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“The perpetuity of Christ’s reign ...” Calvin’s interpretation of Psalm 110:1

ABSTRACT

The discussion of the Messiah in the Old Testament has always been very significant. Matters like the relationship between Old and New Testament, the view of Christ, especially regarding his divine nature, revelation, the view of Scripture etc. – all of these aspects are crucial for the confessions of the church. Considering Calvin’s accentuation on Christology in his theology as such and not least bearing his high regard for the Book of the Psalms in mind, a study of his reflections on Psalm 110:1 is most appropriate for getting more insight in his exegesis. In Calvin’s exposition of Psalm 110:1 Calvin emphasises the significance and consequences for the church (as well as for the world) of Yahweh saying to the Lord Christ that He will be raised to the right hand of the Father, and that his enemies will be subjected beneath his feet. An analysis of Calvin’s exegesis shows his respect of the frame Christ Himself provided when He referred to Psalm 110:1 in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. Calvin thus remains faithful to the text being expounded, but – as always – he does so within the context of the whole history of revelation.

Key concepts: Calvin, Messiah, perpetuity of Christ’s reign, Psalm 110

Opsomming

“Die ewigheid van Christus se heerskappy” – Calvyn se uitleg van Psalm 110:1

Die debat oor die Messias in die Ou Testament is deur die loop van die jare van groot betekenis gewees. Temas soos die verhouding tussen die Ou en Nuwe Testament, die beskouing oor Christus, in die besonder ten opsigte van sy goddelike natuur, openbaring, Skrifbeskouing ens. – al hierdie aspekte is wesenlik vir die belydenisse van die kerk. Wanneer Calvyn se klem op die Christologie in die geheel van sy teologie en daarby sy hoë agting van die Psalms in gedagte gehou word, is ’n studie van sy besinning oor Psalm 110:1 meer as gepas om meer insig in sy eksegeese te verkry. In sy verklaring van Psalm 110:1 beklemtoon Calvyn die betekenis en konsekwensies vir die kerk (sowel as die wêreld) van Jahweh wat aan die Here Christus sê dat Hy opgeneem sal word tot die regterhand van die Vader en dat sy vyande tot ’n voetbank vir sy voete gemaak sal word. ’n Ondersoek van Calvyn se eksegeese toon sy agting vir die raamwerk wat deur Christus self vir die verstaan van hierdie vers verskaf is toe Hy in Matteus 22 en Markus 12 na Psalm 110:1 verwys het. Calvyn bly dus getrou aan die teks in sy verklaring daarvan, maar – soos deurgaans in sy eksegeese – doen hy dit binne die konteks van die geheel van die openbaringsgeskiedenis.

Kernbegrippe: Calvyn, Messias, Christus se ewige heerskappy, Psalm 110

“The perpetuity of Christ’s reign ...”

Calvin’s interpretation of Psalm 110:1¹

*“... necesse est impleri omnia quae scripta sunt in lege Mosi et prophetis et psalmis de me.”
Tunc aperuit illis sensum ut intellegerent scripturas ... (Luke 24:44-45)*

*Psalms Prophetiis adnumero: quando his commune est quod illis tribuimus.
(Calvin, 1543, Inst. 4,8,6; OS 5,138,13 et seq.; cf. Battles’ translation in Calvin, 1960)
I include the psalms with the prophecies, since what we attribute to the prophecies is common
to them.*

*... ad fidem Christi revocat, tanquam ad scopum atque adeo summam.
Nam et ex ea dependent quae mox sequuntur. (Calvin, 1548, on 2 Tim 3:15; CO 52,382)
For this reason he directs us to the faith of Christ as the design [scope],
and therefore as the sum, of the Scriptures;
for on faith depends also what immediately follows.*

In his voluminous commentary on the Psalms from the year 1557, Calvin mentions various prophecies about and references to Christ found in several Psalms. However, in no other Psalm does he apply the Psalm in such an exclusive way to Christ as he does in his exegesis of Psalm 110. He says, for example, that “the truths here stated relate neither to David nor to any other person than the Mediator alone” (CO 32,159; CStA 6,316,24-25).² Because of the decisive place of Christology in any theology, Calvin’s reflections on this crucial biblical text are very illuminating to get some insight in the Reformer’s exegesis as well as his biblical thinking.

