2:465; Nicholas of Lyra, 96d; Denis the Carthusian, 5:451–52; Luther, LW 10:89, 12:109, 115–17; 10:106–10; WA 45:219, 226–28; 5:281, 445, 447, 449, 452–53; 3:105–108. There is less agreement on the readings of Psalm 16. Nicholas of Lyra identifies the Jews with the idolaters in Ps 16:4, as well as with the kidneys that rebuke in Ps 16:7 (105b, 105d). Along with Lyra, Denis the Carthusian also identifies the kidneys that rebuke with the Jews who mock Christ (5:487).

<sup>24</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 2:605, 606; Nicholas of Lyra, 261d; Denis the Carthusian, 6:534, 536, 537, 539; and Luther, LW 11:412–13, 14:92, 96, 102; WA 4:279–80, 31/1:103–104, 164, 168, 171, 172.

These particular psalms, since the New Testament authors explicitly cite them as prophecies of Christ, hold a strong dual legacy within the pre-modern Christian exegetical tradition as literal prophecies of Christ's passion and as fostering a kind of anti-Jewish exegesis. The consistency with which this appears makes Calvin's exegesis of these psalms all the more striking. First of all, Calvin argues against the christological readings of Psalms 8 and 16.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, he significantly overshadows the christological readings of Psalms 22 and 118 with his profound emphasis upon interpreting them primarily in reference to David.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the anti-Jewish exegesis commonly found in many prior interpretations of these psalms is nonexistent in Calvin's readings of them.

For Calvin, Psalm 8 is not a prophecy about Christ's incarnation, passion and resurrection; rather, it expounds on God's providence and exhibits God's infinite goodness to humankind.<sup>27</sup> Hence, he does not identify the "enemy and avenger" in Ps 8:2 with the Jews; instead, these are the impious slanderers and "despisers of God" who "violently oppose all the proofs of divine providence."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Psalm 16 for him is not one of Christ's prayers during his passion, nor is it in its first instance a prophecy of Christ's resurrection (i.e., Ps 16:9–10). Instead, this psalm is a prayer of David in which David exemplifies the way a Christian should seek God's protection, meditate on God's benefits, and rouse oneself to thanksgiving.<sup>29</sup> Hence, the idolaters in Ps 16:4 are generally identified with unbelievers who waste their riches on idols, and the "kidneys" or "reins" in Ps 16:7

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<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:98–99, 105, 230–32. At least he does so in his commentary on the Psalms. In his New Testament commentaries where these psalms are cited in reference to Christ, Calvin is more supportive of the Christological reading, as it is more in keeping with the intention of the New Testament's author.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:356–90, 4:376–92.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:93; CO 31:87–88.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:98; CO 31:89.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:215, 219, 223, 229, 234.

refer to the affections of the soul, rather than the Jews. In this way, Calvin's reading of this text emphasizes the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit that David receives when he seeks counsel from God during the whole of his life.<sup>30</sup> In effect, Calvin essentially replaces the anti-Jewish readings of these psalms with a reading that upraises the biblical Jew David as a supreme exemplar of piety.

Though Calvin acknowledges the christological import of Psalms 22 and 118, the overwhelming weight of his exegesis reads them concerning David. Indeed, he spends nearly three and a half times more space applying Psalm 22 to David rather than to Christ, and he does not even address the christological application of Ps 118:22 until late into his comments on verse twenty-five.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the context of Psalm 22 for Calvin is more the persecutions David suffered under Saul and less the passion of Christ. Accordingly, Calvin does not identify the Jews with any of the negative depictions of the persecutors portrayed in Psalm 22; instead, these depictions refer simply to Saul and his men who persecuted David.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the enemies in Psalm 118 represented by the "bees" ("they surround me like bees" in verse 12) and the "builders" ("the stone that the builders rejected" in verse 22) refer to these same enemies of David.<sup>33</sup> Not only does Calvin essentially drop the anti-

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<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:222, 227. However, Calvin does give brief mention of the idolatry of biblical Jews in his comments on Ps 16:4. First Calvin says that the meaning concerns unbelievers. Immediately afterwards he comments, "Perhaps, also the prophet has an allusion to the common doctrine of Scripture that idolaters violate the promise of the spiritual marriage contracted with the true God and enter into covenant with idols. Ezekiel [36:33] justly upbraids the Jews ... [for offering] rewards to the idols to whom they prostituted and abandoned themselves." Then immediately after this, he reiterates his contention that this passage has more to do with the general category of "unbelievers": "But the meaning which we have above given brings out the spirit of the passage, namely, that unbelievers who honor their false gods by offering to them gifts not only lose what is thus spent but also heap up for themselves sorrows upon sorrows" (1:222). He briefly mentions the idolatry of biblical Jews once more in his comments on Ps 16:5 (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:225).

