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John Calvin and the Jews

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Unlike Martin Luther and most other German reformers, John Calvin had few, if any, contacts with contemporary Jews. The first twenty-five years of his life he spent in his native Picardy, Paris, or Orléans long after the expulsion of the Jews from France. Nor did he have many occasions to encounter Jews during the last quarter century of his life and his increasingly dictatorial regime in Geneva. Jewish sojourn in that Swiss city had been cut short by its city council's decree of expulsion of December 1490, which was carried out ruthlessly during the harsh winter season of January 1491. So few Jews had visited Geneva in the following decades that when, in 1547, two travelers passed through the city on their way from Flanders to Venice, the Council ordered a study of the regulations affecting such temporary sojourn, regulations which had evidently gone into oblivion during the intervening years. While we do not hear of Calvin's personal participation in this debate, it stands to reason that nothing of such significance for religious conformity could have escaped the attention of Geneva's theocratic ruler.¹

Nor did the issue of Jewish "usury," which so greatly embittered the relations between the two faiths throughout western Europe, play a particular role in the Geneva reformer's attitude to the Jews. Apart from the physical absence of Jewish moneylending in Calvin's immediate environment, his view differed sharply from the traditional ecclesiastical

rejection of any kind of interest. In his comment on the crucial passage in Luke 6:35 he stated clearly: "No Scriptural testimony exists which would totally condemn usury. For that sentence of Christ which the populace regards as most unequivocal, namely *mutuum date nihil inde sperantes* [in Luke 6:35], has been gravely distorted."² Not that Calvin altogether favored moneylending. True, many Genevans had long made a living from that occupation and in several ordinances, confirmed in 1547, the city council of Geneva officially set the allowable maximum of interest rate at 5 percent. Certainly no legislation adopted by the city during Calvin's regime could have been promulgated without at least his tacit approval. Yet he refrained from clearly stating his position on this issue which loomed increasingly large in that period of rising capitalism. Occasionally he indulged digs at contemporary Jewish greed and repudiated the Jews' privileged position with respect to charging interest to non-Jewish borrowers. In his comment on Isa. 60:6-7, where the Jews had been promised great "abundance" and that the "wealth of the nations shall come unto thee," Calvin observed: "Under the pretext of this prophecy, the Jews stupidly devour all the riches of the earth with their unrestrained cupidity." In a sermon of 1556 he also declared that the fact the Jews had once been allowed to charge usury to the heathen nations, does not mean that "today they may aggrieve and molest God's children."³ In any case, his attitude to moneylending was so ill-defined that it readily lent itself to divergent interpretations and opened the road for the subsequent Calvinist blanket approval of profits derived from banking.⁴

However, Calvin was undoubtedly impressed by the anti-Jewish teachings of most German reformers. True, Martin Luther's crudely anti-Jewish attacks of 1542-46 were not fully accessible to him because of his limited knowledge of German. He apparently studied only those works by Luther, whom he never met in person, which were available in Latin or French translation.⁵ But during his sojourn in such German-speaking cities as Basel and Strasbourg and particularly during his semi-political appearances at the assemblies of Frankfurt, Hagenau, Worms and Regensburg, Calvin must have discussed with German theologians various contemporary problems including those related to Jews. In Strasbourg, in particular, the vaunted religious tolerance of the city administration, (greatly influenced by the humanist Jacob Sturm), if not of its

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famous theologians, attracted a great many religious persecutes and was conducive to sociopolitical as well as theological debates of all kinds.⁶