The Messiah in the Old Testament

The discussion of the Messiah in the Old Testament has always been intense and significant. Not only the question regarding how one should treat the Old Testament as such and prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament,³ but also the relationship between the Messiah spoken about in the Old Testament, and Jesus of Nazareth, are topics that lead to vehement disputes in theological circles. This subject – the Messiah in Psalm 110 as a classical example of this theme in the Old Testament – is therefore unequivocally concerned with the reformed confession of faith and the reformed heritage. As a matter of fact, the question

1 An earlier version of this article was published in De Bruijne, Burger & Te Velde (2015:17-25) – the editors gave their permission for the publication of a revised version.

2 English translations by James Anderson (Calvin, 1845-1849). However, I do not use his translation in every instance – it depends on the accuracy.

3 Strauß (1922:618) says: “Obwohl die Thematik ‘Messias’/‘messianisch’ als solche und aufs Ganze gesehen zunächst keineswegs zu den umfangreichsten und bedeutendsten des Alten Testaments gehört, impliziert sie so doch wichtigste Grundentscheidungen alttestamentlicher und vor allem dann biblischer Theologie.”
Cf. also Greßmann (in Strauß, 1992:618): “... streicht man ihn [den Messias – VEd’A] aus der Verkündigung der älteren Propheten, so ist die notwendige Konsequenz, die Heilserwartungen überhaupt aus ihren Schriften auszumerzen.”

about the Messiah in the Old Testament and the fulfilling of the messianic prophecies in the New Testament can be said to constitute part of the heart of reformed theology. It touches on issues such as the relationship between the Old and the New Testament, the unity of Scripture,⁴ the authority of Christ and his Word, the relationship between Christ as God and Christ as man, as well as the role of the Holy Spirit, to mention but a few. For this reason, an examination of Calvin's treatment of the first verse of this Psalm in particular, in his commentary on the Book of Psalms of 1557, is a worthwhile endeavour.

Calvin's exegesis as it relates to the scope of Scripture

That Calvin would refer to the Old Testament in his commentary on Luke 24 is obvious because of the way Jesus Himself applies the Old Testament to Himself and his suffering (Luke 24:25-27; 44-47). With reference to Luke 24:27 Calvin states:

In order that Christ may be made known to us through the Gospel, it is therefore necessary that Moses and the Prophets should go before as guides, to show us the way. It is necessary to remind readers of this, that they may not lend an ear to fanatics, who, by suppressing the Law and the Prophets, wickedly mutilate the Gospel; as if God intended that any testimony which he has ever given respecting his Son should become useless. In what manner we must apply to Christ those passages respecting him which are to be found in every part of the Law and the Prophets, we have not now leisure to explain. Let it suffice to state briefly, that there are good reasons why Christ is called the end of the law. (CO 45,806.)

It is well-known that for Calvin the scope of Scripture is Christ. In his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:15 he says:

... he (Paul – VEd'A) directs us to the faith of Christ as the scope and therefore as the whole sum [of Scripture]; for on faith depends also what immediately follows (CO 52,382).⁵

This expression – Christ as “the scope of Scripture” (cf. De Greef, 1984:225-236) – clearly corresponds to the way Scripture speaks. Hence the question is how Calvin applies this principle in his commentary on Psalm 110, given that Christ is the source of all revelation (Inst. 1.13.7), the only light of the truth (cf. Opitz, 1994:282).

Neither David nor any other person ...

Right at the beginning of his introduction (Argumentum) to Psalm 110 Calvin highlights two aspects as being specifically messianic – aspects that also correspond with the structure of the Psalm (verses 1-3; verse 4; verses 5-7), namely “the perpetuity of Christ's reign” (verses 1-3; 5-7) and “the eternity of his priesthood” (verse 4). (CO 32,159.) Hence the aspect of the eternity of his priesthood (verse 4) is situated within the frame of the perpetuity of his reign (verses 1-3 and 5-7), as presented by Calvin in his analysis of the Psalm.

