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Calvin, the Bible, and History (Book Review)

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Calvin, the Bible, and History. Pitken, Barbara. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-19-009327-3, xii + 250 pp. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt University.

Decades ago I met a minister of the gospel who unashamedly regarded himself as a Calvinist. On informing him that I was a student of history, he told me that he was highly suspicious of history as a discipline. He associated the scholarly study of history with the critical approach to written sources that he in turn connected with the rise of theological liberalism—the movement that had brought forth scepticism and unbelief within the churches. This remains the view of many Christians, especially if they are inclined towards some version of fundamentalism.

Of course, there is no necessity for a genuinely historical outlook to be rooted in a starting-point of unbelief. Indeed, the argument can be made that the Christian religion is itself deeply historical. In fact, the critical use of sources and deepening of the western historical consciousness precedes the Reformation and played an important part in the pre-Reformation period. This development was already evident in the work of the Renaissance scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407-57). Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536), who was much influenced by Valla, had a seminal impact on Luther, Calvin, and other early Reformation leaders. Their dependence on the early editions of Erasmus' Greek New Testament—itself the fruit of his use of the critical historical methods of textual analysis—was immense.

Yet, because of the way that Protestantism later developed (down the path of scholasticism), comparatively little attention has been paid to the Reformers' view of history and the complexities of the historical process. In Calvin's case, and in spite of some reflections on "Calvin's Sense of History" offered by E. Harris Harbison (1907-64) over a half-century ago (*Christianity and History*, 1964, 270-88), Calvin's view of history has not received the attention it deserves in the Anglophone world.

This volume by Barbara Pitkin is a big step towards rectifying this situation. Pitkin is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Stanford University. The origins of this volume lay in a range of articles published in the *Sixteenth Century Journal* and elsewhere. However, this new book should not be dis-

missed as old work rehashed. A careful comparison with the original pieces confirms that this is a work of mature scholarship—the harvest of decades of sustained research and reflection.

Pitkin addresses Calvin's historical outlook in his *Institutes* and across a broad range of his commentaries and sermons. She pays particular attention to Calvin's work on the Pentateuch, II Samuel, the Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, the writings of Paul, and the gospel of John. The technique is to interrogate these and other texts with a view to elucidating Calvin's view of history and historical change. The picture that emerges is of a Calvin who was much more historically minded than many today would expect.

More specifically, we encounter a Calvin who is averse to metaphysical speculation and deeply interested in the specific, the down to earth, and the immediate. He focused on the original meaning and cultural context of the biblical texts—even where this approach might disappoint those seeking Christological or Trinitarian proof-texts (4, 43-6, 134). The result is an expository style that is careful, sober, lucid, and concise (17-21). Calvin's avoidance of metaphysical speculation is certainly not "secular" in the modern sense. On the contrary, it is undergirded by his belief in Almighty God's providential governance of all creation, and of human culture, which provides the context within which his covenantal promises unfold (117-120). The deep continuity of the historical process (131-3) means, for example, that the specific events set forth in II Samuel can be related to latter-day situations without crude anachronism (201-8). Moreover, although God's people might endure great adversity, the deeper historical direction is always towards the fulfilment of the divine purposes in Christ (108-11). Indeed, the Bible itself is the product of providentially governed human history (223-6).

That said, Calvin was exceedingly cautious about pronouncing God's action in history (105). There is an immense difference in outlook between Calvin and those who claim to know what God "is really doing" at this, that, or some other historical juncture. When it comes to the book of Daniel, Calvin offers

a contemporaneous and non-eschatological reading (145, 150, 164). Daniel does not refer to the far distant future. Chapters 2 and 7 represent kingdoms and situations now long past. Chapters 8 and 11 relate to the period of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (216-164 BC) and the Maccabean Revolt (144-8, 157-8). More particularly, the much debated passage at Daniel 7: 9-14 is seen as referring to the first advent, *not* the last judgement (144).

Calvin's humanistic training as a lawyer was formative for his approach to the biblical texts. At a pivotal point in his life he learned from teachers such as Pierre de l'Étoile (1480-1537) and Andrea Alciato (1492-1550) to interpret legal sources such as the *Corpus iuris civilis* of Justinian in historical terms. These earlier legal studies were formative for the way they shaped Calvin's approach to the Five Books of Moses (172-3) and the Bible generally. This is an area

in which further research would be most valuable. Other such areas highlighted by Pitkin include the importance of the Calvin-Melanchthon connection (60-6) and the part played by Calvin's view of history in the political-legal-historical writing of François Hotman (1524-90), whose *Francogallia* (1573) offered an interpretation of French history deeply respectful of Calvin's teaching (208-18).

I first read Calvin (in translation) in 1962. My interest in historiography dates from the same time. I wish that I had had access to this sort of work on Calvin back then. As to the minister whom I mentioned earlier, I expect that this volume would have gone a long way to addressing his misapprehensions. Indeed, with this book Barbara Pitkin has placed those who honor and respect the legacy of John Calvin in her debt.

The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World. Barry Gewen. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020, 452pp. ISBN 978-1-324-00405-9. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs emeritus, University of Illinois-Springfield.

Barry Gewin is refreshingly forthright about his view of international politics. He opens his new book about the American statesmen Henry Kissinger by characterizing himself as a political "Realist" thusly: "[I have] tried to reach conclusions based on the power relationships of a given situation. I attempted to assess how American national interest would be affected by a particular decision and to measure what was possible, not simply desirable. To put it another way: I thought it was important to distinguish between what was true—Realism—and what one wished was true. I was distrustful, even dismissive, of applying moral considerations in a field where abstract morality did not seem especially relevant.... I certainly didn't believe in moral absolutes that outweighed all other considerations, national well-being foremost among them" (xi).

Equipped with this intellectual perspective, Gewen chooses to differentiate "good guy-bad guy" perspectives on American foreign relations. His heroic political realist is Henry Kissinger, definitely for Gewen a good guy. In American politics, according to Gewen, the quintessential bad guy was Woodrow

Wilson. The Wilsonian liberal ideal, holding out for a golden age of freedom and democracy throughout the world, justified a world war for democracy. As Gewen puts it, "Wilson appealed to a mind-set that was fundamentally melodramatic and absolutist rather than political and pragmatic....The United States was not like other nations. It would engage in battle for the sake of the transcendent, universal values, with confidence that God, or at least history, was on its side" (325).

To expound and interpret Kissinger's life and Gewen's Realism, Gewen traces the views of earlier intellectual interpreters of Realism: Leo Strauss, a noted philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, and Hannah Arendt, a secular Jewish scholar who grew up in Germany before World War II. The common threads of thought they shared included a skepticism about human equality and, therefore, government imposed through democracy and equal rights. Strauss approved of an elite rule pursuing the public good rather than a democratic process for people primarily in pursuit of their self-interests. Arendt, a refugee from Nazism, wrote skeptically about various dangers