CALVIN *and the* BIBLICAL LANGUAGES





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MENTOR

To all my Hebrew Students


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A Brief Time-Line of John Calvin's Life

1509	Born in Noyon, France (July 10)
1523–1527	Student at College de Montaigu, Paris
1528–1533	Law Studies at Orléans and Bourges Intermittent Study in Paris
1534	Year of Wandering
1535–1536	Calvin in Basel
1536	*Institutes of the Christian Religion* Published
1536–1538	First Stay in Geneva
1538	Calvin and Farel Expelled from Geneva
1538–1541	Calvin in Strassburg Romans Commentary Published (1540) Calvin Marries Idelette de Bure (1540)
1541	Returns to Geneva *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* Approved in Geneva
1549	Calvin's Wife Idelette de Bure Dies
1553	Trial and Execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva
1559	Establishment of the Geneva Academy
1564	Calvin Dies (May 27)





Chapter One

The Christian Hercules

The *realia*

Theodore Beza once commented regarding John Calvin that he 'was a kind of Christian Hercules who subdued many ministers by the mightiest of all clubs, the Word of God. As many adversaries as Satan stirred up against him, so many trophies did the Lord bestow upon his servant.'[1] Numerous works have appeared over the years treating John Calvin's use of this 'club', that is, his hermeneutics or exegetical principles.[2] To put it simply, Calvin desired to get at the real meaning (the *realia*) of the biblical text. Hunter puts it this way: 'fidelity to the meaning of the original was his first principle.'[3]

Prior to the Reformation, this principle of determining the original meaning of a text as the basis of interpretation

1 Quoted by J. C. Bowman, 'Calvin as a Preacher,' *Reformed Church Review* 13 (1909):253.

2 See, in particular, D. L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995); and the articles by H. Kraus, T. H. L. Parker, and J. L. M. Haire in R. C. Gamble, *Calvin and Hermeneutics* (New York: Garland, 1992).

3 A. M. Hunter, 'Calvin as a Preacher,' *Expository Times* 30, 12 (1919):563.

(known today as grammatical-historical exegesis) was not common.[4] Although elements of it were found in movements like the Antiochene School, which includes such scholars as Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428; he was called 'the Exegete') and John Chrysostom (344–407), the reality is that it was a rare hermeneutical position.[5] The clearly dominant position before the Reformation was allegory. During the Patristic period, the Alexandrian School held interpretive sway in the church of the day, and the allegorical method was its centerpiece. Origen (185–254) did more exegetical work than anyone prior to the Reformation, and his work was dominated by allegory. He said he sought 'to discover in every expression the hidden splendor of the doctrines veiled in common and unattractive phraseology'.[6] Origen held to a trichotomy of interpretation: as there is a Trinity and there are three parts to every person (body, soul, and spirit), thus there are three senses to every text of Scripture. These three meanings are literal, allegorical, and moral.

One example from Origen will suffice to demonstrate his interpretive methodology of the Bible. In Genesis 24, we read that Rebekah comes to draw water from the well, and there she meets the servant of Abraham. Origen interpreted this episode to mean that each believer must come daily to the wells of Scripture in order to meet with Christ.[7]

Even Augustine (354–430), the great defender of the orthodox faith, was enamored with allegory as a proper means of exegesis. He was obviously deficient in both Hebrew and Greek, and he believed that the Old Latin translation was

4 For a good survey of pre-Reformation hermeneutics, see D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002, 2nd ed.).

5 For a recent and important study of Chrysostom, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom: Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

6 *De principiis*, 4.1.7.

7 F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker reprint, 1979), p. 199.

singularly inspired. Augustine's exegetical principles are enumerated in his work *On Christian Doctrine*. In that work it is clear that he held the literal and historical sense of a biblical passage in high regard; yet, it is not enough. The Bible has more than one meaning, and the allegorical method is a way of clarifying the obscure.