Calvin, faithful to his own principles of exegesis, deals extensively with and focuses on the contents of the text itself – in this case Psalm 110. He does this even though Christ Himself has declared that this Psalm refers to Him – as is well-known from the Gospels of Matthew

4 “Der *Titel* Christus und Messias bietet die Möglichkeit, die Einheit des AT und NT zu verdeutlichen ...” (Neuser, 1998:249-250.)

5 “... ad fidem Christi revocat, tanquam ad scopum atque adeo summam. Nam et ex ea dependent quae mox sequuntur” (CO 52,382).

and Mark⁶ and as mentioned by Calvin in his discussion of verses 1-3:

Having the testimony of Christ that this Psalm was penned in reference to Himself, we need not apply to any other quarter for the corroboration of this statement; and even supposing we neither had his authority, nor the testimony of the apostle, the Psalm itself cries that it would admit of no other interpretation ... (CO 32,159)⁷

Calvin next turns to the text at hand and, within the context of the dispute with the Jews as to whether Psalm 110 refers to Christ or not, comes to a conclusion about the application of this Psalm – one which singles it out from all the other Psalms:

... the truths here stated relate neither to David nor to any other person than the Mediator alone. (CO 32,159.)

With “the truths” he means in the first instance the perpetuity of Christ’s reign and the eternity of his priesthood. This first aspect – the perpetuity of Christ’s reign – is expressed by Calvin already in his translation of “Adonai” in verse 1 (CO 32,159)⁸ and in verse 5 (CO 32,165) with the Latin “Dominus”, i.e. “the Lord”. In both instances “the Lord” is mentioned in relation to his reign through the use of the important expression “at the right hand” of Yahweh.

The Lord of David his father (CO 32,161)

In his treatment of the authorship by of Psalm 110 by referring to the words, “a Psalm of David” (CO 32,159; CStA 6,316), Calvin has already touched on verse 1 as well, especially because of Christ’s revelation in Matthew 22 and Mark 12, namely that David has penned this Psalm (“in the Spirit” – Matthew 22:43) with reference to Christ. As Calvin turns to a detailed treatment of verse 1, he does not repeat this aspect, but rather clarifies its significance.

What is particularly striking is the deeply contemplative way in which Calvin discusses the first clause of Psalm 110:1, which is translated by him as “Dixit Iehova Domino meo”. He mentions three facets of this verse that “might to some extent be applied to the person of David”. Firstly, David’s ascent to the royal throne was in no way illegal; secondly, he did not make his way to the throne by nefarious artifices; thirdly, he was not raised to it by the fickle suffrages of the people. In contrast to these worldly ways, it was by the direct authority of God that David reigned over Israel. But Calvin quotes Romans 13:1 when he says it “may be justly affirmed of all the kings of the earth, that they have been placed upon their thrones by the hand of God, for the kingdoms of this world are appointed by the decree of heaven and there is no power but of God” (CO 32,160). The first point Calvin is making, is that there is a difference between David’s kingship and that of all the other kings. “God indeed invests kings with authority, but they are not consecrated as David was that like him, in consequence of the holy anointing oil, they might be elevated to the rank of Christ’s vicegerents.” (CO 32,160.) Other kings, although they hold their position by the will of God (Calvin refers to Psalm 82 in this regard), “are not clothed with that sacred majesty by which David was honoured to be an image (‘imago’) of God’s only begotten Son” (CO 32,160).⁹

This theme – the difference between all other earthly kings on the one hand and the kingship of David by a Divine right on the other (CO 32,160) – is discussed comprehensively by Calvin.

6 Matthew 22:43-45 and Mark 12:35-37; cf. also De Greef (2006:251,283).

7 CO 32,159: “..., Psalmus ipse clamat se non aliam expositionem admittere.”

8 Meant is here *Adoni*, i.e. *Adonai* in the mode of address – the Lord said “to my Lord” (CO 32,159).

9 De Greef (2006:253) regarding the concept of “imago”.

However, he then returns to the argument in his introduction when he concludes:

That the whole of what is stated in this verse [Ps 110:1 – VEd'A] cannot be entirely and exclusively applied to David is very obvious from Christ's reply to the Pharisees, which can be read in Matthew 22:44. Because when the Pharisees said that Christ was to be the son of David, He said to them: 'How then is He by David himself called Lord?'