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:356–89 and 4:391–92; CO 31:220–22; 32:208–10.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:367, 371. CO 31:225, 227.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 4:382–83, 388–89. CO 32:205, 210–12. Though it should be noted that Calvin does briefly mention that the "builders" can also refer to the "scribes and the priests in

Jewish readings of these psalms, he also explicitly elevates the biblical Jews as exemplars of faithful practices worthy of imitation. For example, he applies Ps 22:4, “in you our fathers trusted” as a model of faithfulness for the church.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, he promotes biblical Jews as exemplars of prayer, faith, and perseverance in his comments on Ps 118:25–26:

And the Jews never ceased to lift up this prayer during [the Babylonian exile]... their perseverance ought to inspire us with new vigor in these days. At that time they did not have the honor of a kingdom, no royal throne, no name but with God; and yet in this deplorable and ruinous state of things, they held fast to the form of prayer formerly set forth for them by the Holy Spirit. Instructed by their example, let us not fail to pray ardently for the restoration of the church.<sup>35</sup>

Though one must be clear that Calvin is elevating the example of faithful biblical Jews whom he ultimately views as participating in the one covenant that culminates in Jesus Christ, it is still no small matter that his exegesis not only abandons the typical anti-Jewish readings of these psalms, it also sets forth these biblical Jews as *positive* examples for the church’s imitation.<sup>36</sup>

#### Esau and Edom: Isaiah 63:1–4

Next, we turn to another key category of Old Testament texts that often evoked anti-Jewish exegesis; these are prophecies concerning “Edom,” of which Is 63:1–4 is an excellent example. The first verses in Isaiah 63 concern Isaiah’s prophecy of God’s vengeance on

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Christ’s time”; however, the polemical import of his reading falls first in a general fashion upon religious leaders who continue to fail to recognize Christ and thus mislead the people and, secondly in a more specific fashion upon the Roman Catholics of Calvin’s day. See Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 4:387, 392, 394–95.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:364; CO 31:223.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 4:395–96; CO 32:213.

<sup>36</sup> The psalms that Calvin does consistently interpret christologically are psalms that describe and/or prophesy the messianic kingdom. In a few cases, Calvin appears to retain a view of the Jews as enemies of Christ and Christ’s kingdom. For example, in his comments on Ps 2:1, Calvin mentions the Jews as enemies of Christ and the church; however, he clarifies that both classes of enemies—Jew and Gentile—are meant. In other words, he does not isolate or emphasize the Jews as particularly significant enemies more than others (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:10). On the other hand, Calvin reads other royal psalms, such as Psalms 45, 72, and 110 thoroughly christologically without any mention of the Jews as the enemies of Christ and the church. See Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2:173–94, 3:101–20, 4:295–310.

Edom. Augustine, interpreters in the Gloss, Denis the Carthusian, and Luther all apply this prophecy to the Jews. Augustine clearly aligns Esau and Edom with the Jews and the Christians with Jacob, the true heir of God's promises.<sup>37</sup> The Gloss and Denis read the first verse in reference to Christ's passion, resurrection, and ascension.<sup>38</sup> Both the Gloss and Denis apply verse three, "I trampled them in my anger," directly to the Jews. For example, Denis places these words in the mouth of Christ, "I trampled them, that is, the unbelieving Jews, my persecutors."<sup>39</sup> Later in his comments, Denis, too, explicitly connects Edom to the Jews.<sup>40</sup> While, Luther does not read this text as a prophecy of Christ's passion and ascension, he does read it as a prophecy against the Jews. Luther writes, "Edom denotes the ungodly synagogue... In sum, this [passage] has to do with the devastation of the synagogue."<sup>41</sup> Luther applies the color red denoted by Esau's name to the Jews in order to portray them as "blood-thirsty and murderous," since they killed Christ, the apostles and the prophets; thereby, he concludes that they deserve to perish for not believing in Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Calvin, on the other hand, does not equate Edom with the synagogue or the Jews. Indeed, he views Edom as the *persecutors of the Jews*, albeit the biblical Jews. Hence, for

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<sup>37</sup> Augustine is specifically commenting on Mal 1:2–3, which is quoted in Rom 9:13, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau" and Gen 25:23, "the elder shall serve the younger." Augustine writes, "As for the statement 'The elder will be servant to the younger', hardly anyone of our people has taken it as meaning anything else but that the older people of the Jews was destined to serve the younger people, the Christians." Augustine goes on to apply this to the prophecies concerning Edom and the Edomites and concludes, "And what can this meaning be except a prophecy which is now being clearly fulfilled in the Jews and the Christians?" (*City of God* 16:35).

<sup>38</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 3:91; Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Isaiam Prophetam*, 8:737–38. The wine press in verse three also denotes Christ's passion.

<sup>39</sup> *Glossa Ordinaria*, 3:91; Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Isaiam Prophetam*, 8:738. The scholia of the Gloss names these as those who crucified and tormented Christ in his passion; the glosses, however, specifically mention the Jews.

<sup>40</sup> Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Isaiam Prophetam*, 8:739. Denis writes, "According to Jerome, 'Edom' can be understood as the Mount of Olives or Jerusalem where Christ ascended. But this may be seen as extraneous, especially when Edomites will always be connected to the contrary people of the Jews."

<sup>41</sup> LW 17:352; WA 31/2:533.

<sup>42</sup> LW 17:353–54; WA 31/2:534–35.

