



Of One Tree: Calvin on Jews and Christians

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Wulfert de Greef: Of One Tree: Calvin on Jews and Christians in the Context of the Late Middle Ages (Refo500 Academic Studies, Vol. 83.) Translated by Lyle D. Bierma Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021, 197 pp.

Wulfert de Greef

Of One Tree

Calvin on Jews and Christians
in the Context of the Late Middle Ages



Translated by Lyle D. Bierma

Academic Studies

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translation of Wulfert de Greef's 2012 Dutch volume of the same title. Lyle D. Bierma's excellent translation makes the book available to a wider readership. The book's greatest strengths are that it provides the reader a lucid introduction to many aspects of the secondary scholarship concerning Calvin's views of Jews, concise accounts of the historical backdrop and contemporary contexts in which Calvin developed his views, and several well-chosen analyses of Calvin's primary texts that have often been overlooked in prior scholars' studies. In particular, de Greef wisely chose to focus on Calvin's Old Testament exegesis. *Of One Tree* is an eminently readable volume for lay readers and scholars alike.

The first chapter outlines key figures and events that contributed to the view that Jews in medieval Christendom posed threats to Christians and prompted the need for protection. After an admirably succinct overview, de Greef devotes the majority of this first chapter to anti-Jewish (and anti-Christian) literature, as well as sixteenth-century Christians' debates about whether Jewish literature should be tolerated or censored. These choices point to the author's predisposition toward the intellectual (rather than social or cultural) aspects shaping Christian-Jewish relations. The discussion of the polemical literature and corresponding intellectual debates is somewhat oddly arranged, as it bounces between the twelfth century and the sixteenth century. In chapter two de Greef briefly summarizes medieval and early modern Christian interest in Hebrew and Hebrew sources, ultimately focusing on the work of several prominent sixteenth-century Christian Hebraists. One can assume that the author's predisposition toward certain intellectual aspects of this Christian-Jewish history is due to his own judgment that it was these that most shaped Calvin's views of Jews and Judaism. While a defensible claim, it would be helpful for the author to have stated this more clearly as part of his argument.

The bulk of the book—chapters three to eight—focuses on Calvin's views of Jews and Judaism, approaching the question from different angles. In chapter three de Greef explores the question of Calvin's contacts with Jews and knowledge of Jewish sources. Chapter four provides a very brief account (about four pages) on Calvin's views of the relationship between law and gospel and his argument for the enduring significance of the Old Testament for Christians. It is puzzling that the author addresses these themes so briefly since they underpin key aspects of chapters five to nine. A deeper engagement with the primary and secondary sources on these topics would strengthen these chapters significantly.

In chapter five de Greef explores Calvin's use of Scripture to develop his views of how Christians should approach their relationship with Jews. This is the heart of the book and the place of the author's most significant contributions. De Greef establishes that in both his NT and OT exegesis, Calvin depicts Israel as "'the firstborn' in the family of God" (85). Christians participate in the promises first given to the Jews through Abraham, through whom God's covenant is then extended to all nations. Accordingly, argues de Greef, Calvin teaches that the "nations, therefore, are bound together with them [the Jews] in the unity of the faith" (87). Consequently, when Christians "come to faith, they are joined together with the Jews" (87), which he warns Christians should never forget. De Greef identifies key biblical commitments that shape Calvin's teachings concerning Jews: Jews are the source of the law and the gospel, for which Christians should be thankful and from whom they should be willing to learn (88-90); Christians are engrafted into the body of the chosen people so that Israel and the nations become one body (91) and, thus, Christians "do not enjoy an independent status" (95); and Jews retain their special status despite their "ingratitude" (93). In this way, de Greef makes the case for Calvin's complicated and tension-filled view that even as Christians have seemingly replaced Jews in God's covenant, this is not the last word. De Greef argues that Calvin emphasized that Christians should never "lose sight of the fact that Christians do not exist in isolation." Rather, Christians join the Jews so "that together they might be the people of God" (98, emphasis added).

In chapter six de Greef studies Calvin's views of the future of Israel. He sees strong indications that Calvin expected the Jews' full return from exile or their conversion (107), pointing to Calvin's

emphases upon a spiritualized Jerusalem (115) and a spiritual kingdom (126-31). Calvin also applied biblical prophecies of the restoration of Israel to the “entire course of history from the deliverance from exile to the return of Christ” (122). De Greef investigates in chapter seven Calvin’s engagement with Christian and Jewish exegetes in his biblical commentaries. He notes Calvin’s criticisms of Christian exegetes for applying texts to Christ that “ought first to be understood in their original historical contexts” (136) and his criticisms of Jewish exegetes in their refusal ultimately to direct Scripture to its true aim, Christ (143). Within chapter seven is an interlude on Calvin’s views on usury that is not tied clearly to the chapter’s prior themes. In the final chapter, de Greef briefly (in about five pages) explores some of Calvin’s positive and negative statements concerning Jews. Similar to other sections in the book, a broader engagement with the primary and secondary literature on these important topics is desirable.

The book left me both thankful and perplexed. I am thankful because several chapters provide compelling accounts of key aspects of Calvin’s teachings on Jews and Christian-Jewish relations that are rightfully grounded in his biblical exegesis and engage with important secondary literature. These chapters are simultaneously rich in information and amazingly concise. The book left me perplexed at points, however, because the logic of the overall arrangement of the chapters is not clear, nor are sufficient connections made between the chapters. Consequently, when read for concise nuggets, the book is incredibly helpful, but when read as a whole, the book is less effective or coherent. Nonetheless, there are many treasures to be found, yielding an enriched understanding of Calvin’s teachings on Jews and Judaism.

G. Sujin Pak is dean of Boston University School of Theology (STH) and Professor of the History of Christianity since January 2021. She has published two books with Oxford University Press – *The Judaizing Calvin* (2010) and *The Reformation of Prophecy: Early Modern Interpretations of the Prophet and Old Testament Prophecy*– along with several articles in different journals. Her research and teaching focus on the Protestant reformations, Calvin, Luther, the history of biblical interpretation, and women and the reformation.

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