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A STUDY OF
JOHN CALVIN'S USE OF THE
PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

by

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER II
JOHN CALVIN AS AN INTERPRETER
OF THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH

A. Introduction.

1. Prevailing Method of Interpretation.

Before and during Calvin's time the mystical and allegorical method of explaining the Scriptures had been very prevalent. The interpreter would dwell little or not at all on the literal sense of the passage, but would seek for a hidden or allegorical meaning. Calvin rejected this method of interpretation, as we shall see, because it left the meaning at the caprice and whim of the interpreter. Thus Calvin in his interpretation of the Scripture determined to adhere, as much as possible, to the grammatical and historical sense of the passage and by careful examination of the text, and by special attention to the whole of the argument, sought to find the intention of the writer. In doing this he became "the founder of the grammatico-historical exegesis."¹

2. His Spirit.

The spirit of John Calvin, in many ways, is in complete accord with the accepted methods of Bible study

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1. Schaff: History of the Christian Church, Vol. VII. p.532

in vogue today, in so far, at least, as his approach to the Scripture is first hand, direct, and allows the "Word" to speak for itself. He came with an open mind, full of faith, set aglow by a rich personal experience.

3. His View of Scripture.

Calvin makes it clear to his readers concerning the divine origin of the book of Isaiah when he says,

"Thus the inscription of Isaiah recommends to us the doctrine of this book, as containing no human reasonings, but the oracles of God, in order to convince us that it contains nothing but what was revealed by the spirit of God."¹

Due to his grammatico-historical emphasis, and his independent spirit, some have felt that this weakened his position on inspiration, but we find from careful observation that he maintained a very high view of inspiration of the Scripture as will be seen from the following quotation:

"This ought to be carefully observed; for we must not imagine that the prophets learned from men, or foresaw by their own sagacity, those things which they made known; and on this account also they were justly called "Seers".....But the prophets speak by the Spirit of God, as from heaven. The amount of what is stated is, that whosoever shall attempt to measure this prophecy by their own judgment will do wrong, because it has proceeded from God, and therefore it goes far beyond our sense."²

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1. Calvin: Commentary on Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 36
2. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 97

B. His Supreme Regard for Truth.

1. The True Meaning.

When one applies Calvin's rule and makes a direct, first-hand approach to his commentary of Isaiah, going as it were, "ad fontes, to the original sources, then one begins to see and feel the greatness of his original spirit and understand that, indeed, he was "the king of commentators whose exegetical genius was of the first order,"¹ and had the right to be called "the Prince of commentators."²

It has been said that "his commentaries, almost alone among those of his epoch, are still a living force."³ One of the secrets for this lies in the fact that he always had a "supreme regard for the truth,"⁴ which is one of the foremost qualities of an interpreter. How well Calvin observed this regard for truth may be seen from his last will and testament where he writes the following:

"I have made it my endeavor, both in my preaching and in my writings and commentaries, purely and uncorruptibly to expound His Scriptures; and I testify and declare that, in all the controversies and disputes in which I have been engaged with the enemies of the gospel, I have made no use of corrupt and sophistical arts, but have aimed candidly and sincerely to defend the truth."⁵

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1. Schaff: op. cit., p. 524
2. Ibid.,
3. F. W. Farrar: History of Interpretation, p. 342
4. E. P. Barrows: Companion of the Bible, p. 522
5. John Scott: History of Calvin, p. 390

As we turn to his commentary of Isaiah, we observe how well he sought to give this regard for truth a place in his thinking. For instance, in Isaiah 29:7 he says, "sometimes it happens that, when a sentence is beautiful, it attracts us to it, and causes us to steal away from the true meaning."¹

In another passage, when it appears to Calvin that others have failed to arrive at the true meaning he remarks:

"Yet it does not appear that the view generally given by our commentators is a successful elucidation of the passage;....If, therefore, we wish to ascertain the true meaning of this passage, we must bring to our recollection what has already been stated that the Prophet, when he speaks of bringing back the people from Babylon, does not look to a single age, but includes all the rest, till Christ came and brought the most complete deliverance to His people."²

Sometimes, when there are various interpretations possible, he will choose the one that seems to him to come the nearest to the true meaning, as when he comments:

"There are various ways, indeed, of expounding this passage; and I shall not undertake the task of examining all the interpretations and refuting those which I do not approve: it will be enough if we ascertain the true meaning."³

2. The Natural Meaning.

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1. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. II. p. 316
2. Ibid., Vol. I. P. 299
3. Ibid., p. 78

There are times when Calvin finds that the true meaning is identical with the natural meaning. This fact is clearly brought out in his remarks on Isaiah 6:6 which are as follows: "Such appears to me to be the true and natural meaning of this passage, in the explanation of which commentators have hitherto been unsuccessful."¹

Often, in his search to arrive at the heart of the truth, Calvin would find it necessary to simplify or to rephrase a passage. For instance, in Isaiah 8:10 where the Prophet uses the words, "speak the word," Calvin says, "to make the meaning more clear, I have rendered it 'decree a decree.'"²

3. The Literal Meaning.

There are times when Calvin does not distinguish between the true, the natural, and the literal meaning, but seems rather to blend them into a synonymous thought. For though he appreciated the value of a consideration of the historic setting, nevertheless, there are times when he chooses to interpret according to the literal sense because it seemed to bring out the meaning better. This may have been a natural reaction to the superstitious tendencies of his time which he stoutly rejected, as seen in his comment on Isaiah 6:7 when he

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1. Ibid., p. 209
2. Ibid., p. 273

says,

"There is no reason to believe that the coal possessed any virtue, as superstitious persons imagine that in the magical arts there is some hidden power. Nothing of this sort is to be found here."¹

But let us turn to several passages to see this emphasis on the literal interpretation more fully.

In referring to Isaiah 6:1 he says,

"Some think that death here means leprosy, which undoubtedly was a civil death, when the king was compelled to withdraw from the society of men, and to lay down the reigns of government, but I choose rather to take death in its literal sense."²

Then again, in chapter 20:2 in spite of other opinions to the contrary, he insists upon the literal interpretation as the only permissible one justified under the circumstances. He says,

"A question arises, was this actually done, or was it merely and simply a vision which he told the people? The general opinion is that the Prophet never went naked, but that this was exhibited to him in a vision, and only once. They allege as a reason, that on account of heat and cold, and other inconveniences of weather, he could not have walked naked during the whole period of three years. I pay little attention to their argument that he was unable to endure heat and cold; for God, who commanded him to do this, could easily strengthen and protect him....I am of the opinion that Isaiah walked naked whenever he discharged the office of a prophet."³

Sometimes the shade of meaning will be so slightly different that one wonders that Calvin would

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1. Ibid., p. 210
2. Ibid., p. 200
3. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 87

take issue. Nevertheless, his extreme sense of propriety and precision, no doubt gained in the court of law, demanded strict attention to minute details. This is seen in his comment on Isaiah 22:7 when he says,

"I do not find fault with the translation given by some interpreters, 'in a chariot of horsemen,' but I have chosen rather to translate literally the words of the Prophet; for I think that he means 'a military chariot.'"¹

And again, in Isaiah 32:9 he says,

"In the same manner as before, the word daughters is interpreted by the rabbins to mean 'villages' or 'smaller cities'; but I think, as I have already said, that it ought to be taken in its literal meaning."²

And yet in another place in referring to Isaiah 2:3 he says,

"The Hebrew words י'וֹדֵינוּ יְיָנוּ may be literally rendered, he will teach us of his ways; which means, "He will show us what his ways are," or, he will set before us his ways for a perfect instruction."³

And in connection with Isaiah 1:24 he makes the following comment, "He first employs the word יְיָנוּ which literally signifies Lord, and expresses the relation to a servant."⁴

C. His regard for the Writer's Aim.

1. The Author's Meaning.

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1. Ibid., p. 117
2. Ibid., p. 415
3. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 77

Barrows in discussing the principles of interpretation states that "we must know the writer's aim, the shape and course of his argument"¹ to qualify as a just exegete. It is noteworthy that Calvin always has this aim in mind as he seeks to elucidate the Scripture. When a mooted point arises he is guided by what he deems to be the author's meaning of a passage. This is clearly brought out in Isaiah 27:8 where he comments:

"Interpreters are not agreed as to the meaning of this word. (לִשְׁׁלַח) Some think that it means, 'by engaging them in internal wars with each other,' and others, 'that God will punish their sins by that sword which they have drawn and put into his hand.' But as I cannot approve of either of those interpretations, I pass them by. I approve more highly of those who interpret it, 'in her shooting forth'....

But I have another exposition which comes nearer to the Prophet's meaning, that in shooting forth God contends with the Church, because, though he cuts down the branches and even the trunk, yet ~~his~~ **his** wrath does not extend to the roots, so as to prevent the tree from again shooting forth."²

2. The Mind of the Writer.

That one of the goals Calvin had in mind was to discover the mind of the writer will be further seen as we examine the following quotation:

"The words which we render, He will lay up his baggage or armour, are translated by some, He hath made muster; for לִשְׁׁלַח signifies also to number....but (I) prefer the former; for I understand the Prophet to mean that the Assyrians will lay up their armour."³

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1. Barrows: op. cit., p. 528
2. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. II. p. 257
3. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 366

The constant repetition of such expressions as: "the Prophet appears to mean,"¹ "the Prophet had a different meaning,"² and "the Prophet aims at showing,"³ all indicate Calvin's strong emphasis on the mind of the author.

D. His Use of the Text and Context.

1. The Immediate Text.

Barrows in his principles of interpretation makes it clear that it is important that:

"The sober interpreter, then, must have constant reference to the context, as well as for the signification of particular terms as for the general sense of the passage under consideration. To interpret without regard to the context is to interpret at random; to interpret contrary to the context is to teach falsehood for truth."⁴

Let us remember that exegesis means the drawing out or the bringing forth of the true meaning, both from the surface and from the depths. Now in order to give a just exposition of any passage of Scripture, one must be prepared not only to attend to the immediate context, but also to the broader context. The violation of this principle was one of the most flagrant abuses of the interpretation of Scripture before the Reformation. Calvin revolted against this misuse of Scripture and

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. P. 43
2. Ibid., p. 196
3. Ibid., p. 219
4. Barrows: op. cit., p. 531

gave close attention to the context as an aid and a guide in his interpretation.