Calvin, this passage in Isaiah “describes [God’s] amazing love toward the Jews” and predicts God’s ensuing justice against Edom on behalf of the Jews.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it teaches the church that just as the Jews should not “despair or grow faint and weary, if redemption is long delayed,” so also the church should believe that her own “groans are heard” and that in time God will deliver the church from her enemies.<sup>44</sup> The central point is that Calvin does not read contemporary Jews into the text by aligning them with Edom; rather, he retains the identity of the biblical Jews as a people in covenant with God.

### **The Unity of the Old and New Testaments for Calvin**

A clear factor that profoundly shapes Calvin’s interpretive moves in his exegesis of the Old Testament in particular is the far-reaching unity he preserves between the two testaments. Indeed, most pre-modern exegetes uphold the concept of the unity of the two testaments, but it does not always have the same appearance in their exegetical practices. For example, Martin Luther certainly maintains this principle; yet, this is expressed primarily through his christological readings of the Old Testament, particularly his interpretation of many Old Testament prophecies as prophecies of Christ. Granted, increasingly in his later years he also maintains this unity by seeing several Old Testament figures as exemplars of faith.<sup>45</sup> Yet, in quite the reverse, the *starting* point for Calvin is precisely his emphasis on the inherent value of the Old Testament author’s historical context and original intention as gold mines for Christian instruction and edification before

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<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), comments on Is 63:3.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, comments on Is 63:4.

<sup>45</sup> Most notably, James Preus makes this argument in *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) and more briefly in his article, “Old Testament *Promissio* and Luther’s New Hermeneutic,” *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 146, 148, 153, 154–55.

one even considers a christological reading of an Old Testament text. Hence, the unity that Calvin maintains between the Old and New Testaments is deeply tied to his commitment to the human author's intention.<sup>46</sup> In this way, Calvin reads Old Testament texts first concerning its historical author's meaning and original context—in these cases those of David (i.e., the Psalms) and the experience of Israel in exile (i.e., Is 63:1–4).

While both Luther and Calvin maintain that the patriarchs foresaw Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises to them, the difference between Luther and Calvin's understandings of the *distance* between the patriarchs and their grasp of these promises in Christ is telling. For Calvin, the Old Testament persons' grasp of the promises is much more immediate, concrete and definite. Indeed, Calvin deliberately contends against some of his contemporaries' views when he argues for the actual immediacy of the patriarchs' grasp of God's promises. For example, in the *Institutes* he repeatedly insists that God did not merely *communicate* the promises to the Old Testament Jews but actually gave them to them in concrete forms.<sup>47</sup> Calvin persistently contends that it is a perversity to say that the

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<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed account of Calvin's use of the human author's intention as a key exegetical principle, see the conclusion of my recent book, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 133–39. Calvin makes his most clear statement of this as an exegetical principle in his dedication of his Romans commentary to Simon Grynaeus, "Since it is almost his [the interpreter's] only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses his mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author" (*Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995], 1).

<sup>47</sup> For examples, Calvin insists that the Old Testament Jews had not only the hope of immortality but also the assurance of it (*Institutes* II.x.2), that God not only communicated the promises to the Old Testament Jews but also "sealed them with truly spiritual sacraments" (*Institutes* II.x.5), and that the patriarchs had not only communication but *illumination* of the Word (*Institutes* II.x.7). Furthermore, Calvin begins his discussion about the similarity and difference of the Old and New Testaments with a clear position that one should not overemphasize the difference and that many have done this to the confusion of the church. He states that "because writers often argue at length about the difference between the Old and the New Testament ... we shall rightly devote a special section to a fuller and more precise discussion of the matter," after which Calvin notes the erroneous positions of Servetus and the Anabaptists on this topic (*Institutes* II.x.1).

promises concerning the gospel were only meant for the people of the new covenant.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, he takes this a step further by asserting that it is not only false to see the Old Testament Jews as hoping in merely carnal things, but that the earthly benefits that are given to the Old Testament Jews are themselves significant as a concrete manifestation of the promised heavenly benefits:

Scripture sometimes shows that God, in conferring all these earthly benefits on them, determined to lead them by his own hand to the hope of heavenly things ... The point of our quarrel with men of this sort is this: they teach that the Israelites deemed the possession of the Land of Canaan their highest and ultimate blessedness and that after the revelation of Christ it typified for us the heavenly inheritance. We contend, on the contrary, that in the earthly possession they enjoyed, they looked, *as in a mirror*, upon the future inheritance they believed to have been prepared for them in heaven.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, Calvin reads the Jews of the Old Testament as not simply seeing the promises of Christ from afar; these Jews did not merely hope for the fulfillment of God's promises, they received a concrete expression of them in their own experiences.<sup>50</sup>

A case in point is Calvin's insistence that the Jews of the Old Testament had the hope of immortality, which includes a tangible hope of resurrection.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this assertion directly informs Calvin's exegesis of certain Old Testament passages such as Ps 16:9–10.

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<sup>48</sup> Here, of course, he is especially arguing against the Anabaptists. For example, he writes, "Let no one perversely say here that the promises concerning the gospel, sealed in the Law and the Prophets, were intended for the new people" (*Institutes* II.x.3). Likewise, in the next section he passionately asks, "Who, then, dares to separate the Jews from Christ... Who dares to estrange from the gift of free salvation those to whom we hear the doctrine of the righteousness of faith imparted?" (*Institutes* II.x.4).

