

Calvin the Biblical Expositor

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One of the most valuable early reviews of Calvin's work is to be read in the Ecclesiastical Polity of Richard Hooker (Preface, ch. ii, 8). On his writings he says: "Two things of principal moment there are which have deservedly procured him honour throughout the world: the one his exceeding pains in composing the *Institutions of the Christian religion*; the other his no less industrious travails for exposition of holy Scripture according unto the same *Institutions*". This is a judicious assessment and may serve us as a text throughout our essay. For we may need the help of Hooker in persuading the reader that Calvin the expositor is as important and worthy to be studied as Calvin the dogmatician and that his commentaries are as authoritative for the understanding of his theology as the *Institutio*. Not every scholar would agree with our judgment. The learned Dr. Luchsius Smits, for example, has no qualms in introducing his book with the blatant sentence: "*Calvin fut l'homme d'un seul livre*".¹ He justifies his assertion by saying that in this early writing Calvin gave a summary of Reformed teaching, that he went on correcting and enriching it all his life, and that it represents one of the most remarkable of all protestant syntheses of theology. His is an extreme view. Very few scholars would care to crawl so far along the limb. But the fact that many books have been written on the *Institutio* but none on the Commentaries² shows that in practice the "one book" has been regarded as infinitely more important, that the *Institutio* is definitive and the Commentaries at most illustrative of Calvin's thought, in brief, that the *Institutio* was Calvin's life-work, the Commentaries merely incidental.

It is not the purpose of this essay to minimize the *Institutio*—an exercise as obviously ridiculous as Smits' isolating of it. Nor do we wish to over-praise the Commentaries as the only part of Calvin's work worthy of attention. But the Commentaries are, as Richard Hooker perceived, an integral part of Calvin's theological activity. Take them away and we are left, not merely with a poorer and weaker Calvin, but with something that is not Calvin at all. We may be bolder and say that Calvin saw himself primarily, not as a systematic but a biblical theologian. Moreover, once we accept this view, it is clear that we have confirmation from his career. However, the case remains to be proved.

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We will begin by establishing that Calvin regarded himself primarily as a biblical expositor. He does not often allow us into the deeper places of his mind and will, at any rate respecting particularities; but there is a passage in his dedicatory epistle of the Catholic Epistles to Edward VI of England where he quite specifically states his aims.

The most of the dedication has consisted of an attack on the Council of Trent, by then well established in its course. The basis of the errors of Rome he regards as a refusal of the Scriptures; the teaching of their church is their criterion, they only pretend to revere Scripture. It is therefore necessary that scholars should do all they can to remove the erroneous glosses that obscure Scripture and to "restore its brightness". One scholar, at least, will devote his life to this work; "I have determined to give the rest of my life, however much may still remain to me, chiefly to this study, if I can find leisure and freedom for it. The first

fruit of this work, the church to which I am committed shall receive, that it may last the longer. For although I have little time left after carrying out my duties, I have determined to give it, however short it may be, to this kind of writing”.³ These duties to which he refers were primarily his daily work as a minister in Geneva.

The quotation we have given needs no elaboration or further explanation. It establishes certainly what Calvin intended to make his main work from 1551 onwards. The objection might be raised that this represents a new departure in his purpose. But the dedicatory preface to the 1539 *Institutio* also shows that Calvin had set out on this course by then. He promises not only the commentary on Romans, which he was now writing or had perhaps finished, but also forecasts commentaries in the plural. “And so I have, as it were, paved the way, and if I shall hereafter publish any commentaries on Scripture, I shall always condense them. . . . The Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans will furnish an example of my intention”.⁴ The doubt implied by “if I shall” is explained by the French translation: “If hereafter our Lord gives me means and opportunity to compose some commentaries”.⁵ This is equivalent to the doubt in the preface to the Catholic Epistles: “If I can find leisure and freedom for it”. Given the time and opportunity he will write commentaries.