"He regarded it as the chief object of a commentator to adhere closely to the text."¹ This fact is readily seen in reference to Isaiah 8:1 and other passages. He says,

"Isaiah having prophecied about the coming of Christ in the former chapter, (Isa. VII.14,) many improperly explain this also as relating to the same subject, that endued with heavenly power, he came to spoil the prince of this world, (John XII.31) and therefore to hasten the prey. This ingenuity is pleasing enough, but cannot at all harmonize with the text."²

2. His Attention to the Connection.

Dr. W. W. White in his book entitled "How to Study," calls the attention of the student to the fact that things "hook and eye together. This suggests that the seeker after the truth must train himself to see and observe relationships, and to note connections. Calvin possessed a truly scientific spirit and a keen mind which was like the sharp edge of a sabre. His methodical accuracy of procedure and logical mind aided him in the necessary task of careful observation of connections. Immer says, "his gift for discovering, as if by divination, the connection, his exegetical tack, are very remarkable for his time, and useful even for us."³

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1. Schaff: op. cit., p. 458

2. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 262

3. A. Immer: Hermeneutics of the New Testament, p. 188

Schaff likewise points out the fact that one of Calvin's characteristics as an exegete was that "he carefully studies the connection."¹ In commentating on Isaiah 28:10 Calvin says,

"The word ¹P is improperly, in my opinion, translated by some interpreters line, as if the Prophet alluded to the slow progress of a building, which rises gradually by 'lines.' That would be a harsh and far-fetched metaphor, for this passage related to elementary instruction conveyed to children. I acknowledge that the same Hebrew word is used in the eighteenth chapter, where we have translated it 'Line by line,' and in many other passages; but here the connection demands a different meaning."²

There are times when it seems to be the connection between the chapters that attracts Calvin's eye and arrests his attention. This is seen in Isaiah 60:2 where he says,

"We have said that the word 'brightness' denotes a prosperous condition of the Church; but let us not judge this condition from outward appearance; for the Prophet rises higher, and I have no doubt that this discourse relates to spiritual light and brightness. Otherwise that mode of expression which he afterwards employs, 'The Gentiles shall walk in thy brightness,' (verse 3,) would not be appropriate. Besides, this is clearly demonstrated by the connection between this chapter and the preceding; for he says that this covenant is continued in the word and Spirit."³

On the other hand it may be only the connection between words as in the case of Isaiah 60:6 where he says, "He now mentions "trembling," and connects

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1. Schaff: op. cit., p. 531
2. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. II. p. 280
3. Ibid., Vol. IV. p. 275

it with splendour or joy; and this may appear to be inconsistent with the meaning assigned to the former clause."¹

And again in Isaiah 65:8 he says,

"The word $\square\psi\times\gamma$ may be explained in various ways, either 'I will measure back with their iniquity,' or, 'in the first place,' or 'formerly,' or 'from the beginning.' But we must take into account the connection of the passage, from which the Prophet's meaning will be clearly seen."²

3. The Context.

It must be remembered that the text was only the starting point in Calvin's method of interpretation and that he moved on to the consideration of the broader field of the context and then to the more extensive area of the whole passage. For instance in commenting on Isaiah 29:7 he says,

"Sometimes it happens that, when a sentence is beautiful, it attracts us to it, and causes us to steal away from the true meaning, so that we do not adhere closely to the context, or spend much time in investigating the author's meaning."³

Often it was the context that proved most helpful in the understanding of a word, as is apparent from his remarks on Isaiah 24:6 when he says,

"I think that $\square\psi\times$ here means 'to make desolate,' rather than 'to forsake,' and this is apparent from the context, on which account I have translated it 'are made desolate.'"⁴

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1. Ibid., p. 280
2. Ibid., p. 386
3. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 316
4. Ibid., p. 171

And again he says,

"The word אֱלֹהִים oaks, has been sometimes rendered Gods; but this meaning is set aside by the context; for immediately afterwards he adds the word groves: Ye shall be ashamed of the groves which you have chosen."¹

Here we observe that the context was a great stabilizer to Calvin and kept him from giong off into fanciful speculation and wishful thinking. How true this fact was may be seen better in his notation on Isaiah 14:12 as we compare it with a more recent interpretation. The late Bible scholar, Dr. Scofield, in commentating on the words "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning," says that, "They evidently refer to Satan, who as prince of this world system is the real though unseen ruler of the successive world powers."² Calvin commentating on the same passage says,

"The exposition of this passage, which some have given, as if it referred to Satan, has arisen from ignorance, for the context plainly shows that these statements must be understood in reference to the king of the Babylonians. But when passages of Scripture are taken at random, and no attention is paid to the context, we need not wonder that mistakes of this kind arise."³

Comparing these two men it is evident that Calvin's consideration of the context kept him closer to the heart of the truth and prevented him from allegoriz-

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1. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 84
2. C. I. Scofield: Scofield Reference Bible, p. 726
3. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 442

ing, which was a very strong tendency in his day and evidently has had survival qualities up to the present time.

According to Calvin one of the advantages of observing the context is that it removes all doubt. In commenting on Isaiah 2:22, after having rejected one interpretation on the ground that it is at variance with the meaning of the words, and another because it does not agree with the time and the occasion, then he goes on to say,

"But, as I have already said, the context will quickly remove all doubt; for the commencement of the following chapter clearly explains and confirms what is here stated; and he who made this division has improperly separated those things which ought to have been joined together."¹

Even in minute details, when greater liberty might have been exercised, he adhered to a strict observance of the context. This is seen in reference to Isaiah 27:10 where he remarks,

"Here the copulative ׀ (vav) is generally supposed to mean for, and some take it for otherwise.....if we translate it because, the Prophet will assign a reason for the former statement, but that exposition is rejected by the context, and is altogether absurd. With greater plausibility it is taken for otherwise;..... But I consider that exposition to be a departure from the natural meaning, and therefore I choose rather to take it as signifying nevertheless or yet."²

4. The Whole Passage.

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1. Ibid., p. 120
2. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 261

Calvin's early training as a lawyer no doubt developed and gave him a logical mind and the ability to see things in their broader scope as wholes. This power proved to be a valuable asset to him as an interpreter, because it provided vision and perspective so essential to good exegesis. Illustrations of this point are to be found in abundance throughout his works. In Isaiah 1:26 the Prophet has intimated a restoration of Jerusalem to her former righteousness and faithfulness and Calvin interprets the word "faithfulness" in the light of the whole, for he says,

"And, indeed, when I closely examine the whole passage, I think that the Prophet now employs the word faithfulness in a more limited sense than formerly, and connects the two virtues as leading to the same object, so that, while truth goes first as the cause, justice is the effect of it."¹

In Isaiah 10:33 in reference to the phrase "lop off those lofty branches" Calvin has pointed out that most interpreters make this to refer to the Assyrians, meaning that God in turn is to punish them after they have taken Jerusalem. Calvin on the other hand takes an entirely different view in the light of the careful consideration of the whole passage. He says,

"But for my own part, when I examine closely the whole passage, and especially what he adds soon afterwards about Lebanon, and the consolation which immediately follows, I think that this passage ought to be referred

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1. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 81

to the Jews themselves....This interpretation is confirmed by the following chapter, in which the Prophet offers consolation against that calamity."¹

We can readily see how greatly enriched his interpretation was as a result of this enlarged outlook with an expanded horizon that defies cramping. It prevents too many minor details from crowding into the foreground of the picture and so spoiling its intent and balance.

In another place we see this same emphasis upon the whole passage when he says,

"Here the commentators think that the discourse proceeds without any interruption, and that he makes known to the Jews the same judgment which he formerly proclaimed. But when I examine the whole matter more closely, I am constrained to differ with them. I think that the Prophet reproaches the Jews for their obstinacy and rebellion, because, though the Lord had chastened them, they did not repent, and that he relates the history of a great transaction, in order to remind them how utterly they had failed to derive advantage from the Lord's chastisements....the context will make it still more clear, that I had good reasons for being of that opinion."²

Calvin makes it clear that it was only after a careful consideration of the whole subject, by which means he saw the interrelation of the various units, was he able to arrive at an independent position which was tenable and at the same time assuring.

And again he says,

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1. Ibid., p. 369

2. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 115

"I am aware that a widely different meaning is given by some to these words of the Prophet; but anyone who takes a judicious view of the whole passage will have little difficulty, I trust, in assenting to my interpretation."¹

It is evident from the passages just cited that Calvin, as an exegete, followed closely in line with what Immer would style as an essential prerequisite to sound exegesis, namely, that "all single investigations must labor toward the goal of the most perfect understanding of the whole."²

Closely related to the subject, that is, the consideration of the whole passage, is Calvin's attention to what he calls the scope of the passage. It reveals the fact that he is conscious of and feels the sweep of the action of the book, hence allowing for independence and range of thought. For instance he says, "Though I do not reject the former interpretation, yet I prefer the latter, because it agrees better with the scope of the passage."³

At times, he finds that attention to the scope of the passage prevents one from making a far-fetched interpretation and so keeps one within bounds of legitimate exegesis. This is seen when he says,

"But as $\Pi\Upsilon$ signifies to associate, some prefer taking it in this manner, which certainly agrees better

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1. Ibid., p. 42
2. Immer: op. cit., p. 10
3. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 234

with the scope and argument of the Prophet. Some render it, Bruise ye, that is, bruise the kingdom of Judah, or, bruise the Assyrians; but this appears to be unnatural or far-fetched."¹

And again he says,

"Draw close to one another, as if you were in a dense mass: this meaning agrees beautifully I think, with the scope of the passage."²

E. His Recognition of the Historic Situation.

1. Sacred History.

Due to a strong tendency, already noted, on the part of interpreters of his day, to allegorize and to ignore the historic foundations of Scripture, Calvin reacted with a definite attempt to give an historical basis to his exegesis.

Fullerton shows how the exegetical nature of Calvin triumphed over his theological tendencies when he gave recognition to the historic setting, for he says that Calvin's interest was in "securing the historical sense of a passage against the allegorical."³ Thus he finds that "both history and law were interpreted historically to a most surprising degree."⁴

Now as we turn to his prophecy of Isaiah we see how much importance he gave to history. Commentating on Isaiah 14:18 he says,

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1. Ibid., p. 270

2. Ibid.

3. Kemper Fullerton: Prophecy and Authority, p. 160

4. Ibid.

"This passage is the reason why I do not venture to limit, what Isaiah here foretells about the king of Babylon, to the person of Nebuchadnezzar alone; because it does not appear from history that he was denied burial.....He therefore describes, not a single man, **but a whole dynasty.**"¹

It hardly seems conceivable, that one who held such an exalted view of God as sovereign could think of history other than confirming the word of God as recorded in Scripture. Thus it was natural for Calvin to turn to history, whenever possible, for further light on the written page. This is observed in connection with the Prophet's statement that the "people have refused the gentle waters of Shiloah that go softly," when Calvin says, "Shiloah, as Jerome tells us, was a small fountain, from which flowed a little river that ran gently through the midst of Jerusalem."²

At times he finds it unnecessary to go into lengthy and detailed exposition because of the assistance that history gives. This is seen in his comment on the Assyrians when he says in Isaiah 8:7,

"The sacred history assures us that these things were fulfilled, so that anyone who shall read history will not need a lengthened exposition of this passage; for the Assyrians, whom the Jews called to their assistance, destroyed them."³

2. Secular History.

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1. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 447
2. Ibid., p. 266
3. Ibid., p. 267

Calvin, however, does not deem it necessary to confine himself to sacred history but often draws on secular sources when they tender assistance. This fact is seen in his use of Pliny as an authority. In Isaiah 23:3 in speaking of Sidon he says,

"In ancient times, says Pliny, 'she was famous for cities which she built, Leptis, Utica, and that rival of the Roman empire, Carthage, which aspired to govern the whole world, besides Cadiz, which was built beyond the limits of the world. Her whole superiority now consists of scarlet and purple.'"¹

At times help is derived from a knowledge of current historical practices of his own times, as when for instance he says,

"The custom alluded to is that which existed among the Assyrians and other eastern nations, who frequently made use of bows and arrows in battle, as Englishmen of the present day enter into the battle-field with a loaded quiver."²

3. Historic-Prophetic.

Although Calvin takes cognizance of the historic implications of Scripture, nevertheless he does not let this fact limit him in any way in making a more extended interpretation. He often takes, what one would call today, the historic-prophetic view, in which is involved a twofold application, one for the immediate situation and the other for a time yet in the future to be fulfilled.