Among the German theologians it was particularly Martin Bucer (Butzer) who exerted a deep and permanent influence on Calvin's thinking. This generally rather gentle Strasbourg theologian had many harsh things to say about Jews, particularly in connection with a debate between Landgrave Philip of Hesse and the Hessian theologians in 1538. Theretofore Bucer seems to have had but few direct relations with Jews. Several years later (in 1546) he was sharply to remonstrate against the imputation that he was of Jewish parentage. But when approached by his Hessian theological disciples, he took a definite anti-Jewish stand. He helped them prepare an extensive memorandum to answer the Landgrave's seven-point program, which was rather friendly to the Jews. After claiming that it was the general duty of civil rulers to protect the true religion and that the Jewish people had been both dishonest and long condemned by God, Bucer and his associates stressed particularly the country's losses occasioned by the economic rivalry between Jewish and Christian merchants. Their proposals, known as the "Cassel Advice," demanded, therefore, both religious and economic safeguards. The Jews were to pledge themselves not to harm Christians, to have no religious disputations with them, to attend Christian sermons, and, most significantly, to discontinue their reliance on the Talmud. They were also to be forbidden to engage in moneylending, commerce or industry and forced to make a living only from menial labor. In this connection the Hessian clergy coined the well-known simile of the sponge-like function of Jewish moneylending which first sucked up the country's wealth and was subsequently squeezed dry by the authorities. When the Landgrave rejected these proposals as too extreme and argued against them also on theological grounds, he received an urgent letter from Bucer, pointing out his alleged theological errors.⁷ It was unavoidable that Bucer's anti-Jewish views should also affect Calvin who happened to spend most of his involuntary exile from Geneva in those very years 1539-41 in Bucer's close proximity at Strasbourg.⁸

CALVINUS JUDAIZANS

Like other reformers, Calvin naturally had to take a stand on the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Not surprisingly, the late medieval and early modern sectarian struggles frequently resulted in each faction accusing the other of "judaizing." This practice, which in ancient times had led Roman emperors to speak in official decrees of the "new Jew," Nestorius, and which in the sixth century had made opponents of Patriarch Paul of Antioch call him "Paul the Jew," repeated itself during the Albigenian revolt and subsequently during the sectarian conflicts of the Protestant Reformation.⁹

Calvin and his associates were particularly prone to hurl that accusation at their opponents, especially Miguel (Michael) Servetus, whose anti-trinitarianism smacked, in fact, of Jewish as well as of Muslim teachings. "It is, indeed," reads one of Calvin's articles of accusation addressed to the syndics of Geneva in 1553, "an abomination to see how this wretched man [Servetus] excuses the Jews' blasphemies against the Christian religion, and he approves and extols the miserable words of the Muslims that the three persons in the Trinity or, as he styles them, three gods, were unknown to the Fathers and are sons of Beelzebub."¹⁰

As was usual in such cases, the accusers did not have to be consistent. Almost in the same breath Calvin appears as the defender of the Old Testament against calumnies by Servetus, such as that ancient Judea had really been a very poor country, and as denouncer of Servetus' too great indebtedness to Jewish Bible commentators. Indubitably, Servetus was a much better student of Hebrew than Calvin and most other reformers and made good use of such Jewish commentaries as those of Rashi and David Kimhi which enjoyed a great vogue among other Christian Hebraists as well. Curiously, Calvin often accused his enemy of having borrowed a "Jewish" interpretation from the commentary of a good medieval Catholic, Nicholas de Lyra. This denunciation was not so completely far-fetched, however, for Nicholas had indeed extensively borrowed from Rashi's *Commentary*.¹¹ This series of denunciations constituted, of course, but a part of the Calvinist campaign against Servetus which resulted in the latter's burning at the stake in 1553—that permanent blemish on the dark dictatorial regime of the Geneva reformer.¹²

Servetus reciprocated in kind. Just as his anti-trinitarianism had served as the main target for the Calvinists, so did he turn the tables on his

archopponent by pressing charges based on Calvin's emphasis upon "Jewish legalism." There is no question, indeed, that Calvin, who had been trained for the practice of law, rather than of theology, and who was building in Geneva what his fellow reformer, John Knox, admiringly called the "maist perfyit schoole of Chyrst that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostyllis," was greatly attracted to the Old Testament law which he tried to imitate as much as possible in his new Christian republic. With his usual fervor Servetus declaimed, "You [Calvin] place the Christians on a par with the vulgar Jews." Calling the Mosaic law an "irrational, impossible, tyrannical law," Servetus thundered, "And to that law you wish to make us adhere equally today." He further appealed to Calvin to desist from "twisting that law to apply to us and from violently agitating for its observance, as if you were dealing with the Jews." In another context he bluntly accused Calvin that he overlooked that in the New Covenant a new and living way was inaugurated and had thus "shocked me with your true Jewish zeal." These accusations were not silenced by Servetus' death, and, in 1595, Aegidius Hunnius published a polemical pamphlet under the characteristic title of *Calvinus Judaizans*. Curiously, some of the main shafts were aimed at Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity. Hunnius claimed that his work would show "the Judaic glosses and corruptions wherewith John Calvin did not hesitate to corrupt in a detestable fashion the passages and the most celebrated testimonies in Holy Scripture concerning the glorious Trinity."¹³