<sup>49</sup> *Institutes* II.xi.1.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin maintains this even while asserting that in some fashion the patriarchs await a fullness that comes only in Christ.

<sup>51</sup> See *Institutes* II.x.13–22. For example, Calvin specifically writes, "That this might not be attested in words only, the Lord also approved it by deed. At the moment of his resurrection, he deemed many of the saints worthy of sharing in his resurrection and let them be seen in the city of Jerusalem [Matt 27:52–53]. In this he has given a sure pledge that whatever he did or suffered in acquiring eternal salvation pertains to the believers of the Old Testament as much as to ourselves" (II.x.23). Likewise, Calvin writes, "Since the covenant, which was made with Abraham, refers to his see, Christ came for the salvation of the Jewish people ... Is it not therefore to be understood that the promise of the covenant must be fulfilled according to the judgment of Paul as well as the resurrection of Christ, not only symbolically but also *literally in the fleshly seed of Abraham*" (*Institutes* IV.xvi.15).

Calvin insists that these verses in Psalm 16 belong to David just as much as—or perhaps even more than—they belong to a prophecy of Christ’s resurrection. *David* attains the promises of salvation and resurrection so that there is no reason for him to fear death.<sup>52</sup> Though David embraces these promises through a spirit of prophecy (by foreseeing Christ’s resurrection), Calvin asserts, “This, however, did not prevent David from assuring himself of exemption from the dominion of death,” for in foreseeing Christ’s resurrection David also claims that the right to the immortality Christ gained was “not for himself individually but for us all.”<sup>53</sup> Hence, the deep unity of the Old and New Testaments is at the heart of Calvin’s insistence that the promises contained in a passage such as Ps 16:9–10 are indeed accomplished in the life of the Old Testament patriarch in a very real way. Or, more generally, that Old Testament passages such as this must be read principally in reference to the Old Testament person (i.e., in accord with the human authorial intention) and that such a reading is actually the “simple and natural” sense of the passage.<sup>54</sup>

### **Calvin’s New Testament Exegesis?**

I have tried to establish a case for Calvin’s break with a prior anti-Jewish exegetical tradition. Namely, this break specifically appears in particular Old Testament texts that the vast majority of pre-modern Christian interpreters viewed as prophecies of Christ’s passion and resurrection that Calvin did not interpret primarily, if at all, as christological

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<sup>52</sup> Calvin writes of David, “It is as if he had said, There will always be ready for me a way of escape from the grave that I may not remain in corruption” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:230).

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:231)

<sup>54</sup> Calvin goes on to explain the New Testament usage of Ps 16:9–10 in Acts 2:27–31 and 13:35, and he implies that the New Testament authors do not keep with the “natural simplicity” of the text when they simply interpret it as a prophecy of Christ’s resurrection (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:231–32). For more on Calvin’s emphasis on the “natural and simple” sense of the text, see *The Judaizing Calvin*, 79–83. I provide a more extensive analysis of Calvin’s reading of Psalm 16 in “Luther, Bucer, and Calvin on Psalms 8 and 16: Confessional Formation and the Question of Jewish Exegesis,” in *Dutch Review of Church History* 85 (2005): 169–86.

prophecies. This break entails not only a break with a certain class of christological exegesis (i.e., prophecies of Christ's passion) but also a break with the anti-Jewish readings that tended to accompany these readings.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, one can find a similar break in Calvin's exegesis with the anti-Jewish interpretations of prophecies concerning Esau and Edom, such as Is 63:1–4. It remains to be seen, however, whether the same can be said of Calvin's *New Testament* exegesis. Indeed, as has been argued, one of the primary reasons why Calvin reads these Old Testament texts differently from prior exegetes is because of his profound understanding of the unity of the two testaments and the relationship this has to his concern for human authorial intention.

One might expect that Calvin's concerns for the human author's intention and the unity of the two testaments might very well yield different exegetical results when applied to the New Testament. Namely, many of the Jews in the historical context of the New Testament are quite literally opposing and rejecting Christ, whereas Calvin views most of the biblical Jews of the Old Testament as inheritors of God's promises fulfilled in Christ. Thus, how do the Jews appear in Calvin's New Testament exegesis? In order to test this, again I take as a test case one of the most abrasive passages in the New Testament: John 8. Specifically, in Jn 8:39–47, the Jews are described as the children of the devil. As a second test case, and in order to focus on one of the places in Calvin's biblical exegesis where he does explicitly speak about *contemporary* Jews and Judaism, we will look at his interpretation of Romans 9 to 11, where Paul gives an account of Christianity's current relationship with Jews and Judaism.

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<sup>55</sup> I want to comment here that I do not think anti-Jewish readings must *necessarily* accompany a reading of these psalms as prophecies of Christ's passion and resurrection. Indeed, one would do better to use the references to "enemies" in these psalms in a self-referential way (e.g., we, Christians, are crucifiers of Christ when we are unfaithful). Actually, several pre-modern interpreters read these psalms in this way as well.