His first commentary appeared in 1540, when he was thirty-one years old. This seems, at first sight, rather late for the man who had published his earliest book eight years before and who already had the first edition of the *Institutio* and some shorter treatises to his credit. It was, moreover, six years before he published another commentary (excepting the little expositions of Jude in 1542 and on I and II Peter in French in 1545). But in fact his biblical work was not an inspiration of 1538 or 1539 but must be pushed back still further. Already in 1535 he was asked to revise Olivetan’s French Bible. Robert Olivetan, Calvin’s cousin,⁴ was commissioned by the Waldensian Church to translate the Bible into French. This appeared in 1535 with a Latin preface by Calvin. That he had no part in the translation, however, E. Reuss (one of the editors of *Corpus Reformatorum*) wrote an essay to prove,⁷ and apparently with success. It must be pointed out, though, that his case rests to no small degree on the dating of a letter in September, 1535 instead of 1534. If Reuss should perhaps have been mistaken (and it may be time his essay was re-examined), then, in spite of other problems that still remain, Calvin helped in the translation of the first edition. But if Reuss is right, it is the second edition that he worked on (though his revisions were not necessarily used).

The letter in question shows Calvin already engaged in responsible biblical scholarship in 1535. (We cannot accept Reuss’s explanation that he was asked to help because he was known to be a good classical scholar. It is far more probable that he was asked because he was known to be a good biblical scholar.) We give the letter in our own translation, as it is somewhat mangled in the Edinburgh edition: “When our Olivetan had told me in the letter he wrote about the time he left that he had postponed his intended publication of the New Testament, I saw that I could make my promised revision at my leisure and keep it also until another time. Meanwhile I gave myself to other studies and thought no more about it, or rather, sank into my usual laziness. As yet, I have hardly started work on it. And in any case the volume that I used for the collation has not yet been put together (*concinatum est*), although it was brought three months ago. This has not happened through my indifference, but partly through the slackness of the binder (even though we have visited him every day), and partly because when it was first brought to me, six sheets were missing which could not be immediately supplied. But from now on I shall set aside an hour a day for the work. And if I accumulate any criticisms, I will send them only to you—unless, of course, Olivetan should return first”.⁸

Moreover, although the commentary on Romans was not published until 1540 and was written sometime before the date of the dedication, 18 October 1539, this same dedication tells us that Calvin had at least been intending to attempt a commentary and had been pondering the problems of methods since 1536. From February 1535 until early in 1536 Calvin lived in Basel and became intimate with many of the scholarly Reformers there—Münster the Hebraist, Capito, Simon Grynaeus the friend of Erasmus. It is to Grynaeus that he dedicates Romans: “I remember that three years ago we were discussing between ourselves the best way of interpreting Scripture. What pleased you the most seemed best to me too; for we both felt that the chief virtue of an expositor lay in clear brevity”.⁹ Nevertheless, he was deterred from taking up this formidable task by the thought of how many commentaries had been written, not only by the early fathers but even in his own day. To name no others, Melancthon, Bullinger, and Bucer had written on Romans; what remained to be said? How could he write anything fresh? Would it not be regarded as arrogance to enter into competition with them, and especially with Bucer? He was therefore undecided for a time whether he would not be doing more good if he were to publish selections from these great men for readers who were too busy to read the originals (for it had to be conceded that, good as they were, their writings were too prolix—again, especially Bucer). He seems to have had in mind a sort of up-to-date *Glossa ordinaria*. “I hesitated for some time whether to gather some gleanings following them and others which I judged would help those who were not scholars (*mediocria ingenia*), or whether to compose a full commentary (*perpetuum commentarium*).”¹⁰ The fact that they differed among themselves at last decided him to write his *perpetuum commentarium*.

It was impossible to start work yet, however, even had his mind been clear. There was *Psychopannychia* to revise drastically, after it had been strongly criticized by Capito; the first edition of the *Institutio* was being finished and printed; there followed the visit to Italy, the weeks in France to clear up family business, and then for two years the torture chamber of Geneva when his writing as good as went by the board.