Perhaps egged on by such accusations, Calvin often went out of his way in attacking not only the ancient Jews but also his Jewish contemporaries, particularly in their persistent adherence to their traditional interpretation of the Bible. He did not hesitate from time to time to accuse Jews of fraudulently corrupting the biblical texts. True, he never budged from his insistence on the basic trustworthiness of the extant texts of the Law of Moses. Referring to contemporary queries as to how, after the burning of all books by Antiochus Epiphanes, they were again speedily available after the cessation of hostilities, Calvin exclaimed, "But even though all wicked men as if conspiring together, have so shamelessly insulted the Jews, no one has ever dared charge them with substituting false books." Nevertheless some minor textual falsifications, especially in the books of Prophets and the Hagiographa, were still possible. Calvin believed that Jewish scribes, even if supported by all

extant Hebrew texts, could not be trusted, particularly wherever an original reading might have had Christological implications. While suggesting, for example, an emendation in Ps. 22:17, he exclaimed: "I do not labor here in order to convince the Jews whose stubbornness is indomitable to the last ditch [*ad rixandum*]. I merely wish to show how unjustly they have disturbed Christian minds because of their different reading of this passage."¹⁴ In another context he accused the Jews of knowingly denying the Old Testament's testimonies concerning Christ. "But they are not only foolish and stupid but also frenetic." All of this was, in his opinion, merely a sign that God had struck them with blindness, "and if I wished to persist in refuting their errors there would be no end."¹⁵

Understandably, it was the Book of Daniel with its messianic predictions which lent itself particularly well to Calvin's exposition of his general outlook on history and the delineation of the alleged differences between ancient Israel and post-Christian Jewry. Needless to say, the Geneva reformer unquestioningly accepted the traditional date of that book. In a long overlooked brief statement of 1555, Calvin expressly stated that Daniel had accurately predicted the events unfolding during the following two centuries "for he had so clearly specified the persons, the mores and nature, as well as the circumstances of their actions, that one is bound to conclude that he was a true spokesman of God before whom all matters are ever present."¹⁶

Here Calvin ran up against the commentary on Daniel by Don Isaac Abravanel which had attracted wide attention also among Christians. It is possible that Calvin knew Abravanel's comment only from second hand. At his first mention he refers to his friend Antonius Cevalerius as having suggested to him the name of "Barbinel who appears to be ingenious above all other" Jewish commentators. Here Calvin attacked particularly Abravanel's six arguments against the identification of Daniel's Fifth Monarchy with the reign of Jesus Christ. In various other comments Calvin likewise attacked Abravanel with his accustomed vehemence calling him an "impostor," "a dog," and the like. He denounced Abravanel's "hallucinations," particularly also in the reconstruction of ancient history. Apart from the usual theological and dogmatic controversies, Calvin went into great lengths in proving that Abravanel's repudiation of Josephus, whom he himself avowedly not always followed, was completely unjustified. Of course, he rejected Abravanel's

chronology, doubtless taken over from Ibn Daud's twelfth-century Chronicle, that two centuries had passed between the death of Christ and the destruction of the Temple. "How great is his ignorance!"¹⁷ Elsewhere, too, Calvin attacked the Jewish messianic expectation as too materialistic. In one of his sermons he declared that the Jews imagine that the Messiah would "come into the world in order to bring an abundance of goods so that they may have a bellyful to eat, that there shall be no wars, that each should rest and indulge in various delights; this is how the Jews have depicted their savior." But he had to admit that the very Apostles were not completely free of that "fantasy."¹⁸