The Jewish arguments can, according to Calvin, be "easy repelled". First of all, he confirms that David is not speaking in his own name, but in that of the people (CO 32,160). This approach used by Calvin in Psalm 110 is not actually anything special. Calvin also uses it in his commentary on other so-called royal Psalms, and, as a matter of fact, in almost all the Psalms where the authorship of David can be established (see Russel, 1968). Secondly, Calvin mentions the "principle or maxim then generally admitted, that David spoke by the spirit of prophecy and consequently prophesied of the future reign of Christ" (CO 32,161; see also De Greef, 2006:229-230). This principle is, in fact, essential in Calvin's interpretation of Psalm 110. It thus not only applies to Psalm 110 (in which case it is clear because of Matthew 22:43-45 and Mark 12:35-37), but to other Psalms as well, since David is mentioned as "prophet" by Jesus Christ Himself (Russel, 1968:39-41). In Psalm 110, however, the case is even clearer, as Calvin comments:

This principal of interpretation being admitted, it is plainly to be inferred that he had a reference to Christ's future manifestation in the flesh, because He is the sole and supreme Head of the Church. (CO 32,161.)¹⁰

Calvin states that the following part of verse 1a strengthens his exposition of the first part, "Yahweh said to my Lord". It is beyond question that "the Lord" in the text of Psalm 110:1a is referring to Christ, as

... it also follows, that there is something in Christ more excellent than his humanity, on account of which He is called the Lord of David his father. (CO 32,161.)

One King is chosen ...

Having expounded the first part of verse 1a, "Yahweh said to my Lord", in which Calvin concludes that Christ is the Lord of David, his forefather, he continues commenting on the second part, "sit at my right hand". Calvin explains that earthly kings may indeed be said to sit at God's right hand, inasmuch as they reign by his authority.

Here, however, something loftier is expressed, in that one king is chosen in a peculiar manner and elevated to the rank of power and dignity next to God, of which dignity a trace only appeared in David, while in Christ it shone forth in perfect splendour [clearness]. (CO 32,161.)

In a certain sense Calvin is again treating David as a type (typus) of Christ (cf. Selderhuis, 2000:66). However, he immediately downplays the implications by emphasizing the fact that in the case of David only a "trace" of the dignity of reigning at the right hand of God is visible, while in the case of Christ it shines in flawless brilliance.

It is striking that Calvin speaks here also of the "spirit of prophecy" (of the spiritu prophetic). (CO 32,161.)

... as God's right hand is elevated far above all angels, it follows that he who is

¹⁰ CO 32,161: "quia summum est et unicum ecclesiae caput."

seated there is exalted above all creatures (CO 32,161).

Therefore, Calvin says, “we will not maintain that angels were brought down from their high estate to be put in subjection to David” (CO 32,161). “Quid ergo superest, nisi ...” (CO 32,161), Calvin recommences, “hence what does remain otherwise than ...” that by “... the spirit of prophecy Christ’s throne is exalted far above all principalities in heavenly places?” (CO 32,161.)

Calvin explains that the expression, “sitting at the right hand”, is one borrowed from the cultural custom of that time, used in relation to earthly kings. The use of this expression in Psalm 110:1a intends to show that the person sitting at the right hand of the king is said to be next to him in a position of delegated power.

... hence the Son, by whom the Father governs the world, is by this session (sessionem) represented as metaphorically (metaphorice) invested with supreme dominion. (CO 32,161.)

After this explanation of the metaphorical use of the expression of the Lord (Adonai) “at the right hand of the Lord (Yahweh)”, Calvin continues with an exposition of verse 1b.

... prostrate at Christ’s feet¹¹

As there is no doubt at all that the title “my Lord” refers to the Lord Christ in Psalm 110:1a, Calvin launches straight into his explanation of verse 1b, “until I make thine enemies thy footstool”:

By these words the prophet affirms that Christ would subdue all the opposition which his enemies in their tumultuous rage might employ for the subversion of his kingdom ... (CO 32,161).