Exile from Geneva in 1538 and sojourn in congenial Strasbourg gave him the opportunity to start again where he had left off. He not only wrote the commentary on Romans but enlarged his purpose to take in all the Pauline epistles. He was at this time extremely poor and seems to have been in some disorder in his affairs. The Basel printer, Wendelinus Rihelius, came to his help both with a generous gift or loan and by straightening out the whole business. Whether this help was given on condition that Calvin published with him or whether, as is more probable, it was gratuitous and laid him simply under a moral obligation, is not clear. But he certainly felt himself bound, not only to publish Romans with him, but also to offer him later commentaries. He wrote to Farel in 1546: “I have now set myself in earnest to the Epistle to the Galatians. I am not free in the matter of publication, so far at least as the epistles of Paul are concerned”. He then recounts his debt to Rihelius and repeats: “I am therefore now not at liberty to refuse him the epistles”.¹¹ In the event, Rihelius printed only I Corinthians and that he seems to have kept by him for a long time: “If the war had not given the printing presses a holiday,” writes Calvin to M. de Falais in November of the same year, “I would have sent Wendelin my Galatians; but Corinthians lies quiet in his desk and there is no need for me to hurry”.¹² It was more convenient for Calvin to use one of the Geneva printers and it was of course a disadvantage for him that Rihelius possessed no Hebrew type¹³ (this, no doubt, is the reason why Calvin uses no Hebrew words in the first edition of Romans). When, therefore, the partnership lapsed, all his commentaries were printed in Geneva.

That Calvin early determined to write commentaries on the whole Pauline Corpus (including Hebrews, whose Pauline authorship he denied as a scholar but accepted as a churchman) is confirmed both by the speed with which he brought them out and by some internal evidence. The gap of six years between Romans and I Corinthians may be explained partly by his renewed distractions in Geneva, partly by Rihelius' slowness in publishing it. It is clear from the passages in the letters to M. de Falais and Farel that by November 1546 both epistles to the Corinthians were off his hands and he was already working on Galatians (or the Galatians group), which, indeed, he could have finished had there been need. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the Corinthians commentaries were written in 1545 or earlier. He had finished the Galatians group before February 1548 and it was published that year, as also were the commentaries on I and II Timothy. In 1549 followed Hebrews and Titus, and when the Corpus had been completed with I and II Thessalonians in 1551 (though written before February 1550), the collected edition, revised only slightly for the later epistles but considerably for Romans, was published in 1551. The first part of the task he had set himself was now completed and he had already started on other parts of the Bible.

The internal evidence is more scanty but no less conclusive. Calvin often refers back to earlier commentaries, advising the reader to look up what he has written in Romans or Galatians or elsewhere. This he does, of course, to avoid prolixity and repetition, though it also has the effect of unifying the commentaries. What is more remarkable is that he very occasionally refers forward to commentaries not yet written. Thus, writing at the very latest in 1546 but, as we have seen, probably some time before, he promises in I Corinthians to deal with the word *testamentum* when he comes to write on Hebrews, which still lay at least three years ahead: "On the word *testamentum* we shall speak, if the Lord allows us time, in the Epistle to the Hebrews".¹⁴ Similarly, earlier in I Corinthians he defers the treatment of the proverb about leaven until he writes Galatians: "I said, 'In this passage', because Paul uses it elsewhere in a different sense, as we shall see".¹⁵