Not surprisingly, some homiletical interpretations of Scripture current among contemporary Jews lent themselves as special targets for Calvin's verbal arrows. Not drawing any distinction between what the Jews themselves considered the ordinary meaning of Scripture and the various folkloristic and homiletical elaborations by ancient and medieval rabbis, Calvin's logical mind could readily indulge in sharp attacks upon such Jewish "fantasies." In his comment on Isa. 48:21 he declared that "according to their custom, Jews mix in here stupid fables and invent miracles which never occurred. This is not merely the result of their ignorance but audacity, for they easily allow themselves to invent whatever appears favorable to them even if it lacks all reason." In another context he derided the Jews' identification of Canaanites with contemporary Illyrians, Germans, and even Frenchmen, because the ancient Canaanites had allegedly migrated into western Europe. "They already understand Zerphat to connote Spain" (Calvin evidently received wrong information about the contemporary Hebrew use of *Sarefat* vs. *Sefarad*). These identifications, with a long folkloristic history behind them, furnished Calvin the opportunity of assailing the Jews who "are not abashed by anything and incongruously bring together frivolous matters. . . . They are also garrulous about subjects unknown to them. They do it all for no reason but deception [*delectus*]."¹⁹ In all these matters Calvin drew no distinction between the ancient homilists who, through imaginative hermeneutics, tried to deduce moral lessons from Scripture, and his Jewish contemporaries who were perfectly aware of the difference between aggadic and allegorical interpretations on the one hand, and the ordinary meaning of the biblical texts. As a matter of record, in the perennial Judeo-Christian polemics Jews were often accused by their

opponents of "materialism" precisely because of their rigid adherence to the literal meaning of Scripture.

The last quoted passage from Calvin's *Commentary* on Matthew is exceptional in so far as, through drawing in the Jewish interpretation of Isa. 7:14, Calvin had the opportunity of controverting a Jewish exegesis relating to the New Testament, an opportunity which rarely offered itself in connection with his commentaries on that Testament. Here he could only elaborate the differentiation between Israel before Christ and the Jewish people's repudiation of the Christian messiah as stated in the New Testament and in its interpretation by the Church Fathers. Like his predecessors, Calvin saw in pre-Christian Judaism essentially a preparation for the Christian message. "It ought to be known," he declared, "that to whatever places Jews had been expelled there also was diffused with them some seed of piety and the odor of a purer doctrine." But, as a rule, Calvin emphasized the anti-Jewish and toned down the pro-Jewish statements in the New Testament. Even the well-known pro-Jewish utterances of Paul in his Epistle to the Romans are twisted in Calvin's interpretation to convey an essentially anti-Jewish message. In this respect we find a considerable difference in emphasis between Calvin's *Institutes* and his commentaries. The former work, written before Calvin achieved domination in Geneva, though it was frequently revised, leans rather closely to the traditional interpretation. Discussing Romans 9 and 11, the reformer observes:

Nevertheless, when Paul cast them down from vain confidence in their kindred, he still saw, on the other hand, that the covenant which God had made once for all with the descendants of Abraham could in no way be made void. . . . Therefore, that they might not be defrauded of their privilege, the gospel had to be announced to them first. For they are, so to speak, like the first-born in God's household. Accordingly, this honor was to be given them until they refused what was offered, and by their ungratefulness caused it to be transferred to the Gentiles. Yet, despite the great obstinacy with which they continue to wage war against the gospel, we must not despise them, while we consider that, for the sake of the promise, God's blessing still rests among them.