John 8:39–47

It would be pretty difficult to completely escape an anti-Jewish reading of Jn 8:39–47. In this text, Jesus himself describes the Jews who are opposing him as not following their father Abraham but as following the works of the devil, who is a murderer and the father of lies. Interpreters of this passage in the Christian tradition, such as Augustine and Denis the Carthusian, do indeed apply this passage to not only the Jews of the biblical text but to Jews of their day. However, both Augustine and Denis somewhat soften the polemical thrust of this text by aiming to make clear just in what way the text says the Jews are the children of the devil. Namely, they are such *not by nature* but by *imitation*. Rather than imitating the faith of their father Abraham, they imitate the desires of the devil to murder and to lie. Yet, after stating this, both Augustine and Denis do not enumerate the ways the Jews are murderers or liars but, rather, they spend the rest of their commentaries describing how the devil is a murderer and liar.<sup>56</sup> Martin Luther, on the other hand, uses this text to underscore the folly of the Jews' reliance on their physical lineage, their rejection of Christ, and the resulting deserved punishments of dispersion and rejection as the people of God.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Augustine and Denis, Luther emphasizes how the Jews really are murderers and liars, rather than focusing on how the devil is a murderer and liar.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans by John W. Rettig (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), The Fathers of the Church 88: 153–62. Denis the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Evangelium secundum Joannem in Doctoris Ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia* (Monstrolia: Typis Cartusiae S. M. De Pratis, 1898), 12:437–40. Both Augustine and Denis argue that the devil is shown to be a murderer and a liar from the very first through deceiving Adam and Eve and, by this deception, leading them to their deaths (i.e., murder).

<sup>57</sup> See LW 23:406, 407, 408, 412, 416, 418, 421–22; WA 33:661, 662–63, 666, 669–70, 672, 674–75.

<sup>58</sup> For example, Luther writes, “To be sure, you [Jews] would still be Abraham’s children if another father, the devil, had not come along. But now you are murderers and children of the devil. Think this over! Abraham’s seed is to inherit Abraham’s kingdom and the promise ... But now you are killers and murderers, although you are of his lineage. That marks the difference. If you had remained Abraham’s children, as you are his natural descendants; if you were not false children, the seed and children of the murderer, the devil—then

Indeed, the title for Luther's anti-Jewish treatise *On the Jews and their Lies* stems from this text in John.<sup>59</sup>

So, what does Calvin do with this text? Calvin begins his comments on this particular section of John 8 by emphasizing that fleshly descent is not the criterion that establishes who are the children of Abraham. Though he does not explicitly refer this to the "Jews," the inference certainly seems to be there; however, he explicitly deploys this teaching against the Romans Catholics, who also "rely on their false title of the church."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, it is notable how little Calvin actually makes overt mention of the "Jews" in his exegesis of Jn 8:39–47. He mentions the Jews explicitly three times, though the use of "they" throughout the rest of the exegesis certainly appears to refer to the Jews—at least the Jews in the immediate literary context of the passage. Of these three overt references, one simply states that Christ is refuting the Jews and the other two are clearly negative—describing the Jews as obstinate and noting their resemblance to Satan through their cruelty and falsehood.<sup>61</sup>

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you would be true children, and you would soon be free. But since you are seeking to kill Me, you are not true children of Abraham. ... Your defection from Christ, your failure to remain loyal to Him, stamps you as liars" (LW 23:416; WA 33:669, 670).

<sup>59</sup> Luther makes explicit reference to John 8 within the first few pages of the treatise. See LW 47:141. Luther often conflates the passage in Matthew (12:34) referring to the Jews as a "brood of vipers" with this description in John of the Jews as children of the devil; see, for examples, LW 47:232, 277, 289. For an example of a study that traces the demonization of Jews, see Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983). Moshe Lazar directly notes the legacy of this passage in John 8 in his essay, "The Lamb and the Scapegoat: The Dehumanization of the Jews in Medieval Propaganda Imagery," in *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis*, eds. Sander L. Gilman and Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 44–45.

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 225.

<sup>61</sup> See Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 226, 227, 227–28. On Jn 8:41, he comments, "And if Christ's reply was enough to refute the Jews, it is no less so now to expose the Papists" (226). On Jn 8:43, he writes, "In this passage He [Jesus] reproves the obstinacy of the Jews, which was so great that they could not even bear to hear Him speaking" (227). And, finally, on Jn 8:44—commenting on the phrase that the devil is a murderer—Calvin states that the ways that the Jews resemble Satan is through their cruelty and falsehood (227–28).

Calvin's exegetical aims in his interpretation of this passage are mostly to provide theological teachings and warnings for the church. In doing this, his focus is not on how this passage applies specifically to the Jews; rather, he generalizes the import of the text's message to offer lessons for the church as a whole. These lessons involve how one recognizes the true children of Abraham (i.e., not by fleshly descent but by faithful obedience) and how false religion hides behind erroneous claims of being sons of God. Similar to Augustine and Denis, Calvin focuses much of his exegesis upon making clear that being called "children of the devil" is a statement referring to how a people *imitate* the devil, "because they are led by his prompting to fight against Christ." In this way, Calvin's central teaching is that just as the label "children of the devil" does not indicate a transmission of substance, but refers to the possibilities of the corruption of human nature, so also being called "children of God" is not a transmission of substance but, rather, refers to the grace of the Spirit that brings regeneration.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, this leads Calvin to provide a teaching about Satan—namely, Satan's identity as a liar does not arise from his nature but from his voluntary defection from the truth. Hence, those who are children of the devil are such not by their nature but by their imitation of the devil's deeds. In sum, though one cannot deny the negative implications for Jews from Calvin's reading of this text, the weight of his exegesis falls upon providing a more generalized warning for the church.<sup>63</sup>

If ever there was a biblical passage that might evoke anti-Jewish exegesis John 8 seems to me to be one of those places. We find in the exegesis of Calvin that his attention to the historical and literary context does mean that he reads this text as being about—at the

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<sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 225–227, there 227. Calvin concludes, "Therefore that men are born the children of the devil is not to be imputed to creation, but to the vitiation of sin" (227).