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Enough has now been said to establish the truth behind Hooker's statement. Calvin is not just a dogmatic theologian who also wrote commentaries; his genuine life's work consisted of these two equal activities, dogmatic theology and exposition of Scripture. But it would be more true to say that they are not two separate activities but are related and connected as the two parts of one activity. On the one hand, his biblical work exercised a great influence on the *Institutio*. As fresh editions appeared, it is possible to see how in the meantime his thought has been moulded by the closer study of this or that book of the Bible. It would probably also appear from a comparison of the commentaries how they in their turn had been enriched by the deeper meditation demanded by revisions of the *Institutio*. But all this still considers the *Institutio* and the commentaries as two separate activities. Such a view is contrary to Calvin's declared intention in his preface to the *Institutio*, written first in 1539. Here he not only says that he writes so as to open up the understanding of Scripture, but expressly connects the *Institutio* with his commentaries and in particular with that on Romans, to be published the following year. Warned by the fearful lengthiness of Bucer, which was partly caused by his introducing full-scale dogmatic discussions into the body of his work, Calvin saw that these *loci communes* could best stand on their own in a book which would be a companion to the commentaries while they also would be a companion to it. "It has been my purpose in this labour so to prepare and train aspirants¹⁶ after sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word that they may have an easy entrance into it and then go on in

it without stumbling. For I think I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts and arranged it in order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, he will have no difficulty in determining both what he ought especially to seek in Scripture and to what aim he should refer everything in it. And so, I have as it were paved the way, and if I shall hereafter publish any commentaries on Scripture, I shall always condense them, for I shall have no need to undertake lengthy discussions on doctrines and digress with *loci communes*. In this way the reader will be spared great trouble and boredom, provided he approaches them¹⁷ fore-armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool. But because the commentary on the Epistle to the Romans will furnish an example of this intention,¹⁸ I prefer to let the thing itself show rather than forecast it with words.”¹⁹

It only remains to trace the course of his later work on the Bible. The collected edition of the Pauline epistles and Hebrews came out, as we saw earlier, in 1551. This had been preceded by the first edition of Isaiah in 1549 and the Catholic epistles in 1551. The rest of his life was given up to finishing the New Testament and making inroads on the old. It will be more convenient to treat them separately. Acts was published in two parts, 1552 and 1554. In the intervening year came St. John’s Gospel; and the New Testament commentaries were concluded with the Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels in 1555. But 1556 and 1557 saw two revisions of the complete epistles, in 1560 he revised Acts and undertook a certain revision of them all in 1562. No commentaries exist on 2 and 3 John and Revelation. There have been suggestions that Calvin did in fact write on Revelation and that it has been completely lost. Indeed, John Bale, the English Reformer expressly ascribes a commentary to him. He gives a long list of past and present commentators and for his contemporaries, names Luther, Sebastian Meyer, Georgius Aemilius, Francis Lambert, Zwingli, Brenz, Calvin, and Melchior Hofman.²⁰ Against this it must be said that Bale identifies some of these works in the customary way of quoting the first words, and, he says, “I have seen almost so many as have their beginnings here registered”.²¹ Calvin is not so signalized. We assume, therefore, that he was writing merely from hearsay. There is, in the *Bibliothèque publique et universitaire* at Geneva an anonymous commentary which the catalogue ascribed to Calvin: *Familiere et briefre exposition sur l’Apocalypse de Saint Jehan l’apostre*. Geneve. Jehan Gerard. 1539. 8°. It is most improbable that Calvin is the author; indeed, only the accident that it is bound in one volume with his *Exposition sur l’epistre de Saint Judas* (1542) connects him with it.

The first Old Testament commentary, Isaiah, appeared in 1551, before he had completed his New Testament work. Three years passed before Genesis, the next in order, was published. In 1557 came Psalms and then Hosea the same year, a mere transcript of his lectures and apparently unrevised. The second and revised edition of Isaiah followed in 1559 and thereafter, all the Minor Prophets (1559), Daniel (1560), Jeremiah and Lamentations (1563), Genesis and the Harmony of the rest of the Pentateuch (1563), and, posthumously, Joshua (1564) and Ezekiel 1-20 (1565). That his colleagues believed he intended to comment on the whole Bible, Beza shows us in his dedication of Ezekiel to Coligny: “Had God granted us the enjoyment of such a great light for another year or two, I do not see what could be wanting to the perfect understanding of the books of both covenants.”²²

