
H-France Review Vol. 13 (April 2013), No. 38

Jon Balsarak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France: Calvin's Lectures on the Minor Prophets, 1556-1559*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011. 224 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. (hb). \$123.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-90-04-19144-0.

Review by Jeannine Olson, Rhode Island College.

The title of Jon Balsarak's book describes accurately what he accomplishes in this compact volume. It is an analysis of Calvin's lectures on the minor prophets of the Old Testament from 1556 to 1559 within the historical context of the period. Balsarak's approach combining theology and history is particularly germane to an analysis of Calvin and the Minor Prophets, since Calvin delivered these lectures at a time when the Reformed Church was actively expanding into Catholic countries, particularly France, with all the concomitant challenges and frustrations that this move entailed. His auditors had few, if any, alternative sources of scholarly teaching at Calvin's level of expertise during these years just before the foundation of the Genevan Academy (1559).

Underlying Balsarak's analysis of Calvin is the author's conviction that events during this period influenced Calvin enormously: the failure of the Regensburg colloquy (April-July 1541); the pope's convening of the Council of Trent (December 1544) and sessions that followed without Calvin's participation; the Augsburg Interim (1548); Strasbourg's conversion to Lutheranism; and the Peace of Augsburg (1555). On a positive note for Calvin, there was the defeat of the Perrinist faction in Geneva in 1555, which freed Calvin and his supporters to concentrate on the struggle for a remnant church in France and elsewhere, even as French evangelicals looked more to Geneva than to Strasbourg for guidance. The year 1555 saw the beginning of a wave of missionary pastors sent formally, if clandestinely, from Geneva into France, even as congregations in that country also sent men to Geneva to be trained. Meanwhile, the clandestine book trade in Bibles, catechisms, and Psalters in France began to flourish.^[1] All of this affected Calvin and his interpretation of biblical texts, especially those from the prophets of the Old Testament, who seemed to speak so meaningfully to Calvin's contemporary situation.

Having thus set the stage, Balsarak analyzes Calvin's views. In chapter two he deals with Calvin on the church, particularly the Catholic Church, which Calvin conceded could still contain a remnant of the faithful but which, as an institution, was idolatrous and should be avoided. More than other major reformers and unlike some, Calvin condemned what he called Nicodemism, the practice of being evangelical or reformed at heart, but camouflaging one's true beliefs by conforming to the outward forms of Catholic practice, in particular by attending the mass. The prohibition against Nicodemism put evangelicals in Catholic France and elsewhere in a bind, but Calvin had no patience for duplicity. His solution for those whose lives or property might be in danger because of their evangelical beliefs was for them to emigrate or flee rather than to conform, much as he and his French compatriots in Geneva had done. Balsarak does not mention an additional reason for Calvin's stringent views on the danger of Nicodemism: the fact that it would have been difficult to build an institutional church in France if Reformed Christians hid behind the protection of outward conformity to Catholicism.

Chapter three addresses the questions of how prophecy was conceived in the sixteenth century, whether or not Calvin was a prophet, and whether Calvin realized that he was a prophet. To answer these questions in

a sixteenth-century context, it is important to realize that Calvin's understanding of prophecy was different from twenty-first century usage. Sixteenth-century thinkers did not see prophets as soothsayers, as people who could foretell the future, or as magicians in any sense. Rather, prophets interpreted and applied Scripture. This understanding of prophecy fit into the actions of the minor prophets of the Old Testament in conveying God's word to the people and applying it to their lives, often in a call for repentance and amendment of life. The sixteenth-century understanding of prophecy described Calvin well, even if did not call himself a prophet and asserted that the age of the prophets had ended.