What is striking in this sentence is the biblical way in which Calvin speaks about David as a prophet – much like the New Testament speaks about David. The following aspects come to the fore as Calvin continues his explanation:

First, the one mentioned above, that all opposition to Christ’s reign (the reign of “my Lord” – verse 1a) is going to be subjected to Him.

Second, “the kingdom of Christ would never enjoy tranquillity until he had conquered his numerous and formidable enemies. Even if the whole world should direct their machinations to the overthrow of Christ’s royal throne, David here declares that it would remain unmoved and unmoveable, while all they who rise up against it shall be ruined.” (CO 32,161.)

The point Calvin is making with this second aspect is that we should learn that “however numerous those enemies may be who conspire against the Son of God [...], they shall, by the greatness of his power, be laid prostrate at Christ’s feet [sub pedibus Christi].” (CO 32,161.) Calvin underlines that this prophecy (propheta) will not be accomplished before the last day,

... it must be that the kingdom of Christ will be assailed by many enemies from time to time until the end of the world ...

Referring to 1 Corinthians 15:24 Calvin points out that we should not think these words mean that Christ would

11 “... sub pedibus Christi” (CO 32,161).

cease to reign and become, as it were, a private individual; we are to regard them (these words – VEd'A) as describing *the manner [modum] of his reign* (emphasis – VEd'A), that is, that his Divine majesty will be more conspicuous (CO 32,161).

The theologically interesting aspect is the conclusion that Calvin draws at the end of his exposition of Ps 110:1, namely the fact of God's election. According to Calvin's exegesis, this passage (verse 1b) is solely about "the reprobate who fall under Christ's feet to their own ruin and destruction". (CO 32,161.) In the conclusion of his explanation of this clause, "until I make thine enemies thy footstool", Calvin repeats his view on election (cf. Selderhuis, 2000:293-294).

All mankind are naturally opposed to Christ, and hence it is, that ere they be brought to yield a willing obedience to him, they must be subdued and humbled. This he does with regard to some of them whom he afterwards makes partakers with him in his glory; while he casts off others, so that they may remain for ever in their lost state (CO 32, 161-162).

At the centre of his exposition of verse 1b, however, is the notion that Christ's Divine majesty will be most evident at the end, when He "delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:24).

For he must reign "until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25 – cf. the English Standard Version; emphasis of prophecy from Ps 110:1 – VEd'A).

Calvin is thus faithful in his analysis of verse 1b, expounding it in accordance with his principle that biblical exegesis should be "in line with Scripture's understanding of itself" (Russel, 1968: 39; cf. also De Greef, 2006:222-225).

Conclusion

In Calvin's exposition of Psalm 110:1 – as in his introduction to his commentary on Psalm 110 as a whole (Argumentum), as well as in his introductory notes to verses 1-3 – Calvin emphasises the significance and consequences for the church (as well as for the world) of Yahweh saying to the Lord Christ that He will be raised to the right hand of the Father, and that His enemies will be subjected beneath his feet. It is therefore clear that he is expanding on the first sentence of his introduction, especially regarding Christ's reign:

In this Psalm David sets forth the perpetuity of Christ's reign and the eternity of his priesthood; and, in the first place, he affirms that God conferred upon Christ supreme dominion, combined with invincible power, with which He either conquers all his enemies, or compels them to submit to him ... (CO 32,159).

The rest of Psalm 110, verses 2 to 7, is addressed in the rest of the Argumentum and is dealt with in the remaining part of his commentary on this Psalm. The overwhelming significance of this investigation into his commentary on verse 1 is that it confirms the notion that Calvin's Christology (cf. Selderhuis, 2000:63 as well as note 5 in CStA 6,321) is found in his understanding of the Psalms within the context of the rest of Scripture. Without imposing any preconceptions on the text Calvin expounds the Hebrew text of this verse in a logical and – for the congregation – understandable way. Calvin's exegesis stays within the frame Christ Himself provided when He explained it in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. Calvin thus remains faithful to the text being expounded, but – as always – he does so within the whole history of revelation. As a result, his commentary of Psalm 110:1 is an exegetical masterpiece. Not only is it an example of exegesis for the church – the individual believer as well as the congregation – it is simultaneously a striking example of the faithful combination of biblical exegesis and sound theology.

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