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1. Calvin: Vol. II. p. 148
2. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 195

This is seen in his comment on Christ's advent, in Isaiah 2:4 when he says,

"I readily admit that the universal peace which existed throughout the Roman empire, at the birth of Christ, was a token of that eternal peace which we enjoy in Christ. But the Prophet's meaning was different. He meant Christ makes such a reconciliation between God and men, that a comfortable state of peace exists among themselves, by putting an end to destructive wars.....The fulfilment of this prophecy, therefore, in its full extent, must not be looked for on earth."¹

This historic-prophetic view of Calvin is seen time and time again, but I shall cite only two further illustrations from Isaiah to elucidate the matter. In reference to Isaiah 11:12 he says,

"We see that the Prophet speaks here not only of the deliverance which took place under Zerubbabel, (Ezra ii.2,) but that he looks beyond this;.....these words,.....must be viewed as referring to the kingdom of Christ, under whom this deliverance was obtained through the preaching of the gospel."²

And again, in another place he says,

"To what period must we refer these promises?....They must undoubtedly be referred to the universal kingdom of Christ;-universal, I say, because we must look not only at the beginning, but also at the accomplishment and the end; and thus it must be extended to the second coming of Christ, which on that account is called "the day of redemption"....This prediction relates, no doubt, to the deliverance from Babylon; but as that deliverance might be regarded as the earnest and foretaste of another, this promise must undoubtedly be extended to the last day."³

It is evident from these few citations that

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1. Ibid., p. 100
2. Ibid., p. 390
3. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 199

Calvin's historical balance was superb. He comprehended readily the immediate historic situation that had called forth the writing, but was at the same time able to look beyond to the timeless application. This is a sign of true exegesis according to Dr. Thompson, for he states that one of the principles of interpretation is to "illustrate, whenever possible, by reference to history, topography, and antiquities."¹

F. His Independence of Others.

1. The Greek Translators.

Immer lays down as one of the principles of good exegesis the need of an independent spirit, for he says in speaking of the interpreter,

"His center of gravity must never be in anybody's commentary, but in the author himself. This independence of exegetical helps can be attained only by accustoming oneself to examine every thought of the author first without a commentary, and by exerting oneself to the utmost to understand these thoughts."²

Such a process is certainly in harmony with the modern historical critical method of research. One of its major emphases is on independent study of the Scripture by direct contact with the original sources or the very fountain head itself. We shall see that Calvin was motivated in a strong degree to adopt an independent

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1. William Thompson: Aids to Faith, p. 430

2. Immer: op. cit., p. 9

spirit in his interpretation and so displayed the spirit of a pioneer and a trail blazer. He never feared to leave the beaten path or to face the challenge of some new truth.

He was independent of the Greek translators.

He says in referring to Isaiah 1:3,

"The Greek translators have added the word me; but I prefer to repeat what he had said before, Israel doth not know his owner, that is, God; nor his crib, that is, the Church, in which he had been brought up."¹

2. The Jewish Translators.

There were occasions when Calvin felt at perfect liberty to disagree with the Jewish translators as we shall note in his reference to Isaiah 1:8 when he says,

"The former interpretation is adopted by the Jews, and they understand this passage to relate to the siege of Sennacherib; but I think that it has wider signification, and embraces other calamities which follow afterwards."²

3. The Latin Translators.

Calvin's individualism and unwillingness to be bound in thought by the opinions of others is seen in his reference to Isaiah 28:2 where he takes issue with Jerome and says,

"7 1, which I have translated 'with the hand,' is translated by Jerome, 'a spacious country,' which does not agree with the words. Others take it for 'strength,' so as to mean a violent casting down. But the plain meaning appears to me to be, that the glory and

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1. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 42
2. Ibid., p. 51

splendour of the Israelites will be laid low, as if one threw down a drunk man 'with the hand.'¹

4. Other Interpreters.

Calvin does not hesitate to take issue with any of the translators if he conceives that he is nearer to the truth. At times he will allow for another translation or again he may disapprove entirely. In referring to Isaiah 57:6 he says,

"It might be translated, 'Shall I repent?' This interpretation has been most generally adopted....Yet the interpretation which I have followed appears to me preferable."²

And again he says in reference to Isaiah 1:17,

"Others render it, Inquire respecting judgment, of which I do not approve; for by the word seek the Prophet meant more than this, he meant what we call the actual practice of it."³

Also he says in reference to Isaiah 6:8,

"Whom shall I send?....Some think that this is intended to reprove the ignorance of the priests and Prophets; because, though they were very numerous, still not one of them was qualified to teach. This reason carries some probability, but I would rather view it as referring to the certainty of Isaiah's calling, as implying that he was not at random, but from choice, that the Lord appointed him."⁴

It is to be noted the frequency with which Calvin uses such expressions as these: "I differ," "on the contrary," "I prefer," and "it appears to me," all

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 272
2. Ibid., Vol. IV. p. 203
3. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 65
4. Ibid., p. 212

of which indicate a freedom and independence of spirit that would not be fettered by any conventional forms.

It has been said that,

"He fully appreciated the philological knowledge of Jerome, the spiritual depth of Augustine, and the homiletical wealth of Chrysostom, but he used them with independent judgment and critical discrimination."¹

G. His Freedom from Bias and Extremes.

1. Avoidance of the Frivolous.

Although Calvin showed an independent spirit in his exegetical work, he did not allow this to carry him far-a-field, as one might have suspected. His use of restraint and moderation in his interpretation are seen in many places throughout his works. I shall not attempt to cite all the cases but only give several that are typical illustrations. In commentating on Isaiah 30:31 he says,

"And yet we must not dream, as the Rabbins do, that the Assyrians were struck by a thunderbolt, for their conjecture is excessively frivolous. On the contrary, the Prophet follows the ordinary custom, and by means of these comparisons, describes the judgment of God."²

2. Avoidance of the New and Foreign.

Calvin was not one to go off on a tangent or to take up with novel ideas without careful consideration. In referring to Isaiah 9:12 he says,

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1. Schaff: History of the Christian Church, Vol. 7. p. 530
2. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. II. p. 383

"The phrases in front and behind agree with the ordinary modes of speaking, so that we ought not to seek an interpretation that is new and foreign to the purpose."¹

3. Avoidance of the Far-fetched.

In referring to Isaiah 10:27 he says,

"The phrase, the face of anointing, is explained by some to mean the fatness with which the yoke is besmeared. But that interpretation is too far-fetched. Others more correctly view יָשׁוּ as bearing its ordinary signification, and as denoting anointing or oil.....As to the interpretation given by some, that יָשׁוּ denotes the king himself, not only is it too far-fetched, but it conveys no solid instruction."²

4. Avoidance of Forced Interpretation.

In his elucidation of Isaiah 5:1 he says,

"Why does Isaiah call God his friend? Some reply that he was a kinsman of Christ, and I acknowledge that he was a descendant of David; but this appears to be a forced interpretation. A more natural and appropriate one would be, to adopt the statement of John, that the Church is committed to the friends of the bridegroom and to reckon Prophets as belonging to that class."³

5. Search for the Simple Meaning.

In spite of a colossal intellect and an attention to the great things of life, Calvin's real genius is seen in his attention to the task of interpreting so that even babes might understand, and that all might be without excuse. In considering the thought of Isaiah 24:21 he says,

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1. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 320
2. Ibid., p. 365
3. Ibid., p. 163

"This passage has tortured the minds of many commentators, and various interpretations have been offered by various writers. Some think that this relates to the devils, who will be punished along with the wicked. Others refer it to the Jews, on whom God had bestowed remarkable privilege. But I cannot adopt any of those interpretations. The simple and genuine meaning, therefore, appears to me to be, that no power will be so high as to be exempted from the scourges of God; and though they raise themselves above the clouds, yet the hand of God will reach them."¹

And again he says,

"Here commentators differ....For my own part, I adopt a simpler view, though I do not choose to refute the expositions given by others."²

If the question arises between the choice of allegory and a simple interpretation, he favors the latter, as we shall see when he says,

"Others explain it allegorically, and take 'Lebanon' as denoting proud men, and 'Carmel' as denoting mean and ordinary persons. This may be thought to be acute and ingenious, but I choose rather to follow that more simple interpretation which I have already stated."³

6. Use of Allegory.

As has been intimated, the question of allegorical interpretation was a sore spot with Calvin because of the tendency on the part of many interpreters in his day to go to extremes. Schaff says, "Calvin departed from the allegorical method of the middle ages, which discovered no less than four senses in the Bible."⁴

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 184
2. Ibid., p. 296
3. Ibid., p. 331
4. Schaff: op. cit. Vol. VII. p. 532

Compared with other men of his day in the Reformed fold we can say that "in exegesis he was distinctly in advance of his time, freer than Luther in the rejection of allegory and topology."¹ Nevertheless, he did allow a place for the interpretation of allegory when the text itself would seem to indicate the same. For instance, in commentating on Isaiah 2:13 he says,

"The allegory which is here introduced, about the trees of Lebanon and the lofty mountains, instead of obscuring, sheds light on the subject;....It cannot be supposed that God is actually angry with the mountains and the trees,....but....Isaiah holds out to view the judgment of God, in order more fully to convince wicked and unprincipled men that their presumption will not pass unpunished. Thus we see the reason why he mixes up the metaphors of cedars, oaks, and mountains."²

In referring to his comments on Isaiah 27:1 he says,

"The word 'leviathan' is variously interpreted; but in general it simply denotes either a large serpent, or whales and sea fishes, which approach to the character of monsters....For my own part, I have no doubt that he speaks allegorically of Satan, and of his whole kingdom, describing him under the figure of some monstrous animal."³

Often Calvin finds it expedient to draw light from other sources to have a comprehensive view of the allegorical interpretation, as for instance, when he says in reference to Isaiah 16:8

"Here the Prophet describes allegorically the des-

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1. Bradford K. Pierce: The Biblical Student, p. 83
2. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 113
3. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 246

olation of the whole country. There is reason to believe that it abounded in the choicest vines, as may readily be inferred from this and parallel passages (Jer.XLViii.32.)"¹

It must be said to his credit that Calvin was not an extremist, but allowed a legitimate place, in the Scriptures, for the proper use of allegory. His attitude to allegory can best be summed up in his own words for he says, "In expounding allegories, I have no intentions to enter, as some do, into ingenious disquisitions."²

Immer points out that Calvin's aversion to allegorizing and the torturing of the verbal sense was due to his veneration of Scripture as the only source of faith. He then goes on to lay down as a fundamental principle "that Scripture is to be interpreted not by tradition, but by itself."³

7. Scripture Interpreted by Itself.

Calvin adhered to the principle of having the Scriptures interpret themselves whenever this is possible. This fact is seen in many instances, as for example in reference to Isaiah 6:1 he says,

"But why was not this vision exhibited to him at the beginning? I answer, it was necessary in regard to the time, that he might be more and more confirmed in the discharge of his office. We have an instance of this in the Apostles themselves; for at first they were

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1. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 492
2. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 278
3. Immer: op. cit., p. 40

sent out with an injunction not to pass beyond the limits of Judea, (Matt.X.5;) but after that Christ had risen, he again set them apart in a new and solemn manner, breathed on them, bidding them receive the Holy Ghost, (John XX.21,22.)...."1

And again in reference to the passage in Isaiah 49:1 where it says, "Jehovah hath called me from the womb," Calvin remarks,

"It might be thought that Isaiah says far less than the occasion demands, when he says that he was 'called from the womb,' for he had been called long before.... the Prophet does not describe the commencement of the period, as if it were only from the womb that God began to call him; but it is as if he had said, 'Before I came out of the womb, God had determined that I should hold this office.' In like manner Paul also says that he was 'set apart from the womb,' (Gal.i.15,) though he had been 'elected before the creation of the world.' (Eph.i:4) To Jeremiah also it is said, 'before thou camest out of the womb, I knew thee.' (Jer.i:5) In short, the meaning is, that Christ was clothed with our flesh by the appointment of the Father, in order that he might fulfil the office of Redeemer, to which he had been appointed."2

Again in reference to Isaiah 53:7 he says,

"We are here exhorted to patience and meekness, that following the example of Christ, we may be ready to endure reproaches and cruel assaults, distress and torture. In this sense Peter quotes this passage, shewing that we ought to become like Christ our Head, that he may imitate his patience and submissiveness. (1Pet.ii,23.) In the word lamb there is probably an allusion to the sacrifices under the Law; and in this sense he is elsewhere called the 'Lamb of God.' (John i:29,36.)."3

H. Summary and Conclusion.

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1. Calvin: Isaiah, Vol. I. p. 199
2. Ibid., Vol. IV. p. 8
3. Ibid., p. 119

Considering the background of his day, one can well appreciate the exegetical spirit and genius of John Calvin in desiring to steer clear of the old time worn ruts. In leaving the allegorical method behind for the better grammatico-historical, he showed a real pioneering spirit. His open mind, his first hand raw contact with the "Word of God," and a high view of the Scriptures explain in some measure his success as an interpreter. Along with this went his supreme regard for the truth, which was akin to the truth that had laid hold of his own heart in Christ Jesus, for he was motivated by loyalty to this greater light. This naturally led him to a proper regard for the writer's aim and purpose. He sought, as it were, to feel the warmth and the glow of the original message as it came direct from the pen of the author. This involved a willingness to let the author speak for himself.