<sup>63</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 228. Indeed, one might ask how one could completely escape an anti-Jewish reading as it is basically inherent in the text itself.

very least—the Jews in the story. It is not at all clear, however, that Calvin intends the reader to turn around and apply this text to all contemporary Jewry, for he does not expound on it or spend any space applying it in this way. Yet, in Calvin’s use of the Jews in this text as an example of warning for the church, one might see a form of the ‘negative witness doctrine’ operating in his *New Testament* exegesis. Yet, on the other hand, the thrust of his exegesis is toward the *general*—or perhaps more accurately, the *ecclesial*—application of this text for the whole church in order to enable the church to defy the deceptions of Satan and properly imitate the faith of Abraham.<sup>64</sup>

### Romans 9 to 11

Romans 9 to 11 is a classical locus for the question of Christianity’s ongoing relationship with contemporary Jews and Judaism. My investigation will focus on how his reading of Jews in this text informs and is informed by the ways Jews appear in his wider exegesis. The first central question this passage raises for Calvin is whether the fact that most of the Jews have not believed in Christ means that God’s faithfulness and truth are now in doubt.<sup>65</sup> Calvin responds to this on several levels. First, “the ungodly cannot spoil the good gifts of God.” Second, the “light of God’s grace” has not been completely extinguished among the Jews, for as is consistent with Israel’s biblical history God preserved a remnant of God’s people. Thus, Calvin concludes, “It will follow that the defection of some does not prevent the covenant from remaining firm and steadfast.”<sup>66</sup> Hence, though the promises do belong to all the Jews (i.e., general election), only a remnant

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<sup>64</sup> I expected to find Calvin spending more time on how a passage like John 8 speaks about negative attributes of the Jews, since the ‘plain sense’ of the text could very well lend itself to this. Indeed, I was pleasantly surprised at how underplayed Calvin’s remarks about Jews are in his exegesis of this text.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 192, 196. Here forth cited as *Commentary on Romans*.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 193, 194, 197.

remains faithful (i.e., God's secret election), and this is not surprising for, as Paul has already taught, "not all the children of Abraham are the children of God" (Rom9:7-8). Thus, Calvin asserts that God's secret election overrides God's general election.<sup>67</sup>

The next central question that Calvin finds in this text is the question of the basis of God's election. Here Calvin concludes that election is never merited by any human deed or good work, but, rather, it flows singularly out of the sovereign will and purpose of God, and it is based upon the goodness and kindness of God alone.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, God's rejection of the reprobate is also affirmed by Calvin as revealing God's glory both to show the sovereignty of God and to allow the mercy of God to the elect shine all the more clearly, for Calvin contends, "The elect differ from the reprobate only in the fact of their deliverance from the same gulf of destruction. This, moreover, is by no merit of their own, but by the free goodness of God." Hence, the calling of the Gentiles and the rejection of the Jews is part of God's sovereign purpose; so God has neither forgotten God's promises nor is it unjust that the majority of the Jews have failed to arrive at these promises.<sup>69</sup>

Calvin interprets Romans 10, for the most part, as supplying scriptural support for the justice of God's rejection of the Jews and the affirmation of the calling of the Gentiles, for both of these are prophesied in the Old Testament scriptures.<sup>70</sup> Romans 11, however, qualifies this by denying that "the covenant which had formerly been made with Abraham was abrogated or that God had so forgotten it that the Jews are now completely estranged from His kingdom."<sup>71</sup> Yet, this qualification means, according to Calvin, in the first instance

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<sup>67</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 197-98. See Rom 9:7-8.

<sup>68</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 199-203.

<sup>69</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 211, 212, there 211.

<sup>70</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 220-37. Here Calvin sees a focus in the text on the dependence of the covenant upon hearing and believing the Word of God.