During the Middle Ages, most biblical study was isolated in monasteries. Strident allegory was the dominant interpretive method of the time. A fourfold sense to Scripture was commonplace: literal, allegoric, moral, and mystical. One of the leading lights was Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141). He wrote a book titled *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, and it served as an introduction to the allegorical study of the Old Testament. For example, his understanding of the throne room scene in Isaiah 6 reeks of allegory. He said that the seraphim, who are angelic creatures surrounding God's throne, actually represent the sacred Scriptures. The three pairs of wings on each creature symbolically picture a proper interpretive method: literal, allegoric, and moral![8]

Thomas Aquinas was one of the most profound thinkers and theologians that the Middle Ages produced. He was, however, a weak exegete. When interpreting Scripture, Aquinas gave meager explanations of the literal sense of a text. His hermeneutics was imbued with the fourfold sense of Scripture. Overwhelming and long-winded arguments in addition to speculative discussions were rampant (e.g., when looking at Job he goes on relentlessly about good angels in contrast to bad angels). He accepted many tasteless and empty allegories. For instance, when the text says that John the Baptist ate wild honey and locusts, this means that John's preaching to the crowds was sweet like honey, but short of flight like locusts.

In contrast, the Reformation emphasized a literal interpretation of the text; Christian doctrine must be based

8 For further study of this period, see H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

on the original and literal intent of the authors of Scripture. There is little or no room for allegory. Calvin called allegory a contrivance of Satan and merely a bunch of monkey tricks! Hand in hand with the reformational principle of grammatical-historical exegesis was the conviction that at the heart of interpretation are the biblical languages. The exegetical task 'can be accomplished only through a solid knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages'.[9] In reality, while much has been written about Calvin's exposition of Scripture, little has been penned regarding his knowledge and use of these languages in his life's work and ministry.[10] That is the purpose and subject of this book, and I hope this work will help promote further study of this topic.

King of the commentators

In a well-known statement, the 17th century French Catholic cleric Richard Simon (1638–1712) claimed that John Calvin was basically ignorant of the Hebrew language of the Old Testament.[11] In fact, he 'went so far as to say that Calvin knew little more than the characters of the Hebrew alphabet'.[12] Others argue that this accusation was false and that it was an aspersion on the academic character of Calvin. These proponents say that, in reality, Calvin had a thorough knowledge of the biblical languages, and he was fully competent in their use to perform exegesis of a biblical text. A. M. Hunter remarks about Calvin's skill in the original languages:

> ... suffice it to say that in spite of depreciative assertions, an impartial student of his commentaries cannot but admit that he was more than adequately equipped to deal authoritatively with

9 H. Kraus, 'Calvin's Exegetical Principles,' *Interpretation* 31 (1977):14.

10 For introductory work on the subject, see J. D. Currid, 'Calvin as Hebraist: Guarding the Sacred Deposit,' *Reformed Theological Review* 63 (2004):61-71.

11 R. Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux testament* (Rotterdam, 1685), p. 435.

12 W. McKane, 'Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator,' in R. Gamble, ed. *Calvin and Hermeneutics* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 250.

the originals of both Old Testament and New Testament.[13]

Who is right? Was John Calvin a good exegete who relied on a masterful knowledge of biblical languages or not? The truth of the matter is that most 'recent scholars have agreed that, for his time, Calvin was a distinguished textual scholar. Proficient in all three languages ...' – Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.[14] Such a view of Calvin's linguistic abilities has been around for a long time. In 1892, Philip Schaff made the observation that 'Calvin, besides being a master of Latin and French, had a very good knowledge of the languages of the Bible.'[15] The biblical languages were foundational to Calvin's exegetical prowess. Diestel said that Calvin was 'the creator of genuine exegesis'; Reuss, who was the chief editor of Calvin's works, said that Calvin was without question 'the greatest exegete of the sixteenth century'; and Schaff called him the 'king of the commentators'.[16] Calvin himself had the conviction of the essential importance of the biblical languages. He said, 'we cannot understand the teaching of God unless we know his styles and languages.'[17] The reality of the issue is summed up by Fuhrmann who says that a '*primary* merit of Calvin is to be a *philologist*'.[18]

Calvin learns Hebrew

There is quite a debate in Calvin scholarship regarding when and where Calvin first began the study of biblical Hebrew.