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Calvin continued in his prefaces or dedications to lament the lack of time: “What may be expected of a man of leisure cannot be expected from me, who, in addition to the ordinary office of a pastor, have other duties which allow me hardly the least relaxation. Yet I shall not consider my spare time better spent in any other way.”²³ But his work had been facilitated

from 1549 by the assistance of three secretaries. We have explained elsewhere²⁴ how Denis Raguénier, the stenographer, preserved Calvin's sermons from that year. He and Jean Budé, the son of the mighty Guillaume Budé, and Charles de Jonviller also undertook to write down and transcribe his lectures at the school and at the "Congrégations". Thanks to the prefaces, we can see a little more clearly Calvin at work as a lecturer and commentator. In the first place, Budé confirms the fearful pressure of work that forced him "to leave home after having had usually hardly half an hour to meditate on these lectures".²⁵ Then we are told that he lectured extemporarily, not like those "who repeat to their hearers from a written paper what had been previously prepared at home".²⁶ This is confirmed by Jean Crispin, the printer: "He occupied a whole hour in speaking and used not to write in his book a single word to assist his memory".²⁷ The book mentioned was apparently his Hebrew Bible, for the Printer's Preface to Daniel says that "Calvin is accustomed first to read each verse in Hebrew and then translate it into Latin".²⁸ Crispin also shows, in the Minor Prophets' Preface, the secretaries at work: "In copying, they followed this plan. Each had his paper ready in the most convenient form, and each separately wrote down with the greatest speed. If a word escaped one (which sometimes happened, especially on points of dispute and in those parts that were delivered with some warmth), it was taken down by another. . . . Immediately after the lecture ended, de Jonviller took the papers of the other two, placed them before him, consulted his own, and collating them all dictated to someone else so as to copy down what they had hastily taken down. At last he read it all through in order to be able to read it back to M. Calvin at home the following day. When any little word was missing, it was added; or if anything seemed not explained sufficiently, it was easily made plainer".²⁹

It would seem that at first, from 1549 to 1552 or so, the secretaries gave their transcriptions to Calvin who himself revised them thoroughly and made an independent commentary out of them. But as time went on, he was no doubt only too glad to make use of the zeal of his admirers and to be content with the scanty revision that Crispin notes. No doubt these later commentaries would have been the better had they received the great care that he gave to the epistles; but, since that was impossible, it is still sufficient to say that they are worthy of Calvin the commentator—"Two things there are of principal moment which have deservedly procured him honour throughout the world: the one his exceeding pains in composing the Institutions of Christian religion; the other his no less industrious travails for exposition of holy Scripture according unto the same Institutions".

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Saint Augustin dans l'Oeuvre de Jean Calvin*, I, p. 1.
- 2) See W. Niesel: *Calvin-Bibliographie 1901-1959*, pp. 75-78.
- 3) C.R., 14. 37. C.T.S., p. xx.
- 4) *Opera selecta*. III, p. 6.
- 5) *Op. sel.*, III, p. 8.