This study inevitably threw him into a careful consideration of the text, context, and the whole passage. He visualized these different units in their various relationships, and gave to each its proper evaluation, without in any way detracting from the value of one from another. Such a procedure prevented fanciful speculation and wishful thinking, and kept him close to the heart of the truth, providing symmetry and balance to his exegesis.

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His recognition of the historic situation proved to be a great stabilizer. He drew from all the available sources of his day in order to properly orient his work. Providing as it did a proper setting and balance, nevertheless it did not limit him from making a more extensive application whenever he deemed it essential.

In harmony with his desire to provide a historical background for his interpretation was a tendency to interpret literally. This was the result of a natural reaction to the superstitious tendencies of his day which he stoutly rejected.

His independent spirit displayed all the earmarks of a pioneer and a trail blazer. He acknowledged his debt to the Greek translators but was not bound to them. He recognized the voice of the Jewish exegetes but felt free to beat his own trail to the door of truth. He took issue with Jerome and others maintaining the right to remain unfettered by conventional thought.

Although looked upon by others as radical in nature, yet he displayed a truly conservative spirit in avoiding the frivolous, the far-fetched, the forced and allegorical interpretations. Farrar sums it up so well when he says,

"The neatness, precision, and lucidity of his style, his classic training and wide knowledge, his methodical accuracy of procedure, his manly independence,

his avoidance of needless and commonplace homiletics, his deep religious feeling, his careful attention to the entire scope and context of every passage, and the fact that he has commentated on almost the whole Bible, makes him tower above the great majority of those who have written on Holy Scripture."¹

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1. Farrar: op. cit., p. 343

CHAPTER III

JOHN CALVIN'S USE OF ISAIAH IN
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A. Introduction.

Many of the world's greatest and best blessings were born out of the expediency and the necessity of the times. Calvin, shortly after his conversion to Protestantism, realized the tremendous need for a comprehensive treatise on theology, for use in training Protestant ministers, which would be based on the sound interpretation of the Scriptures.

1. The Christian Institutes.

As the result of this heart-felt need Calvin set himself to the task of compiling the Christian Institutes, which were printed in Latin in Basle in 1536. As soon as they came off the press their unusual worth was appreciated, which necessitated the printing of later editions that were issued without any modification of doctrine. Lord Acton pronounced the Christian Institutes to be "the finest work of the Reformation"¹ and this estimate seems justifiable in the light of their continued usefulness in every generation. It is admitted that the Christian Institutes "overshadowed all previous attempts at a

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1. Alfred Plummer: The Continental Reformation, p. 151

systematic treatment of Protestant doctrines^{#1} and it was not long before the world realized that "the book was the most effective weapon of Protestantism"^{#2} in combatting the errors of the day.

2. The Theologian.

As the years and centuries pass, the finer lines of personality fade out in the aging process of contemporary and later history, so that the true Calvin is apt to be lost sight of or snowed under in a heap of incrustations not truly his own, so that the real man is apt to remain unknown. Nevertheless, it is conceded that Calvin was the "greatest theologian"^{#3} of the Reformation and from the facts considered in chapter one it is evident that "his theology is biblical rather than scholastic."^{#4} The primary concern of this chapter is to understand and determine, if possible, how much Calvin used the prophecy of Isaiah in his theological writings and was thus influenced in his thinking.

B. The Law of Proportion.

One of the aids to study and research work is the knowledge and application of the law of proportion.

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1. Schaff: Creeds of Christendom, p. 449
2. Preserved Smith: The Age of the Reformation, p. 166
3. Schaff: op. cit., p. 423
4. Schaff: History of the Christian Church, Vol. 7, p. 526

This law states that an author reveals his point of view by his comparative stress or neglect of what is written as to time, place, person, event, and idea. I shall apply this law to the Christian Institutes and graph the results so as to get a bird's eye view or a kaleidoscopic impression of the whole which will help determine relationships and show the relative importance of the material Calvin used. Referring to the chart on page eighty eight it will be seen that of the sixty six books of the Bible, Isaiah holds sixth place, in Calvin's Christian Institutes, in regard to the frequency of total quotations and second place in the Old Testament. As far as the Old Testament is concerned this observed fact verifies early usage of the book when "the various values which, at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, were ascribed to individual books of the Old Testament is shown from the circumstances that the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and the Psalms are cited most frequently of all."¹ The Psalms are quoted three hundred and fifty times, Romans three hundred and forty, Matthew two hundred and seventy six, John two hundred and fifty nine, first Corinthians two hundred and forty two, and Isaiah two hundred and twelve times.

One is surprised at the result for it is obser-

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1. Immer: op. cit., p. 16

ved that an Old Testament book, namely the Psalms, claims first place, taking precedence over the books of the New Testament. This suggests that the spirit of John Calvin was closer, in some respects at least, to that of the Old Testament than to the New. Then, when the importance of such a book as the Epistle to the Romans to Reformation emphasis and theology is taken into consideration, little wonder is evidenced that it should take second place. When one allows for the fact that the New Testament deals with the perfect Revelation of God in Jesus Christ and thus in its own right would claim a position of greater importance, we can understand that in his Christian Institutes Calvin has given the Prophecy of Isaiah a prominent place in his thinking. To hold sixth place in a list of sixty six books is no mean position.

C. The Character of God.

Calvin, as we shall see from his many references, was influenced in his conception of God by the writings of the Prophet Isaiah. Both held an exalted and lofty view of God, which had come out of a personal experience, that completely changed the course of their lives and moulded the destinies of the nations of the world in their respective time.

1. Pantheism.

Pantheism holds to the view that the universe

is God and God is the universe. It denies the Infinite and Absolute Being in itself has either intelligence, consciousness, or will. In doing this it denies the personality of God and runs into fatalism. In such a view the thought that God is in all things becomes barren of religious incentive and consolation when it is remembered that this presence is only impersonal power and affords no possible grounds of real fellowship.

To meet the challenge of such faulty reasoning Calvin turns to Isaiah 40:21 where he finds a corrective view of God as a Personality and the Creator of the world. He says,

"The true God clearly distinguished in Scripture from all fictitious ones by the creation of the world. 'Although Isaiah brings a just accusation of stupidity against the worshippers of fictitious deities, for not having learned, from the foundation of the earth, and the circuit of the heavens, who was the true God, Yet such is the slowness and dulness of our minds, as to induce a necessity for a more express exhibition of the true God, lest the faithful should decline to the fictions of the heathen. For, since the most tolerable description given by the philosophers, that God is the soul of the world, is utterly vain and worthless, we require a more familiar knowledge of him, to prevent us from wavering in perpetual uncertainty.'"¹

2. Idolatry.

The iconoclastic spirit ran at fervid heat during the Reformation and in France there were men who

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1. Calvin: The Christian Institutes, Vol. I. p. 150

would gladly lay down their lives for the privilege of tearing down idols from their pedestals. Calvin naturally had a strong aversion to idolatry himself and found support for his convictions from the prophet Isaiah, in chapter forty four and verse nine to twenty, where he makes the following comments,

"For whence did idols originate, but in the will of men?....We should be stung and penetrated by the rebuke which the Prophet has given to the extreme stupidity of those, who, with the same wood, make a fire to warm themselves, heat an oven for baking bread, roast or boil their meat, and fabricate a God before which they prostrate themselves, to address their humble supplications. In another place, therefore, he not only pronounces them transgressors of the law, but reproaches them for not having learned from the foundations of the earth; since, in reality, there is nothing more unreasonable than the thought of contracting the infinite and incomprehensible God within the compass of five feet."¹

And again in reference to Isaiah 40:18 and 41:7, 29 and 46:5 he says,

"But God.....rejects, without a single exception, all statues, pictures, and other figures, in which idolators imagine that he would be near them.....We see how expressly God opposes his 'voice' to every 'manner of similitude,' to show, that whosoever desires visible representation of him, is guilty of departing from him. It will be sufficient to refer to one of the Prophets, Isaiah, who insisted more than all the others on this argument, that the Divine Majesty is dishonored by mean and absurd fiction, when he that is incorporeal is likened to a corporeal form; he that is invisible, to a visible image; he that is a spirit, to inanimate matter."²

There is little doubt from what has already

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1. Ibid., p. 101
2. Ibid., p. 98

been cited that the Prophet Isaiah played an influential part in shaping and moulding of John Calvin's conception of the character of God. This does not mean that there were not other factors that came to bear upon his life and so influenced him also. But there are significant parallels of thought and emphases in the minds of these two great men which tend to show that Calvin was close to the spirit of the prophet.

3. Theism.

Theism may be defined as belief in the personality and sovereignty of one righteous and eternal deity who has revealed himself supernaturally to man.

a. Omnipotence. Calvin quotes from Isaiah 11:4, in his dedication of his *Institutes* to Francis I, to support his doctrine of the sovereignty and omnipotence of God. He says,

"But our doctrine must stand, exalted above all glory, and invincible by all the power of the world; because it is not ours, but the doctrine of the living God, and of his Christ, whom the Father hath constituted King, - that he may have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth, and that he may rule in such a manner, that the whole earth, with its strength of iron and with its splendour of gold and silver, smitten by the rod of his mouth, may be broken to pieces like a potter's vessel; for thus do the prophets foretell the magnificence of his kingdom."¹

Calvin also finds this prerogative assigned to

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 23

Christ when in referring to Isaiah 45:23 he says, "As I live, every knee shall bow to me."¹

Now the human heart and mind have wrestled with the question of God and the Scriptures do not ignore the mystery which pertains to the Divine Nature, yet a real, though limited knowledge of God can and must be affirmed. Although this knowledge is the result of man's relationship to God yet there is a sense in which God's nature transcends all man's capacities of comprehension. Calvin noticed that Isaiah had sensed this truth, for in commentating on Isaiah 6:2 and 24:23 he says,

"And what can man do, all vile and corrupt, when fear constrains even the cherubims themselves to veil their faces? This is what the prophet Isaiah speaks of- 'the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the Lord of hosts shall reign:' that is, when he shall make a fuller and nearer exhibition of his splendor, it shall eclipse the splendor of the brightest object besides. But, though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves be intimately connected, the proper order of instruction requires us first to treat the former, and then to proceed to the discussion of the latter."²

b. Omnipresence. Omnipresence conveys the idea that God is the one whose range of action is unlimited. It is conceived as the free, self determining presence of God with his creatures, to each of whom He

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1. Ibid., p. 140

2. Ibid., p. 48

wills to stand in a different relation. Calvin suggests that the different titles given to God cannot be taken to indicate that He is bound. Referring to Isaiah 37:16 he says,

"When he is called 'the God of Abraham,' or 'the God of Israel,' when he is said to reside 'between the cherubim,' in the temple, 'at Jerusalem,' these and similar forms of expression do not confine him to one place, or to one nation; they are only used to fix the thoughts of the pious on that God, who, in the covenant which he has made with Israel, has given such a representation of himself, that it is not proper to deviate in the smallest instance from such a model"¹

Calvin further emphasizes this thought that God cannot be bound, in connection with Isaiah 66:1 where he says,