13 A. M. Hunter, 'The Erudition of John Calvin,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 18 (1946):203.

14 W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 117.

15 P. Schaff, 'Calvin as a Commentator,' *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892):464.

16 G. Johnson, 'Calvinism and Interpretation,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 4 (1932):170-71.

17 *Opera* 47:465.

18 P. T. Fuhrmann, 'Calvin, Expositor of Scripture,' *Interpretation* 6.2 (April 1952):197.

Theodore Beza, who was rector of the Academy at Geneva and held its Greek chair, wrote a biography of Calvin that claimed the Reformer learned Hebrew in the city of Basel in 1534. He said about Calvin in those early days:

> There he lived on intimate terms with those two distinguished men, Simon Grynaeus and Wolfgang Capito, and devoted himself to the study of Hebrew.[19]

I believe this statement by Beza has often been misunderstood. In it, he nowhere alleges that Basel was the first place that Calvin studied Hebrew, but only that he 'devoted himself' to it there. The reality is that Calvin probably began his Hebrew studies in 1531, at the ripe age of twenty-two, when he was a student in Paris. As far as we can tell, this was approximately the time of his conversion to Christianity.[20]

Two years earlier, Francis I had founded a trilingual college that later came to be known as the great Collège de France. At the heart of the academic institution, the king had established several professorships for teaching Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. 'It was a great step in a new direction. Not many years before he would have been ridiculed for it by the Sorbonne; perhaps he was now. But the king selected the best professors whom he could obtain: Danes taught Greek, Vatable taught Hebrew.'[21] Calvin enrolled in the Collège de France, and almost certainly began his Hebrew studies under the renowned François Vatable (d. 1547), who was arguably the greatest Hebraist of his day.[22] Battles and Hugo remark: 'It is probable, though not altogether certain, that he also attended the lectures of Toussain and of his eminent Hebrew colleague, the celebrated

19 T. Beza, *The Life of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), p. 15.

20 See the discussion of Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 10-12.

21 W. Blackburn, *College Days of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1865), p. 139.

22 G. Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 71-2.

Vatable.'[23] Vatable is rightly regarded as the restorer of Hebrew scholarship in France. Unfortunately, he wrote very little in his lifetime, and not much of even that has survived until today.

A few scholars argue that this incipient Hebrew study of Calvin was almost a curiosity, a mere 'dillettant'.[24] But the reality is that he began his studies in Hebrew in Paris in the year 1531, and then he did further in-depth work in Basel in 1535 and 1536, perhaps under the instruction of Sebastian Münster who was teaching Hebrew in the city at that time.[25] This was followed by even more learning of it in Strassburg during 1538 to 1541.[26]

The founding of the Collège de France as a trilingual university reflected the shifting academic mood of the day in Europe. At this time there occurred an explosion of interest in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew studies.[27] Indeed, 'by the year 1550 one could find instruction in the Hebrew language at the majority of Western European universities.'[28] Yet, it was not

23 F. L. Battles and A. M. Hugo, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's de Clementia* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 5.

24 Q. Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), p. 64.

25 N. Lunn, 'Sebastian Münster – Hebraist of the Reformation,' *Banner of Truth* 490 (2004):8-14. Lunn comments, 'Though the Hebrew Old Testament together with the standard Jewish commentaries was available to him in the form of Blomberg's *Biblia Rabbinica* (1524-25), Calvin's knowledge of these latter writings was probably for the most part obtained indirectly through works such as Münster's *Hebraica Biblia*. We know for a fact that Calvin consulted Münster in the preparation of his commentaries' (p. 11). Münster was perhaps the most famous Hebraist of his age. He truly loved the Hebrew language, and he called it 'that holy and truly divine language'. See P. E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 53.

26 Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, p. 58.

27 This was not a pure revival of Hebrew studies, but certainly a great expansion of interest in that language. Clearly, many scholars had a lofty opinion of Hebrew in the high Middle Ages. Indeed, 'it was the language of God, the first speech of mankind, and the medium of angels.' See A. C. Skinner, *Veritas Hebraica: Christian Attitudes Toward the Hebrew Language in the High Middle Ages* (Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1986), p. 323.