- 6) There were very few biblical scholars, either Roman Catholic or Protestant, with whom Calvin was not closely connected.
- 7) *Revue de Théologie*, vol. 3, pp. 217ff., vol. 4, pp. 1ff., 281ff. and 388ff. 1865-66.
- 8) C. R. 10. 51-52. E.E. pp. 18f.
- 9) C. R. 10. 402. C. T. S., xxiii.
- 10) C. R. 10. 404. C. T. S., xxvi.
- 11) C. R. 12. 391. E. T., II, 70.
- 12) C. R. 12. 423. E. T., II, 70.
- 13) See F. Ritter: *Histoire de l'Imprimerie Alsacienne aux XV^e et XVI^e Siècles* (Strasbourg and Paris, 1955), p. 266.
- 14) C. R. 49. 489. C. T. S., 383.
- 15) C. R. 49. 382. C. T. S., 187.
- 16) *Candidatos* does not refer especially to what we should call “theological candidates”, but to anyone who wishes to study theology. This appears from Calvin’s French translation which is, literally, “those who wish to devote themselves to the study of theology.”
- 17) The translator of the Library of Christian Classics edition of the *Institutes* is surely mistaken in supplying “Scripture” as the object of “approaches”. The context very clearly shows that Calvin is speaking of his commentaries. Will Scripture be troublesome and boring to us unless we approach it armed with the *Institutio*?
- 18) Not “instruction”, as L.C.C., which is a translation of *Institutionis*, not of *institutii*. What a pity that the chance afforded by this series of supplying a really good new edition should have been let slip!
- 19) *Opera selecta*, III, p. 6.
- 20) *Select Works* (Parker Society), p. 258.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- 22) C. R., 40: 9-10. C. T. S., xl.
- 23) Dedicatory Epistle of Minor Prophets. C. R., 42: 183-84. C. T. S., I, xix.
- 24) *The Oracles of God*, pp. 39f.
- 25) Preface to the Minor Prophets. C. R., 42: 185-86. C. T. S., I, xxvi.
- 26) *Ibid.*, C. R., 42: 185-86. C. T. S., xxvii.
- 27) To the Reader, Minor Prophets. C. R., 42: 189-90. C. T. S., I, xxx.
- 28) C. R., 40: 523-24. C. T. S., I, Ixii.

29) C. R., 42: 189-190. C. T. S., I, xxxi.

APPENDIX I

Chronological list of the commentaries

(L. = Latin. F. = French translation. Cong. = lectures in *Congrègation*. Lect. = *Leçons* at School. Pr = preached. The dates of lecturing or preaching are given only where there is reason to believe that the lectures or sermons formed the basis of the commentary.)

- 1540. Romans, L. 1550, F.
- 1542. Jude, F.
- 1545. I and II Peter and Jude, F.
- 1546. I Corinthians, L. 1547, F.
- 1547. II Corinthians, F. 1548, L.
- 1548. Galatians, etc., L. 1548, F.
I and II Timothy, L. 1548, F.
- 1549. Titus, F. 1550, L.
Hebrews, L. 1549, F. Cong. Up to 1549. Pr. before 1549.
Collected edition of Pauline letters and Hebrews, L.
Catholic epistles, L. 1556, F. Cong. 1549-50.
I John, F. James, F. Jude, F.
- 1552. Acts (a), L. 1552, F. Pr. 1549-54
- 1553. John, L. 1553, F. Cong. 1550ff.
- 1554. Genesis, L. 1554, F. Lect. 1550ff.
Acts (b), L. 1554, F. Pr. 1549-54.
- 1556. Collected edition of all epistles, L. Revision.
- 1557. Psalms, L. 1558, F. Lect. 1552ff. Cong. 1555ff. Preached variously.
Hosea, L. 1557, F. Lect. Pre-1557. Pr. 1551.
Collected edition of Pauline letters and Hebrews, L. Revision.
- 1559. Isaiah (2nd edn.), L. 1572, F. (not by Calvin). Pr. 1556-59.
Minor Prophets, L. 1560, F. Lect. 1557ff. Pr. 1550-52.
- 1561. Daniel, L. 1562, F. Lect. 1559-60. Pr. 1552.
- 1563. Jeremiah and Lamentations, L. 1565, F. (not by Calvin). Lect. 1560-62. Pr. 1549-50.
Pentateuch, L. 1564, F. Cong. 1559ff. Pr. (Deuteronomy), 1555-60.
- 1564. Joshua, F. 1564, L. Cong. 1563f.
- 1565. Ezekiel 1-20, L. 1565, F. Lect. 1563-64. Pr. 1552-54.