<sup>71</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 238.

that the Jews are not completely estranged because a remnant of faithful Jews remains.<sup>72</sup> On the second instance, however, Calvin finds in Romans 11 a clear hope of the possibility of the Jewish nation's return to God. While it is true, writes Calvin, that those who have currently rejected Christ have fallen into destruction, "the nation itself, however, has not so fallen that one who is a Jew must necessarily perish or be estranged from God."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Calvin understands Paul as setting forth a clear hope in the conversion of the Jews to Christ after the "full number of the Gentiles have come in" (Rom 11:25). Thus, in the end, God's covenant with the Jews "stands firm and immutable," for it is "completely impossible for the Lord to depart from the covenant which He made with Abraham." Hence, Calvin concludes, "God has not wholly turned His kindness away from the Jewish nation."<sup>74</sup> Finally, in all of this, the proper attitude of Gentiles toward the Jews is not to boast but, rather, to be terrified and grateful at the same time—terrified at the consequences of rejection, but grateful because it is through the rejection of the Jews that the Gentiles were allowed into the covenant.<sup>75</sup> Yet, in the end, Calvin maintains the hope of the Jews' conversion to Christ, for it is axiomatic that in God's punishment God does not forget his mercy, "just as God has often at other times restored the Jews after He had apparently banished them from His kingdom."<sup>76</sup>

From one perspective of his reading of Romans 9 to 11, Calvin seems ultimately untroubled by God's rejection of the Jews, and he does—it should be stated—understand

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<sup>72</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 238–44.

<sup>73</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 246.

<sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 255, 256.

<sup>75</sup> Calvin writes, "We should never think of the rejection of the Jews without being struck with dread and terror. ... [Paul] desired that the example of punishment inflicted on the Jews should fill them with terror, so that they might lift up their thoughts in reverence to the judgment of God" (*Commentary on Romans*, 251, 252).

<sup>76</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 254.

contemporary Jewry to be rejected by God. He views this rejection as part of God's sovereign will and providential purpose and as consistent with how God has worked in the past, particularly within the biblical history of the Jews. For Calvin, God has always acted through the processes of a general and a secret election, namely, through a remnant. On one level, Calvin is content with the fact that only a small remnant of Jews has received God's promises through their belief in Christ. On the other hand, Calvin appears to hold out for the real possibility that God's covenant with the Jewish nation may yet "stand firm and immutable," that a restoration of the Jewish nation is still possible as evidenced in the biblical history itself (i.e., the Old Testament shows that God is always ready to be merciful). Yet, to be very clear, Calvin comprehends such a restoration as occurring only when the Jews place their faith in Christ.

In many ways, Calvin is reading Romans 9 to 11 with the vision of the one covenant with which he reads the Old Testament. The unity of the Old and New Testaments has several consequences for his reading of Romans 9 to 11. First, the biblical story shows that God has always worked through election, and specifically, a remnant. Hence, just as stories of the unfaithful Jews of the Old Testament calls the church to proper fear, repentance and gratitude, so the contemporary Jews who have rejected Christ teach these same lessons—in other words, there may be a 'negative witness doctrine' operative in Calvin's New Testament exegesis. Third, since election across the two testaments has never been based upon merit, there is no proper place for boasting or gloating (i.e., Christians should not gloat over Jews). Finally, God's covenant remains firm and true, first by its fulfillment in the remnant but also by the ever-constant possibility of the Jewish *nation's* return to faithfulness. This, too, is part of Calvin's reading of the Old Testament. Calvin's exegesis of

the accounts of the Old Testament Jews' unfaithfulness is wrapped within a larger vision of the possibility and, yes, actuality of their return to faithfulness to the covenant.<sup>77</sup> Now that Christ is fully manifest, this restoration—according to Calvin and his reading of Romans—can only take the form of Jews professing faith in Christ, and this remains for Calvin a real, hoped-for possibility.<sup>78</sup>

### Calvin's Anti-Judaism in his Exegesis

Some may very well view Calvin's interpretation of Romans 9 to 11 as a kind of anti-Judaism. Namely, it is supercessionist; it demands and expects that in order for the Jews to regain their status as the people of God, they must embrace Christ; otherwise, they remain a rejected people abandoned by God. As much as I (or others) may want a different—or perhaps a little more nuanced—reading from Calvin on this matter, it is anachronistic to expect one. In an account of Calvin's views of Jews and Judaism within his exegesis, one cannot ultimately escape the fact that for Calvin the Jews' acceptance of Christ is their only way back into the covenant. This lies precisely in Calvin's profound concept of the unity of the two testaments as having the same *substance*—that is, Christ.<sup>79</sup>

The other area where anti-Judaism appears in Calvin's exegesis of these texts that has not yet been noted is his frequently negative remarks about Jewish exegesis. The vast majority of Calvin's negative comments about Jews and Judaism center on Jewish

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<sup>77</sup> For example, look at Calvin's reading of Isaiah 42 and 43 in *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, 283–354.

<sup>78</sup> Most scholars state that it is rather ambiguous as to whether Calvin's hope of the conversion of the Jews is simply for individual Jews or the conversion of the whole nation at the end of time—that is, when the “fullness of the Gentiles” has come. Detmers emphasizes that Calvin means only the conversion of individual Jews (“Calvin, the Jews, and Judaism,” 213–14). This is not so clear to me. It seems to me that insofar as Calvin speaks about this for his current context, he does mean that all that can be expected are individual conversions. However, he also seems to express an *apocalyptic* hope of the conversion of the nation as a whole—namely, a conversion at the end of time. Indeed, I think this was Paul's hope in the text, as well.