28 Ibid., p. 322.

without great opposition. In the academies of Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century 'there was widespread hostility to the renewed emphasis on classical antiquity and scorn for the paganism of the Greeks and Romans.'[29] Many academics of this period simply had contempt for the study of the biblical languages. This bias was specifically directed at the Collège de France in the early 1530s when a suit was brought by the Faculty of the Sorbonne against Vatable and other professors at the Collège de France enjoining them not to teach Hebrew and Greek. In a publication titled *Determinatio Facultatis* (April 30, 1530), the Sorbonne attacked those who believed that sound exegesis of the original texts helped to understand the Bible better.[30] Two propositions were made by the Faculty of the Sorbonne that clearly summarized their beliefs:

> First proposition: Holy Scripture cannot be understood properly without Greek, Hebrew, and other similar languages. Censura: this proposition is imprudent and scandalous. Second proposition: no preacher can explain the truth of an epistle or Gospel without the aforementioned languages. Censura: this proposition is false, impious, and prevents in a pernicious manner Christian people from hearing the Word of God. Moreover, the authors of these assertions are strongly suspected of *Lutheranism*.[31]

Battles and Hugo give further comment on this conflict:

> The very subjects, Greek and Hebrew, were revolutionary for those days (although cities like Alcala, Oxford, and Louvain had already taken the lead in this), and were regarded by the Paris theologians as dangerous in the extreme. The theologians smelt Lutheranism, and they did not hesitate to say so; but neither the

29 A. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 9.

30 A. Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 69.

31 A. Lefranc, *Histoire du Collège de France* (Paris: Hachette, 1893), p. 122.

> King nor his chosen band of professors heeded such talk, and the institution grew apace, attracting students from far and wide.[32]

The fiercest hostility was against the study of Jewish literature and, especially, the language of Hebrew. Many of the European academicians believed that, 'even for biblical studies, Hebrew had no real value over the existing Latin.'[33] Even Erasmus, who did so much with the Koine Greek of the New Testament, questioned the true worth of much Hebrew study; he was afraid that so much emphasis on it may lead to a revival in Judaism.[34] He stated, for example:

> The restoration of Hebrew learning may give occasion to the revival of Judaism. This would be a plague as much opposed to the doctrine of Christ as anything that can happen.[35]

Despite such heated resistance, Calvin profited greatly from the new and rare advantage of learning biblical Hebrew. He made Hebrew, along with Greek and Latin, the very cornerstone of his studies and of his later preaching, teaching, and commentary work.[36]

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32 Battles and Hugo, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, p. 4.

33 Katchen, *Christian Hebraists*, p. 9.

34 J. C. Olin, ed. *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 80. On this issue, Erasmus contradicted himself. For example, he wrote the following to Martin Dorp: 'How much better, instead of doing what they are doing – wounding others and being wounded, wasting their own time and that of others – to learn Greek or Hebrew, or at least Latin, which are so indispensable to the knowledge of Sacred Scripture that I think it extremely impudent for anyone ignoring them to usurp the name of theologian.'

35 J. Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1983), p. 178.

36 It is likely that Calvin was trained in Hebrew with Conrad Pellicanus' book *De modo legendi et intelligendi Hebraea* (1503). He also certainly used the Rabbinics of Kimchi, Ibn Ezra, and Rashi.

Calvin learns Greek

Although Calvin spent part of 1531 and 1532 studying in Paris, much of his academic work during these early years was spent in Orléans, a city which contained an important law university. Here, and at Bourges, Calvin worked on a law degree, and he became a *licencié* in the law. To the best of our knowledge, he studied at Orléans, off and on, from 1528 to 1533. Most important for our study is that at Orléans and Bourges Calvin came under the influence of Melchior Wolmar.

Wolmar was born in Rothwell in 1496. After serving as a schoolmaster for a number of years, 'in 1521 he went to Paris, where he studied Greek under Glareanus and Nicolas Bérauld. In 1523 he published his annotations on two books of Homer's *Iliad*. Of one hundred candidates for the licentiate in arts at Paris he ranked number one.'[37] Wolmar was thoroughly and fervently reformational, and his views were considered dangerous in Paris. Thus, he moved to Orléans about 1527, no doubt because this city was more open to his religious opinions.