Against this deliberately cautious, but sympathetic interpretation, we find that in his *Commentary* on Rom. 11:28-32, he argues inconclusively back and forth the pro- and anti-Jewish elements in this passage, but finds its main meaning in the fact that "their [the Jews'] greatest

crime consisted in their lack of faith [*incredulitas*]." Elsewhere, too, he contends that the Jews still "wish to have tangible [*ad oculos*] evidence of divine power in connection with every miracle."²⁰

In his sermons Calvin could even more freely allude to contemporary Jews, while using historical developments or biblical interpretations as a foil. In the crucial matter of the Deuteronomic prohibition of interest, Calvin delivered in 1555 an important sermon arguing that the distinction between the "brother," to whom no interest could be charged, and the "stranger," from whom one could collect it, no longer held true. But rather than contend that, after the advent of Christ, all men had become brothers and hence usury was prohibited to all, Calvin, who had also rejected the underlying Aristotelian view of the unproductivity of money, taught that moderate interest could be charged to all borrowers except persons in utter penury. This classical tirade of the Geneva reformer included the following statements:

For God wished to withdraw the children of Abraham from the rest of the world; He had united them into one body and wished to be their chief. There was good reason, therefore, for their maintaining [that unity] and that they should be more inclined to support one another. From that condition the Jews took occasion to trap all those who have little, for they interpret all the Scriptural promises to their advantage....

For example, when it is said 'Ye shall rule over many nations' they conclude therefrom: It is permitted to us to exercise any kind of tyranny and to devour the heathens for they are uncircumcised, polluted, and in no way belong to God, and that we should extract from them everything possible without sparing them. Even the word of the priest [Deuteronomist] they understood as meaning that they create no difficulty for them [the Jews] to charge to a stranger as much usury as he can stand without any regard for equity.... [In contrast thereto] we [the Christians] should preserve equity and righteousness toward all men and have pity and compassion for all.

All of which did not prevent Calvin in the same breath from teaching that there may be a "special brotherhood" in a community of like-minded Christians.²¹

DEBATE WITH JOSEL OF ROSHEIM?

Among Calvin's writings there is a small but remarkable tract entitled *Ad quaestiones et obiecta Judaei cuiusdam responsio*. Nothing is known about the circumstances which induced Calvin to write this noteworthy

dialogue, nor about the date of its composition.²² The content, too, raises many questions. In the first place the Jewish debater reveals an astounding familiarity with the New Testament. True, in the sixteenth century quite a few Jews, particularly before entering a religious disputation with a Christian, familiarized themselves with some of the classical Christian arguments and their scriptural backing. This is true of Don Isaac Abravanel, Abraham Farissol, and a number of other Jewish controversialists. Nevertheless it is quite remarkable that the Jewish debater tried to persuade Calvin through arguments largely borrowed from Christian theology. As if to pay back in kind, Calvin's replies were largely based upon Old Testament passages. While neither debater drew a sharp line of demarcation between the two Testaments, this inverted emphasis by the two contestants is quite remarkable.²³

Secondly, the Jew's arguments are not only given with much objectivity, a procedure rarely pursued by the Geneva reformer in his controversial pamphlets, but, despite their brevity, they often appear more forthright and logical than Calvin's much longer and quite involved replies. If this Jewish debater had been a figment of Calvin's imagination, as is assumed by most scholars, this discrepancy between query and answer would appear doubly remarkable. Even if logically capable to do so and by his legal training perhaps best prepared to see two sides of any question, Calvin was temperamentally far from inclined to give any opponent an equal chance. It stands to reason, therefore, that Calvin may indeed have heard such a presentation by a Jewish spokesman and tried to invalidate it by his replies. In that case the most likely period for the composition of this tract would appear to be the time of his sojourn in Strasbourg in 1539-41 and particularly his visit to Frankfurt in 1539. Here he may indeed have encountered Josel of Rosheim, the chief defender of German Jewry at that time, who often sought direct contacts with the religious and political leaders of both warring camps. Though primarily a businessman, Josel was a well-informed controversialist who could stand his ground in any religious disputation. In fact, in his *Diary* Josel records the "disputations he had held with many Gentile scholars [in Frankfurt in 1539] to prove to them from our holy Torah against the words of Luther, Bucer and his faction" the groundlessness of the latter's anti-Jewish accusations. Among the Protestant controversialists, Josel informs us in another context, there arose one who attacked him in a "violent, angry and menacing" harangue. Josel replied calmly: "You, a