"Nor, indeed, was the temple recommended to the Jews that they might enclose the Divine presence within its walls, but that they might be employed in contemplating a representation of the true temple. Therefore Isaiah and Stephen have sharply reprehended those who suppose that God dwells in any respects 'in temples made with hands.'"²

And in another place in commentating on prayer he says, in referring to Isaiah 66:1,

"It is added, That He is in heaven. From which it is not hastily to be inferred, that he is included and circumscribed within the circumference of heaven, as by certain barriers....And he says himself, by the prophet, 'The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.'"³

c. Omniscience. God's knowledge is all in-

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1. Ibid., p. 341
2. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 116
3. Ibid., p. 124

clusive and comprehensive of all that is knowable—all the actual in Himself and in the world, and all that is in His will. Calvin suggests this in quoting Isaiah 11:2 when he says, "For he was always his eternal wisdom and being made man, was given to men as the Angel of great counsel."¹

d. Holiness. Holiness is a general term for the moral excellence of God. It expresses His stainless purity and absolute separation from all moral corruption. This attribute of God demands a corresponding attribute in us in our union with the body of Christ. Calvin uses Isaiah in stressing these two facts in commentating on Isaiah 35:10 when he says,

"This scripture....admonishes us that we ought to be holy, because our God is holy.....When we hear any mention of our union with God, we should remember that holiness must be the bond of it;.....For to what purpose was that we were delivered from the iniquity and the pollution of the world, in which we had been immersed, if we permit ourselves to wallow in them as long as we live? Besides, it also admonishes us that; to be numbered among the people of God, we must inhabit the holy city Jerusalem; which, he having consecrated it to himself, cannot without impiety be profaned by impure inhabitants."²

e. Love. This consideration of holiness naturally led Calvin in thought to the contemplation of the love of God, for holiness and love are inseparable

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1. Ibid., p. 137
2. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 615

elements of God's nature. Christianity was the first religion to affirm unconditionally that God is love. Calvin finds the infinite love and mercy of God hidden in the words of Isaiah 63:16 and 49:15 when he says,

"Therefore he denominates himself our Father, and wishes us to give him the same appellation; delivering us from all diffidence by the sweetness of his name, since the affection of love can nowhere be found in a stronger degree than in the heart of a father. Therefore he could not give us a more certain proof of his infinite love toward us, than by our being denominated the Sons of God. But his love toward us is as much greater and more excellent than all the love of our parents, as he is superior to all men in goodness and mercy; so that though all the fathers in the world, divested of every emotion of paternal affection, should leave their children destitute, he will never forsake us, because 'he cannot deny himself.' For we have his promise,.....'Can a woman forget her child? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.'"1

f. Light. God is represented in the Scriptures under the figure of light. Jesus took unto Himself the title of "light" as symbolic of His mission in the world. Calvin takes cognizance of and appropriates Isaiah's figure of light as applying to Christ, in Isaiah 60:1 for he says,

"The grace of Christ is the only remedy, by which we can be liberated from that blindness, and from the evils consequent upon it. And this is what Isaiah had prophesied concerning the kingdom of Christ, when he predicted that the Lord would be 'an everlasting light' to his Church, whilst at the same time 'darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people.'"2

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. P. 121
2. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 261

D. The Person of Christ.

There is no doubt to the honest reader of the Scriptures that they present two distinct views of Jesus Christ, namely that He is divine and also human. The problem of how Christ could be both God and man, at the same time, is one that has taxed the best intellects of the world. Calvin in his use of Isaiah recognizes Christ's true humanity and yet it appears that his greatest emphasis was on Christ's divine nature. In referring to Isaiah 42:1 he says

"When he is called the 'servant' of the Father;.... all this belongs solely to his humanity. For as he is God, he is incapable of any argumentation whatever; he does all things for his own glory, and there is nothing concealed from him; he does all things according to the decision of his own will, and is invisible and intangible. And yet he describes these things not to his human nature separately, but to himself, as though they belong to the person of the Mediator."¹

In another passage commentating on Isaiah 9:6 he finds the prophet very implicit on this question when he says,

"Since it ought, without controversy, to be believed by all, that Christ is the very same Word clothed in flesh, any testimony which asserts the Deity of Christ will be very properly introduced here.....There certainly is no obscurity in Isaiah, where he introduces Christ as God, and as crowned with supreme power, which is the prerogative of God alone. 'His name', says he, 'shall be called the Mighty God, the Father of eternity.' Here also the Jews object, and invert the reading of

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1. Ibid., p. 436

the passage in this manner: 'This is the same by which the mighty God, the Father of eternity, shall call him, etc; so that they would leave the Son only the title of Prince of Peace. But to what purpose would so many epithets be accumulated in this passage on God the Father, when the design of the prophet is to distinguish Christ by such eminent characters as may establish our faith in him.'¹

Calvin finds Paul and King David corroborating Isaiah in respect to Christ's deity and self existence when in referring to Isaiah 44:6 he says,

"Thou Lord, hast laid the foundations of the earth and the heavens;' and 'Let all the angels of God worship him.' These ascriptions belong only to the one true God; whereas he contends that they are properly applied to Christ.....For, since the name Jehovah is used in each of these passages, it follows that in respect of his Deity he is self-existent. For, if he is Jehovah, he cannot be denied to be the same God, who in another place proclaims by Isaiah, 'I am the first and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.'²

In another passage Calvin uses Isaiah 11:2 to show that Christ has all the necessary attributes of God and so is divine. He says,

"His regal unction, therefore, is not represented to us as composed of oil and aromatic perfumes; but he is called 'the Christ of God,' because 'the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord,' rested upon him."³

It has been said that "Christianity is distinctly a religion of redemption"⁴ and "is emphatically the

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1. Ibid., p. 124
2. Ibid., p. 140
3. Ibid., p. 450
4. James Orr: The Christian View of God and the World, p. 331

great theme of the Bible and is expressed or implied on every page."¹ This "theme was in no small degree Christ's own person and work, for therein lay that which was of the most consequence for men to know."² Calvin held Christ's work terminated primarily in God and secondarily in man. It consisted in Christ identifying Himself with man and taking his law place before God. Thus his death was an expiation of man's guilt saving him from it and from the pollution of sin. Calvin uses Isaiah to confirm this mediatorial function of Christ. He says in referring to Isaiah 33:22,

"The Scripture often styles him Lord, because the Father hath given him authority over us, that he may exercise his own dominion by the agency of his Son.... He is the same God, who by the mouth of Isaiah has asserted himself to be the king and lawgiver of his Church. For although he every where ascribes all the authority he possesses to the free gift of the Father, yet he only signifies that he reigns in the majesty and power of God; because he assumes the character of Mediator, in order to approach to us by descending from the bosom and uncomprehensible glory of his Father."³

And again in another place he quotes the high point of Old Testament grace to bring out in bold relief Christ's office. In commentating on Isaiah 43:25 he says,

"And he participates with the Father, not only in the government of the world, but also in all other offices, which cannot be communicated to creatures. The Lord

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1. Ibid., p. 341
2. Charles G. Finney: Systematic Theology, p. 330
3. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 452

proclaims, by the prophet, 'I, even I, am he that blot-teth out thy transgressions, for mine own sake.' According to this declaration, when the Jews thought that Christ, committed an injury against God, by undertaking to forgive sins, he not only asserted in express terms, that this power belonged to him, but proved it by a miracle."¹

Calvin conceived of Christ's mediatorial work as beginning even before the Incarnation. This is clearly seen in his comments on Isaiah 25:9 where he says,

"Jehovah having so frequently appeared in the character of an angel.....For though he was not yet incarnate, he descended, as it were, in mediatorial capacity, that he might approach the faithful with greater familiarity. His familiar intercourse with men gave him the name of an angel; yet he still retained what properly belonged to him, and continued the ineffably glorious God.....For when it is said in Isaiah, 'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us; this is Jehovah; all who have eyes may perceive that this is God, who arises for the salvation of his people. And the emphatical repetition of these pointed expressions forbids an application of this passage to any other than to Christ.'"²

Calvin would agree with James Orr that

"Christ, as the Son of God, Incarnate in our nature, is the only one qualified to undertake this work; and as the Son of God and the Son of man He did it. In Him we see that done which we could not do. And appropriating that sacrifice, not only in its atoning merit, but in its inward spirit, we know ourselves redeemed and reconciled."³

It is evident from the above quotations, and their number might be increased were it necessary, that Calvin's Christology was established in some measure by

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1. Ibid., p. 128
2. Ibid., p. 125
3. Orr: op. cit., p. 366

the prophecy of Isaiah.

E. The Holy Spirit.

Calvin is resourceful, ingenious, and varied in his approach to the study of the Scriptures. It would seem as if new light were constantly breaking through the portals of his mental processes and registering new truths continually. Thus, it is with gentle, artistic touch of a master who has experienced the deep emotional tides of life and yet **remained appreciative** and responsive to the finer, gentler, strains, that Calvin approaches the subject of the Holy Spirit through the medium of the prophet Isaiah.

1. The Titles.

He observes the various titles that distinguish the Spirit when referring to Isaiah 44:33 and 55:1 for he says,

"It will be proper to notice the titles by which the Scripture distinguishes the Spirit. 'He is also said to be 'life', because of righteousness. Since by his secret showers he makes us fertile in producing the fruits of righteousness, he is frequently called 'water;' as in Isaiah: 'Ho every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.' Again: 'I will pour water on him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground.'"¹

2. The Unction.

"The root idea of the Spirit of God in both

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1. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 486

the Old Testament and in the New Testament is that of power."¹ Calvin conceives this to be the underlying idea in the coming of the Spirit upon Christ. Referring to Isaiah 61:1,2 he says,

"The prophetic and sacerdotal unctions have their respective places, and must not be neglected by us. The former is expressly mentioned by Isaiah in these words: 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath annointed me to preach good tidings to the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' We see that he was annointed by the Spirit, to be a preacher and a witness of the grace of the Father; and that not in a common manner; for he is distinguished from other teachers, who held a similar office. And here again it must be remarked, that he received this unction, not only for himself, that he might perform the office of a teacher, but for his whole body, that the preaching of the gospel might continually be attended with the power of the spirit."²

a. In Prophets. Calvin conceived as one of the functions of the Holy Spirit the imparting of power to the prophets. He says in commenting on Isaiah 48:16,

"The declaration of Isaiah bids defiance to all cavils: 'And now the Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me.' For the Holy Spirit is united in the exercise of supreme power in the mission of Prophets, which is proof of his Divine majesty."³

The words that the prophet speaks are not frail human words from the mouth of clay, but divine truths from God. It were the same as if God Himself were actually speaking. Calvin says in connection with Isaiah 63:10

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1. T. A. Kilpatrick: Our Common Faith, p. 151
2. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 447
3. Ibid., p. 130

and 6:9,

"And where Isaiah introduces the Lord of hosts as the speaker, Paul informs us that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks. Indeed, while the Prophets invariably declare, that the word which they utter are the words of the Lord of hosts, Christ and the Apostles refer them to the Holy Spirit; whence it follows, that he is the true Jehovah, who is primary author of these prophecies. Again, God complains that his anger was provoked by the perverseness of the people; Isaiah, in reference to the same conduct, says that 'they vexed his Holy Spirit.'¹

And again in still another place Calvin is even more emphatic, infering by implication, that God put the words in the prophet's mouth. Commentating on the vision of the prophet Isaiah in chapter six, verse five, he says,

"Not one of the prophets opened his mouth, therefore, without having first received the words from the Lord. Hence their frequent use of these expressions:..... for Isaiah exclaimed, 'I was a man of unclean lips,'... What could proceed from the pollution of the one, and the folly of the other, but impure and foolish speeches, if they had spoken their own words? But their lips were holy and pure, when they began to be the organs of the Holy Spirit."²

b. In Scripture. The fact that a prophet could predict long in advance events that were to take place in the future, was sufficient evidence for Calvin, of the authenticity and inspiration of Scripture. Referring to Isaiah 39:6 and 45:1 he says,