In Orléans, Wolmar took Calvin under his wing and 'initiated him into the rudiments of Greek'.[38] This initial Greek study was merely introductory, and it did not go beyond the bare essentials. Calvin admits this fact himself in the preface to his later *Commentary on Second Corinthians*. He dedicated that volume to Wolmar, and in the dedication he includes the following statement:

> But the main reason has been my recollection how, the first time my father sent me to study civil law, it was at your instigation and under your tuition that I also took up the study of Greek, of which you were at that time a most distinguished teacher. It was not your fault that I did not make greater progress.... Nevertheless

37 F. L. Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), p. 58.

38 Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, p. 68.

> my indebtedness to you for this is still great for you gave me a good grounding in the rudiments of the language and that was a great help to me later on.[39]

Beza also studied Greek under Wolmar. In his biography of Calvin, Beza said about his Greek teacher:

> I have the greater pleasure in mentioning his name, because he was my own teacher, and the only one I had from boyhood up to youth. His learning, piety, and other virtues, together with his admirable abilities as a teacher of youth, cannot be sufficiently praised. On his suggestion, and with his assistance, Calvin learned Greek.[40]

Obviously Beza assigned too much credit to Wolmar in regard to Calvin's learning of biblical Greek. In reality, the most that can be said is that Wolmar merely laid the original foundation for Calvin's Greek study. But, most importantly, he did encourage and inspire Calvin to pick up and undertake that study.

In 1535 and 1536, Calvin resided in Basel. This city was 'a free center of humanist culture and a sure refuge for persecuted reformists'.[41] Here Calvin became increasingly convinced that the Bible was to be read and understood according to the original texts. At Basel, he greatly desired to develop his knowledge of Greek and to continue his Hebrew studies, and in that manner he hoped to deepen his familiarity with the sacred Scriptures.

Calvin met Simon Grynaeus at this time, and the latter proved to be of invaluable help for Calvin's instruction in Greek. Grynaeus had been professor of Greek at the University

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39 John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. by T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 1.

40 Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, p. 12.

41 Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, p. 91.

of Heidelberg from 1524 to 1529. He moved to the University of Basel where he taught Greek from 1529 to 1534. Grynaeus was a top-flight Greek philologist. He and Calvin became close friends, and they collaborated in studies regarding methods of exegesis. No doubt, Grynaeus significantly contributed to Calvin's study of and ability in the Greek language. Biblical Greek became one of Calvin's passions in life, and as Schaff concludes: 'He had passed through the school of the Renaissance; he had a rare knowledge of Greek; he thought in Greek, and could not help inserting rare Greek words into his letters to learned friends. He was an invaluable help to Luther in his translation of the Bible.'[42]

Calvin would wholeheartedly agree with Melanchthon's statement that 'the Scripture cannot be understood theologically unless it be first understood grammatically'. And, therefore, 'it must not be forgotten that Calvin was an intense student of the Bible in the original tongues.'[43] In truth, Calvin was an outstanding exegete.[44] Schaff rightly concludes that Calvin 'combined in a very rare degree all the essential qualifications of an exegete – grammatical knowledge, spiritual insight, acute perception, sound judgment, and practical tact.'[45] Indeed, the 'age of Calvin was one of translation and interpretation'.[46] For us to know Calvin the Reformer and Calvin the theologian, we must first know Calvin the exegete and linguist.[47] We now turn to view Calvin's ministry of preaching and the role played in it by the biblical languages.

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42 P. Schaff, 'Calvin as a Commentator,' *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892):463.

43 G. Johnson, 'Calvinism and Preaching,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 4 (1932):251.

44 T. Lane, 'The Quest for the Historical Calvin,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983):113.

45 Schaff, 'Calvin as a Commentator,' p. 463.

46 Johnson, 'Calvinism and Interpretation,' p. 171.

47 Fuhrmann, 'Calvin, Expositor of Scripture,' p. 193.