In chapter four, Balsarak deals more specifically with the subject at hand, the Minor Prophets. In this chapter, the author reveals his particular expertise and experience by analyzing the specific biblical texts, New Testament authors' uses of Old Testament texts, and sixteenth-century reformers' interpretations as compared to those of Calvin. In addition, Balsarak points out that Calvin had "an amazing ability to find in the circumstances of the prophets' hearers practices and beliefs which were particularly relevant to his own day and age (p. 131)" and later on that "Calvin's lectures betray a pattern of making extremely frequent comparison between the prophet's age and his own . . . Calvin held to the idea that the two ages were very similar (pp. 176-77)." This makes real the extent to which Calvin and those who heard him lived mentally within the reality of Old Testament times. Calvin's interpretations of the texts from the Minor Prophets were different from those of other commentators because he applied them to contemporary France. It only makes sense, then, that Calvin could "read the trials of the French evangelical church in terms of the trials experienced by the faithful remnant in the days of the prophets (pp. 177-78)." As Calvin addressed his auditors in these lectures on the Minor Prophets, he returned frequently to the theme of the covenant between God and his people, meaning the faithful remnant, the elect.

Finally in chapter five, Balsarak describes how Calvin applied his teaching specifically to the Roman Church and also to the establishment of the remnant church. Speaking to an audience of men who would soon lead congregations in France and be faced with the difficulties of living in a Catholic country, Calvin emphasized his criticisms of the Church of Rome. His interpretation separated him from the expositions on the Minor Prophets by contemporaries such as Luther and Melancthon (p. 208). Calvin did not address practical questions such as how to relate to a Catholic neighbor or whether or not to have social and business relations with Catholics. By contrast, when he addressed the remnant church in these lectures, Calvin was full of support and encouragement, an approach that must have inspired many and contributed, at least in part, to the tremendous growth in the number of Reformed congregations in France just prior to the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598). Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod have suggested that the number of Reformed congregations might have been as high as 2,150.[3]

In his concluding chapter, Balsarak provides the reader with an excellent summary of his major theses and assertions with the added comment that at no point did Calvin predict a brighter future for the faithful remnant, nor for Calvin "was the world at the cusp of a third age" (p. 213).

Overall, the book is well-organized and easy to follow. It has periodic introductions and summaries. Of course, one could always ask for more: Historians, for instance, might want to know specifically why Calvin did not like the Peace of Augsburg of 1555. Was it because the peace only applied to Lutherans and Catholics? Was it because allowing each ruling prince to pick one of those two denominations for the territory he ruled compromised the faithful who did not want to follow the religion of the prince? Or was it because it was the nature of the expansion of the Reformed churches to persist as a minority in countries where the ruler and the majority were Catholic?

One could hardly find fault with Balsarak's reliance on others for his historical information, especially since he cites the work of such esteemed historians as Robert Kingdon, Raymond Mentzer, Glenn Sunshine, and Karin Maag. One could wish that he had consulted more of the historians who work on Genevan or French history. For instance, to explain his comments on the influx of refugees to Geneva (p. 4) and the missionary pastors sent out from that city (p. 62) he might have cited my own book on the *Bourse française* (see note [1])

below). This book also would have provided him with more information on the logistical and financial component of the evangelical effort in France.

These are minor quibbles, however, compared to the overall worth of the book. By integrating the historical and theological, Balsarak captures the dynamism of the Reformed movement in a way few solely theological works do. His approach is refreshing, especially to historians who have reviewed works that treat theology abstractly without taking into consideration the events of the time. Historians as well as theologians will enjoy and benefit from this book.

NOTES

[1] For details of the illegal Genevan book trade into France see Jeannine Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare: Deacons and the Bourse française* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses and Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1989), pp. 51-69.

[2] The months before the Wars of Religion are considered to be the height of the Reformed cause in France in terms of numbers of adherents. Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod recently revised the assertion in the *Histoire ecclésiastique des Églises réformées au royaume de France* that the number of Reformed churches in France was 2,150 in January 1562. Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, "Les 2,150 'églises' réformées de France de 1561-1562," *Revue historique* 311, no. 3 (2009): 559-560.

Jeannine E. Olson
Rhode Island College
jolson@ric.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172