"When, in the time of Isaiah, the kingdom of Judah was in peace, and even when they thought themselves safe in the alliance of the Chaldeans, Isaiah publicly spake of the destruction of the city and the banishment

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1. Ibid., p. 132
2. Ibid., Vol. II. P. 341

of the people. Now, even if to predict long before things which then seemed false, but have since appeared true, were not a sufficiently clear proof of divine inspiration, to whom but God shall we ascribe the prophecies which he uttered concerning their deliverance? He mentions the name of Cyrus, by whom the Chaldeans were to be subdued, and the people restored to liberty. More than a century lapsed after this prophecy before the birth of Cyrus; for he was not born until about the one hundredth year after the prophet's death. No man could then divine, that there would be one Cyrus, who would engage in a war with the Babylonians, who would subjugate such a powerful monarchy, and release the people Israel from exile. Does not this bare narration, without any ornaments of diction, plainly demonstrate that Isaiah delivered the undoubted oracles of God, and not the conjectures of men?....What impudence must it be to deny the authority of the prophets has been confirmed by such proofs, or that what they themselves assert, in order to vindicate the credit due to their declarations, has been actually fulfilled. 'Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth, I tell you of them.'¹

It is evident from what has been cited that Calvin considered Inspiration to be the work of the Holy Spirit and that "by Him the prophets were moved to speak the word of God, and all the writers of the Holy Scripture inspired to record infallibly the mind and the will of God."² It were as though the men who wrote had been laid hold of by God. Thus they say, "I was in the Spirit," and "the word of the Lord came," meaning that they had an illumination of the mind and a heightening of their rational processes. The inspiration was "an interior

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1. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 86
2. Westminster Confession of Faith, p. 138

divine agency auxiliary to the grasp and expression of truth."¹ These men who wrote were subjects of an inescapable impression and conviction; that is, that they were the instruments of a higher power, and this power was a mind and a will; hence they use the word He or God. Calvin conceived the Holy Spirit as energizing and quickening the intellect and emotions.

c. In Church. Calvin considered the establishment and maintenance of the Church a distinct work of the Holy Spirit. This is seen in his reference to Isaiah 59:21 where he says,

"The fanaticism which discards the Scripture, under the pretense of resorting to immediate revelations, (is) subversive of every principle of piety.....But not one of them learned, from his teaching to condemn the Divine word; they were rather filled with a higher reverence for it, as their writings abundantly testify. This had been predicted by the mouth of Isaiah. For where he says, 'My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, forever,' he does not confine the people under the old dispensation to the external letter, as though they were children learning to read, but declares, that it will be the true and complete felicity of the new Church, under the reign of Christ to be governed by the word of God, as well as by his Spirit."²

d. In world. Calvin also in another place quotes the prophecy of Isaiah to show that the work of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the Church alone, but is active in other spheres. He would admit that God is somehow

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1. Henry Sheldon: System of Christian Doctrine, p. 138
2. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 91

related to the problem of evil. In referring to Isaiah 45:7 he says that God exerts his power on the elect by the Holy Spirit and,

"Also compells compliance of the reprobate.....He declares that he creates light and darkness, that he forms good and evil, and that no evil occurs, which he has not performed."¹

e. In Reason. Emil Brunner, the modern Swiss theologian, and John Calvin are in agreement concerning the function and the place of man's reason. Both would acknowledge man's reason as the greatest gift of the creator, while at the same time holding that there is truth that is beyond pure reason, and so in a sense the reason is limited. Brunner says,

"Even the Christian acknowledges reason as the greatest gift of the Creator, but that is as a gift and not as God. Above reason there is the Creator of reason. Where reason pretends to know God, it creates a reason God, and that always is an idol."²

Calvin finds that the testimony of the Holy Spirit transcends all reason and it alone authenticates the truth. Referring to Isaiah 59:21 he says,

"But I reply, that the testimony of the Spirit is superior to all reason. For, as God alone is a sufficient witness of himself in his own word, so also the word will never gain credit in the hearts of men, till it be confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit. It is necessary, therefore, that the same Spirit, who spake by the mouths of the prophets, should penetrate into our hearts, to convince us that they faithfully delivered the oracles which were divinely entrusted to them. And this connection is

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1. Ibid., p. 216
2. Emil Brunner: The Word and the World, p. 33

very suitably expressed in these words: 'My Spirit that is upon thee, and my word which I have put into thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed forever.' Let it be considered, then, as an undeniable truth, that they who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves as by the testimony of the Spirit. For though it conciliate our reverence by its internal majesty, it never seriously affects us till it is confirmed by the Spirit in our hearts. Therefore, being illuminated by him, we now believe the divine original of the Scripture, not from our own judgment or that of others, but we esteem the certainty, that we have received it from God's own mouth by the ministry of men, to be superior to that of any human judgment, and equal to that of an intuitive perception of God himself in it.*1

CHAPTER IV

JOHN CALVIN'S USE OF ISAIAH IN
HIS THEOLOGICAL WRITINGS

(Continued)

CHAPTER IV

JOHN CALVIN'S USE OF ISAIAH IN HIS THEOLOGICAL WRITINGS

(Continued)

A. Man.

1. His Election.

Although Calvin considered man in a desperate condition, hopelessly lost, depraved, and all his righteousness is as so many filthy rags, nevertheless, he sees for the elect, the favor and the grace of God who delivers. This deliverance is the result of God's decrees and not of any merit on the part of man. Commentating on Isaiah 64:6 he says,

"Now, if even our righteousness, when viewed in the light of truth, be found to be 'as filthy rags,' what judgment will be formed of our acknowledged unrighteousness?Man is nothing. Yet how is he entirely nothing, whom God magnifies?....in one view we are nothing, and in another how we are magnified,....If we reflect, if he had decreed to save us, we shall shortly be delivered;....We are; but in the heart of God....but by his condescending favor, not by our own merit."¹

2. His Sin.

To Calvin sin was realistic and he looked upon it with holy horror, for it was a deadly thing and more venomous than a snake's fangs. Sin was more than an "imperfection," more than a "not yet;" it was a definite cleavage that separated man from God by an impassible

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1. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 515

barrier and caused the wrath of God to remain on man until reconciliation was accomplished. This truth Calvin brings out clearly in his use of Isaiah 59:1,2 when he says,

"Now, let us examine the truth of what has been asserted in the definition, that the righteousness of faith is a reconciliation with God, which consists solely in the remission of sins. We must always return to this axiom-That the Divine wrath remains on all men, as long as they continue to be sinners. This Isaiah has expressed beautifully in the following words: 'The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither is his ear heavy, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. 'We are informed, that sin makes a division between man and God, and turns the Divine countenance away from the sinner. Nor can it be otherwise; because it is incompatible with his righteousness to have any communion with sin.'"¹

This "impassible barrier," the "frontier of death," the "chasm of sin," is not only the result of man's action in withdrawing from God, but God likewise deserts man, so that the action becomes two fold, tending to widen the breach rather than to close it. This is seen in Calvin's use of Isaiah 63:17 when he says,

"'O Lord, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our hearts from thy fear?' For these passages rather indicate what God makes men by deserting them, than show how he performs his operation within them."²

a. Expiation. Although the mediatorial nature of Christ's work has been touched upon in another place,

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1. Ibid., p. 672
2. Ibid., p. 280

it is proper at this point to call attention to several things that Calvin brings out in his use of Isaiah. We have seen that sin is a mortal wound which man has received and can only be healed by expiation which is accomplished in Christ. Calvin in referring to Isaiah 53:6 says,

"Now, it is evident what the prophet meant, when he said, 'The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all;' namely, that when he was about to expiate our sins, they were transferred to him by imputation."¹

b. Voluntary. This expiation is the result of a voluntary act on the part of Christ and is offered willingly and freely. This fact Calvin points out in reference to Isaiah 53:7 when he says,

"Now, in answer to the inquiry, how Christ, by the abolition of our sins, has destroyed the enmity between God and us, and procured a righteousness to render him favorable and propitious to us, it may be replied in general, that he accomplished it for us by the whole course of his obedience....his voluntary submission is the principle circumstance even in his death; because the sacrifice, unless freely offered, would have been unavailable to the acquisition of righteousness. In which sense Isaiah says, 'As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.'"²

c. Substitute. Then also Christ's mediatorial work consisted in his being a substitute for us to satisfy the divine justice. This Calvin sees in the chastisement that Christ bore for us. Thus in commentating on Isaiah 53:6 he says,

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1. Ibid., p. 461
2. Ibid., p. 457

"For when we say, that he 'bare all our sins in his own body on the tree,' we intend only, that he sustained the vindictive punishment which was due to our sin. This sentiment is more significantly expressed by Isaiah, when he says that the 'chastisement of our peace was upon him.' Now, what is the correction of our peace, but the punishment due to sins, and which we must have suffered before we could be reconciled to God, if he had not become our substitute."¹

d. Satisfaction. Calvin conceived the work of Christ as saving man from the guilt and pollution of sin and the curse of the broken law which meant death. It justifies God's acceptance of man and makes possible a sanctified life. This is made possible because God's justice has been satisfied. In commentating on Isaiah 53:5 he says,

"It was requisite, also, that he should feel the severity of the Divine vengeance, in order to appease the wrath of God, and satisfy his justice. Hence, it was necessary for him to contend with the powers of hell and the horror of eternal death. We have already stated from the prophet, that 'the chastisement of our peace was upon him.'"²

3. His Depravity.

Calvin would admit that man bears the stamp of the "Imago Dei" (the divine image) but he would say that it was lost in the fall of Adam. As a result of this fall man is utterly depraved and only in the full flood-light of the sinless Christ does he realize his real condition and find the righteousness necessary to overcome it.

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1. Ibid., p. 590

2. Ibid., p. 464

Calvin finds that Isaiah verifies this fact in Isaiah 53:6 when he says,

"From this contemplation of the Divine perfection, let us not be unwilling to descend to take the view of ourselves, without adulation or blind self-love..... That we may examine ourselves properly, it is necessary for us to summon our conscience to the tribunal of God. For we have the greatest need of his light in order to detect the recesses of our depravity, which otherwise are too deeply concealed. For then only shall we clearly perceive the force of this language:....For the complaint, which the prophet formerly made respecting Israel, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; is applicable not only to one period of time, but to all ages.'"¹

Surely it can hardly be denied that Calvin used the prophecy of Isaiah extensively and that his thoughts of sin and its remedy were shaped thereby.