<sup>79</sup> See *Institutes* II.x.2, 22; II.xi.1.

interpretation of the Old Testament. For example, in the texts considered in this essay, Calvin contends against Jewish readings of Ps 22:16 and Ps 118:22.<sup>80</sup> There is no doubt that Calvin expresses harsh critique of certain forms of Jewish exegesis; yet, I have argued elsewhere that a careful read of Calvin reveals that he also makes significant *positive* use of Jewish exegesis. Indeed, he appears to do this quite covertly, without explicitly citing the Jewish sources he is using affirmatively to make his case. Generally, when Calvin does not consider an Old Testament verse as an explicit prophecy of Christ, Jewish exegesis can be quite useful, but when he believes a verse should be read christologically, negative evaluations of Jewish exegesis appear. In sum, Calvin employs certain forms of Jewish exegesis positively, though on the most part clandestinely, when it provides readings that preserve the ‘simple and natural’ sense of the text—a sense that for Calvin is deeply tied to maintaining the unity of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, in Calvin’s evaluation of Jewish exegesis the issue of the unity of the two testaments is of central importance. Jewish exegesis is wrong when it fails to see this unity. I conclude with one of Calvin’s most negative statements concerning contemporary Jews and Judaism in order to show that at the heart of the rebuke is his crucial objective to maintain the unity of the two testaments. I quote his infamous statement in the *Institutes*, which appears precisely at the closing of his section on the unity of the two testaments:

Nor would the obtuseness of the whole Jewish nation today in awaiting the Messiah’s earthly kingdom be less monstrous, had the Scriptures not foretold long before that they would receive this punishment for having rejected the gospel ... Therefore, they read Moses

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<sup>80</sup> See Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:373–75 and 4:395. Calvin also makes a negative statement about Jews’ refusal to read Psalm 110 christologically (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 4:295–96).

<sup>81</sup> For my argument concerning Calvin’s covert positive use of Jewish exegesis, see “Luther, Bucer, and Calvin on Psalms 8 and 16: Confessional Formation and the Question of Jewish Exegesis,” in *Dutch Review of Church History* 85 (2005): 169–86, esp 178–82.

and continually ponder his writings, but they are hampered by a veil from seeing the light shining in his face. Thus Moses' face will remain covered and hidden from them until it be turned to Christ, from whom they now strive to separate and withdraw it as much as they can.<sup>82</sup>

First, the unity of the testaments means that Jewish unbelief and rejection of the New Testament gospel were already predicted in the Old Testament scriptures. Second, in this statement Moses may be viewed as representing the Old Testament; thus the true meaning of the Hebrew scriptures remains covered and hidden to the Jews until the Jews turn those scriptures to their true substance, which is Christ, argues Calvin. Instead, though, Jews strive to separate Christ from the Old Testament. They separate their reading of Moses from the true Teacher, Christ, and hence, cannot read Scripture rightly. In sum, Calvin's negative views of Jewish exegesis and his negative views of contemporary Jews and Judaism are rooted in his concern to maintain the unity of Scripture, the unity of God's covenant throughout sacred history.

## Conclusion

In many ways you might ask, "How is this any different from other Christian readings and conclusions concerning Jews and Jewish exegesis?" Calvin is still arguing for that Christianity embraces God's truth better than Judaism. He still sees the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament as culminating only in faith in Christ and belonging ultimately to the church. But, here, I might ask, are these convictions *necessarily* anti-Jewish? Can they not be, simply, the convictions of a—for lack of a better word—

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<sup>82</sup> *Institutes* II.x.23. One could also make the case that in his one anti-Jewish treatise, *Ad Questiones et Obiecta Iudaei cuiusdam Responsio Ioannis Calvini*, in which sets up a debate between himself and a Jew, his main point is to demonstrate that Jews do not rightly understand the unity of the Old and New Testaments—a unity found through Christ—and thereby cannot correctly understand their own scripture. Indeed, this is what Susan Frank concludes ("Calvin, Jews, and Intra-Christian Polemics," 223).

“traditional” form of the Christian faith? Though other forms of Christianity today might advocate a pluralistic position that affirms the legitimacy of Judaism as Judaism, I just do not think that was a conceivable option for Calvin in his time. Moreover, vital forms of Christianity still hold views very similar to those expressed by Calvin. I contend that these convictions are not necessarily anti-Jewish. *They become anti-Jewish when they are linked with a simultaneous tradition of denigration of Jews and Judaism.* Calvin certainly does not thoroughly escape this tradition of denigrating Jews and Judaism. Yet, I submit that he does better than many, if not most, of his predecessors and contemporaries. It is no small feat that in Calvin’s interpretation of the Old Testament in particular—and possibly in his exegesis on the whole—Calvin proffers an exegesis largely disassociated from a centuries-old anti-Jewish tradition of biblical interpretation. Let me say that again, it is *no small feat* that Calvin not only breaks from an intractable tradition of Christian anti-Jewish readings of the Old Testament, but also offers in its place a reading of the Old Testament that consistently depicts the biblical Jews as the people of God and frequently elevates them as positive examples for the church’s imitation. Rather than making the interpretive move to apply any negative images of Jews in the Old Testament to contemporary Jews and Judaism, Calvin continues to read biblical Jews as part of God’s covenant. Even if, in the end, Calvin’s exegesis of the biblical Jews of the Old Testament ultimately assumes their being claimed as believers in Christ and members of the church, is this not a much more faithful exegetical legacy for the Christian church and a legacy with far less violent consequences for Jews and Judaism?