B. Salvation.

1. Repentance.

a. In Relation to man. John the Baptist began his public work as Jesus did also, with the call to repentance upon his lips. It was also the burden that was on the heart of God and was foremost in the preaching of the Apostles. Calvin defines repentance as a transformation of the entire man from within and the eradication of all impiety and wickedness. He uses Isaiah 58:6 to confirm this thought when he says,

"In the first place, when we call repentance 'a conver-

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1. Ibid., p. 680

sion of the life to God, 'we require a transformation, not only in the external actions, but in the soul itself; which, after having put off its old nature, should produce the fruits of action corresponding to its renovation. The prophet, intending to express this idea, commanded those whom he calls to repentance, to make themselves a new heart.....Observe how he denounces that they shall labor in vain in the pursuit of righteousness, unless impiety be previously readicated from the bottom of their hearts. And in order to make a deeper impression on them, he apprizes them that they have to do with God, with whom subterfuges are of no avail, because he abhors all duplicity of heart. For this reason, Isaiah ridicules the preposterous endeavours of hypocrites, who did indeed strenuously attempt an external repentance by the observance of ceremonies, but at the same time were not concerned 'to loose the bands of wickedness,' with which they oppressed the poor. In that passage he also beautifully shows, in what duties unfeigned repentance properly consists."¹

The evidences of the commencement of real, sincere, genuine repentance is seen in a hatred and a repulsion of sin. This Calvin makes clear in his comments on Isaiah 61:1 where he says,

"Now, as the hatred of sin, which is the commencement of repentance, is our first introduction to the knowledge of Christ, who reveals himself to none, but miserable and distressed sinners, who mourn and labor, and are heavy laden; who hunger and thirst, and are pining away with grief and misery, so it is necessary for us, if we desire to abide in Christ, to strive for this repentance, to devote our whole lives to it, and to pursue it to the last."²

Calvin views repentance as involving two types of action, the one being negative and the other being positive in direction, each arising from the action of man. He says in referring to Isaiah 1:16,17

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1. Ibid., p. 538

2. Ibid., p. 553

"Repentance consists in two parts- the mortification of the flesh and the vivication of the spirit. This is clearly expressed by the prophets, although in a simple and homely manner,....'Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment; relieve the oppressed, 'For when they call men from the paths of wickedness, they require the total destruction of the flesh, which is full of wickedness and perverseness.'"1

b. In Relation to God. Although Calvin would insist that man has to do something in the process of repentance, nevertheless, he would maintain that the action behind man was of God. He uses Isaiah 59:20 and 63:17 to illustrate this point when he says,

"That repentance is a peculiar gift of God, must, I think, be so evident from the doctrine just stated, as to preclude the necessity of a long discourse to prove it. Therefore the Church praises and admires the goodness of God.....Whomsoever God chooses to rescue from destruction, then he vivifies by the Spirit of regeneration: not that repentance is properly the cause of salvation, but because, as we have already seen, it is inseparable from faith and the mercy of God; since, according to the testimony of Isaiah, 'the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob.' It remains an unshaken truth, that wherever the fear of God prevails in the heart, the Spirit has operated to the Salvation of that individual. Therefore, in Isaiah, where believers are bewailing and deploring their being deserted by God, they mention this as a sign of reprobation, that their hearts are hardened by him."2

c. In Relation to Prayer. Calvin finds in Isaiah the justification of the thought that repentance is the necessary prerequisite to legitimate prayer. If

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1. Ibid., p. 540
2. Ibid., p. 554

we would expect our prayers to be acceptable to God we must renounce all hypocrisy and vanity in ourselves.

Commenting on Isaiah 1:15 and 29:13 he says,

"Legitimate prayer, therefore, requires repentance. Whence it is frequently said in the Scriptures, that God hears not the wicked, and that their prayers are an abomination; as also their sacrifices; for it is reasonable that they who shut up their own hearts, should find the ears of God closed against them; and God should be inflexible to them who provoked his rigour by their obduracy. In Isaiah, he threatens thus: 'When ye make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood,'....'This people draw near me with their mouth, but have removed their heart far from me.' He does not restrict this solely to prayer; but asserts his abhorrence of hypocrisy in every branch of his worship."¹

2. Faith and Assurance.

Faith has been defined as "the exercise of the whole personality in relation to God; it is the belief of the mind, the trust of the heart, the submission of the will."² It looks forward and accepts whereas repentance looks back and forsakes. Calvin thought of faith as preceeding repentance and being the origin of repentance. In referring to Isaiah 40:1,3 he says,

"Those who imagine that repentance rather preceeds faith, than is produced by it, as fruit of a tree, have never been acquainted with its power, and are induced to adopt that sentiment by a very insufficient argument....For when Christ and John preached in this manner, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,' do they not derive an argument for repentance from grace itself and the promise of salvation? The meaning of their language, therefore, is just as though they

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 83

2. A. H. Garvie: The Christian Doctrine of the Godhead, p. 414

had said, Since the kingdom of heaven is at hand, therefore repent. For Matthew, having related that John preached in this manner, informs us, that in him was accomplished the prediction of Isaiah concerning 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' But, in the prophet, that voice is commanded to begin with consolation and glad tidings. Yet when we speak of faith as the origin of repentance,....we intend to signify, that a man cannot truly devote himself to repentance, unless he knows himself to be of God."¹

Calvin uses Isaiah to show that there must come a measure of assurance and confidence as the result of faith. In referring to Isaiah 30:16 he says,

"Faith is agitated with various doubts; so that the minds of the pious are seldom at ease, or at best enjoy not a state of perpetual tranquility. But whatever assaults they sustain, they either emerge from the very gulf of temptation, or remain firm in their station. This assurance alone nourishes and supports faith,....the Scripture, intending to exhort us to faith, commands us to 'be quiet.' In Isaiah, 'in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.'"²

3. Justification.

Justification refers to a change of standing before God. It is "the acceptance of a man by God although he has done wrong." Calvin is very implicit and makes it clear that we are justified in God's sight not because of our own righteousness or any works of the law but because of God's grace, for we are justified on the ground of what Christ has done and not on the ground of what we do. Turning to Isaiah 59:15.16 Calvin says,

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1. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 534
2. Ibid., p. 527

"But as the Scripture is sufficiently perspicuous on this subject,....Isaiah, after having described the universal ruin of mankind, properly subjoins the method of recovery. 'The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment. And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his own arm brought salvation unto him.'.... Where are our righteousnesses, if it be true, as the prophet says, that no one assists the Lord in procuring his salvation?"¹

And again, in showing the uselessness of the works of the law, Calvin quotes Isaiah 1:13,14 when he says,

"He excellently pursues the same argument also in Isaiah: 'Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble to me; I am weary to bear them. When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evils of your doings.' What is the reason that the Lord is so displeased at an obedience to his law?.....Let hypocrites go now,....endeavor by their works to merit favor of God. By such means they will add provocation to provocation."²

Calvin warns of the error of thinking that justification can come from any works of supererogation but on the contrary he shows that it comes by virtue of the righteousness that Christ plants in the believer. He says in connection with Isaiah 1:12,

"We cannot admit that there are any works of supererogation except such as those of which it is said by the prophet, 'who hath required this at your hand?'"³

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 7
2. Ibid., p. 9
3. Ibid., p. 16

And again in Isaiah 53:1 he says,

"Isaiah informs us, 'by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many.' Let us remark, that the speaker here is the Father; that he attributes to his Son the office of justifying; that he adds as a reason, that he is righteous."¹

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, does not mean that we are to slight works for "the doctrine of justification needs to be guarded against being made a cover for a light estimate of practical activity."²

Nevertheless, it is well to remember that

"It is the charter of Christian liberty for all time; of emancipation from legalism with its treadmill service and fear and gloom and uncertainty; from laborious self salvation, whether by religious ceremonial or by orthodox opinions, or by the magic power of the sacraments."³

4. Forgiveness.

When one truly repents and turns to Jesus Christ in faith, then the sense of forgiveness comes to the believer as a result of the knowledge that your sin has been dealt with by God and that He no longer holds them against you. Calvin confirms this by the prophet in Isaiah 38:17 and 44:22 and 1:18 when he says,

"'Not to mention righteousness,' signifies, not to notice it so as to reward it; and 'not to remember sins,' is, not to inflict punishment for them. This is

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1. Ibid., Vol. I. p. 658
2. Sheldon: op. cit. p. 451
3. Ibid.

expressed in other passages by the following phrases: to 'cast behind the back,' to 'blot out as a cloud,' to 'cast into the depths of the sea,' not 'to impute,' to 'cover,'.....Let us also hear from another passage of the prophet, on what condition God remits sin. 'Though your sins be as scarlet, (says he,) they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'"¹

Calvin rejects the claims of the priests to power to forgive sin, maintaining rather that Christ alone has this prerogative. He uses Isaiah 43:11,25 to confirm his opinions, for he says,

"They maintain, that all persons, of both sexes, as soon as they shall have arrived at years of discretion, should, once at least in every year, confess all their sins to their own priest; that there is no remission of sin, unless they have firmly resolved to confess it; that unless they fulfill this resolution, when opportunity offers, there is no admittance for them in Paradise; and, moreover, that the priest has the power of the keys, with which he may loose the sinner or bind him,....But they venture not to explain this binding and loosing simply to mean, forgiving and obliterating sins; because they hear the Lord proclaiming by the prophet, 'I am the Lord, and beside me there is no Saviour. I, even I, am he which blotteth out thy transgressions.'"²

Calvin not only rejects the idea that forgiveness can come by way of the priests but also that it may come of man's good works, for he holds that Christ alone can forgive. In referring to Isaiah 53:5,6 he says,

"And there are two things demand our consideration- that the honor, which belongs to Christ, should be preserved to him entire and undeminshed; and that consciences assured of the pardon of their sins, should have peace with God. Isaiah says, 'The Lord

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1. Calvin: Institutes, Vol. I. p. 589
2. Ibid., p. 574

hath laid on him the iniquity of us all,' and 'With his stripes we are healed,'....How immensely wide is the difference between these positions- that our iniquities are laid on Christ to be expiated by him, and that they are expiated by our own works."¹

One of the most noteworthy achievements of forgiveness is the change that takes place within man when he finds that peace comes to reign supreme. Once more Calvin finds his analogy from the prophet when in commentating on Isaiah 9:6 he says,

"The prophet suggests that believers enjoy no true peace till after they have obtained the remission of their sins. For this analogy must be observed in the prophets, that when they treat of the kingdom of Christ, they exhibit the external bounties of God as figures of spiritual blessings. Wherefore also Christ is denominated 'the Prince of peace,' and 'our Peace;' because he calms all the agitations of the conscience. If we inquire, by what means; we must come to the sacrifice by which God was appeased."²

C. Eschatology.

1. Resurrection.

The Scriptures teach that there is to be a general resurrection of the righteous and the wicked. The resurrection of believers is closely associated with that of Christ's for he is the pledge and promise of his people. It is, indeed, the corner stone of the whole Christian ediface. The doctrine of the resurrection has rendered service of great value in Christian thought, by adding definiteness and vigor to the hope of immortality.

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1. Ibid., p. 586

2. Ibid., p. 687

Calvin in his view of the resurrection falls back on the exalted conception of God for his assurance, although he sees manifold suggestions in the miracles of his own day. He says, in referring to Isaiah 26:19,

"Nor would it be a thing so difficult to believe, if we paid proper attention to the miracles which present themselves to our view in all parts of the world. But let us remember, that no man will be truly persuaded of the future resurrection, but he who is filled with admiration, and ascribes to the power of God the glory that is due to it. Transported with this confidence, Isaiah exclaims, 'Thy dead men shall live; together with my dead body shall they arise; awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust.' Surrounded by desperate circumstances, he has recourse to God, the Author of life."¹

As God is the giver and the sustainer of life, it only seemed reasonable to Calvin that He could, as it were, raise up children unto Abraham of the dust of the earth, if He so desired. This thought he expresses in reference to Isaiah 26:21 for he says,

"God, having all the elements subject to his control, will find no difficulty in commanding the earth, the water, and the fire, to restore whatever they appear to have consumed. This is declared in figurative language by Isaiah: 'Behold, the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth shall also disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.'"²

2. Future Life.

That there is conscious life after death of the body is seen from many implications and statements of

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1. Ibid., Vol. II. p. 204

2. Ibid., p. 213

the Scripture. Christ referred to God as the God of the living and not of the dead. The parable of Dives and Lazarus, the appearance of Elijah and Moses on the mount together, the assurances to the dying thief, the prayer of the martyred Stephen that the Lord receive his spirit, and the expectation of Paul that departure from this world was to be present with the Lord, all point to and confirm the state of the conscious life after physical death. To Calvin it was the thought of the future life that spurred him on to action and relieved what would have meant at times discouragement. He draws strength from the prophet, in reference to Isaiah 25:8 for he says,

"The whole family of believers, as long as they dwell on earth....Their state, therefore, would be deplorable, if they did not elevate their thoughts toward heaven,... and look beyond present appearances.....For they will keep in view that day when the Lord will receive his faithful servants into his peaceful kingdom; will wipe every tear from their eyes, invest them with robes of joy, adorn them with crowns of glory, entertain them with his ineffable delights, exalt them to fellowship with his majesty, and, in a word, honor them with a participation of his happiness."¹

And again in another place in commentating on Isaiah 66:22-24 he says,

"There are some places, which show....the future immortality which awaits the faithful.....'As the new heavens and the new earth which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another,....shall all flesh come

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1. Ibid., Vol. p. 644

to worship before me, saith the Lord. And they shall go forth, and look on the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched."¹

D. Summary and Conclusion.

In this chapter evidence has been brought forward to substantiate the opinion that Calvin used the prophecy of Isaiah extensively in his theological writings to clarify the ideas presented, and in so doing he showed evidence that his thoughts were moulded thereby, thus tending to verify the opinion that his spirit was in harmony with that of the Old Testament and the Prophets as well as that of the New.

An analysis and graph of his Christian Institutes reveals the very interesting fact that an Old Testament book, namely the Psalms, ranks first place in the number of times it is quoted. It was noticed that Isaiah held sixth place among all the books of the Bible and second place among the books of the Old Testament, as regards the frequency of quotation. This fact indicates that Calvin had a high regard for the prophecy of Isaiah and assigned it a place of importance in his theological writings.

Then we notice that Calvin's idea of God was moulded by the prophet Isaiah. His emphasis on the

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1. Ibid., p. 403

transcendent nature and glory of God made him a kindred spirit with the ancient prophet. With both men the majesty of God was their controlling principle; it was the vision of God high and lifted up upon his throne. This noble, lofty conception, pervaded his view of the holiness of God, and found expression in a spotless moral character, so far as human standards are concerned. John Knox in speaking of his school at Geneva had said that it was

"The most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles. I confess Christ to be truly preached, but manners and religion so sincerely reformed I have not yet seen in any place besides."¹

This testimony of another great reformer confirms the truth that the holiness of God was as realistic to John Calvin as it had been to Isaiah in his own time.

Calvin's aversion to idolatry was, in some measure at least, influenced by the prophet, as we have seen from his quotations. Not only was idolatry abnoxious to him but it was incompatible with his lofty conception of God. His keen, penetrating, intellect, and his sound, almost unerring judgment made him quick to grasp the truth of Isaiah's prophecy and apply them to his own day and age.

We see evidences of Isaiah's influence on Calvin's Christology especially in connection with the

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1. Preserved Smith: op. cit., p. 174

mediatorial work of Christ. The Lord's humanity and divinity find corroboration at the pen of Isaiah and even Christ's preexistence is verified in the light of Isaiah's teaching.

That the Holy Spirit guided the prophets, energized the Church, illumined the believer, and transcended human reason, Calvin vindicates and accredits by constant reference to Isaiah. The prophets were the inspired mouth piece of God, being moved by the Spirit and kept from error.

That man is totally depraved and hopelessly lost, Calvin confirms from the analogy of the figures in Isaiah to "filthy rags" and the "straying sheep." Thus it follows that repentance, faith, justification and forgiveness are all movements in which the major action proceeds from the side of God with a corresponding response from man. These also are explained in the light of the teachings of the prophet Isaiah.

Even in that most difficult of all fields of thought, namely in eschatology, where the material is so scanty, Calvin turns to the prophecy of Isaiah and reads the promise of the resurrection and the future life in its lines. Surely the charm, the winsomeness, and the fiery zeal of the prophet of old found its secret appeal and common bond of unity, in the life and spirit of John Calvin, because both were rooted from the same

stock, namely in the Divinity. That Calvin would confess a great debt to Isaiah, were he living today, I doubt not in the least. May the spirit of Isaiah and of Calvin rekindle in the hearts of men in the ages to come and bear them up to nobler heights of service.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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As was stated at the beginning, the aim of this thesis was to discover how John Calvin used the prophecy of Isaiah and to what extent it influenced his thinking and his theology.

The study was divided into two parts. In the first part a study was made of the prophecy of Isaiah to reveal Calvin's principles of exegesis and to discover his qualifications as a sound exegete of Isaiah. The main interest being to see if Calvin by his methods of interpretation was true to the thought, meaning, and purpose of Isaiah himself and so was qualified to use him as a basis for his theological writings, or whether by his interpretation he did violence to the spirit and intent of Isaiah's prophecy and so was unqualified to use it.

The second part was a study of Calvin's practical use of Isaiah in his theological writings to substantiate his doctrines.

Our first line of inquiry took us into the consideration of the prevailing method of interpretation of Calvin's day. We were impressed with the way in which Calvin cut himself clear of the accepted allegorical method of interpretation, which had so many ramifications

and was conducive to misinterpretation; he attempted to regain the truth of the original message. In so doing he was greatly aided by an open mind full of the vigor of an experiential faith in Christ and an exalted view of God.

We discovered that one of Calvin's qualifications that commends him to men of our day was his supreme regard for the truth. He had no hazy and uncertain opinions concerning the function and the nature of truth, as was implied in the question Pontius Pilate put to Christ when he said, "What is truth?" From a study of his commentary of Isaiah it appears that this purpose to hold fast to the truth, on the part of Calvin, was the dominating passion of the man and found expression in various forms in his regard for the true, the natural, and the literal meaning of Scripture. This was, indeed, the focal point around which all his labors centered and involved a careful consideration of the text, context, and whole passage. It automatically threw him into a study of relationships that in turn gave vision and perspective and freed him from any tendency to bias and prejudice.

We also discover that Calvin readily recognized the hand of God moving in history and thus naturally attempted to interpret the Scripture in the light of sacred and secular history. Thus there was a timely as

well as a timeless character to his work, as he conceived of God's movement both as past, present and future.

It is also noted that Calvin was possessed, in great measure, of the spirit of the "humanists" of his time, in their love of freedom, and independence of thought, and yet it was always under reasonable control. He recognized the Greek, Jewish, and the Latin commentators and yet he was constantly driving his own stakes and building on his own foundations an edifice truly original and unique in design. This independent spirit of Calvin, which is so noticable from a study of his commentary on Isaiah, cannot be overemphasized; it is one of the points that accounts for much of his success. He was a leader of men and not a follower. He drew men to him from all over the world like a magnet that attracts steel by virtue of its own inherent power.

And in spite of this magnetism and independence we see his nobility of character manifest in a conservative spirit that avoids extremes and is free from bias. He shuns the frivolous, the far-fetched, the forced and all that would tend to deviate from the truth as he saw it in God.

In view of what has been said we cannot but conclude that Calvin was well qualified to understand and to interpret Isaiah, in the light of the intent and

purpose of the prophet.

When we turn to a study of Calvin's practical use of Isaiah in his theological writings we find that they figure prominently. A graph of all the quotations used in his Christian Institutes reveals the fact that although the prophecy of Isaiah did not attain the supreme position of all the mountain peaks, so to speak, nevertheless, it comes in on the higher level and plays an important role in his theology.

We discover that there is hardly a branch of theology that is not influenced by Isaiah. Calvin's concept of the character of God is very definitely controlled by the prophet. There is a close kinship between the two men.

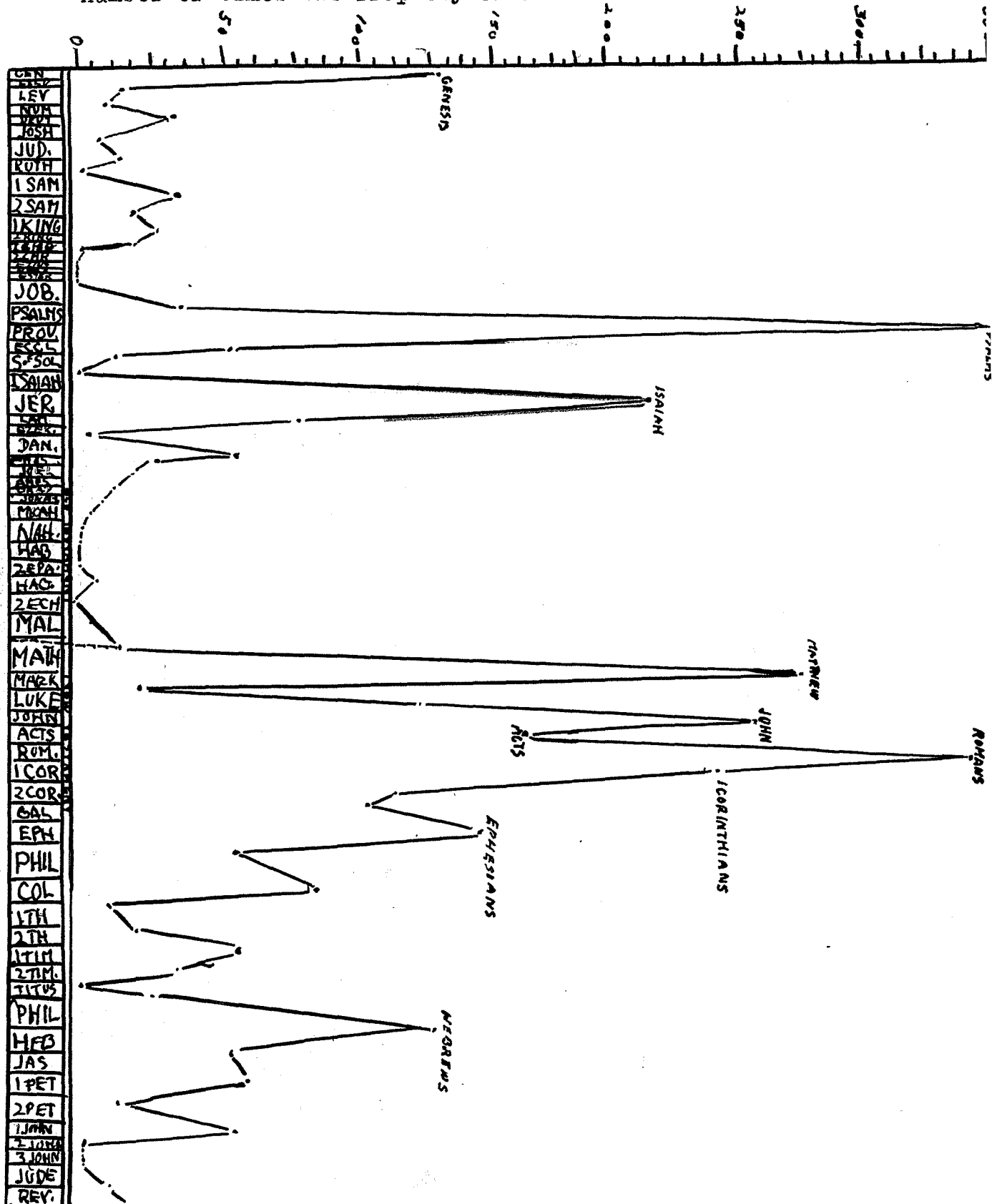
Then again Calvin's idea of the Person of Christ, especially in relation to his mediatorial work, is influenced by the prophet's picture of the servant and other passages.

He draws extensively on Isaiah in showing the work of the Holy Spirit was behind inspiration and was actively at work in the world.

In dealing with the question of man, sin, salvation and eschatology, we find Calvin constantly drawing on Isaiah to confirm and substantiate his teachings.

It might be said that Isaiah cut the stones from the quarry and Calvin gave them shape and polish and erected a magnificent cathedral of ideas with the skill of a master architect in his theological works.

A Graph of the Christian Institutes showing the frequency with which the Prophecy of Isaiah is used as compared with the other books of the Bible. The vertical imaginary lines represent the different books of the Bible and the horizontal imaginary lines represent the number of times the Prophecy of Isaiah is mentioned.



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