The author
Wulfert de Greef (PhD, Utrecht 1984) was a pastor in various congregations in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands from 1964 until his retirement in 2001. His research interests and publications focus on the Reformation, especially John Calvin.

The translator
Lyle D. Bierma (PhD, Duke 1980) is P. J. Zondervan Professor of the History of Christianity at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His research interests and publications focus on early Reformed covenant theology, the Heidelberg Catechism, and John Calvin.

This work examines John Calvin's understanding of the relationship between Jews and Christians at a fundamental level. After reviewing the status of Jews and Hebrew studies in Europe in the late Middle Ages, the author turns specifically to Calvin's interpretation of Scripture. Several important questions are addressed: How did Calvin understand the relationship between Jews and Christians? Have Christians replaced the Jews, or do they belong to the Jews because they are included in the relationship between God and Israel? What does Calvin have to say about the future of the Jews? The author concludes that Calvin's view of the relationship between Jews and Christians is closely tied to his view of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Because the God of Israel also wants to be the God of the nations, Christians are included in the relationship between God and Israel.
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Wulfert de Greef

Of One Tree

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

Translated by Lyle D. Bierma

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
English translation of Van één stam. Calvijn over Joden en christenen in de context van de late Middeleeuwen (Delft, the Netherlands: Eburon, 2012).
Author’s Preface to the English Edition

Two years ago, Professor Dr. Lyle Bierma offered to translate into English my book *Van één stam: Calvijn over Joden en christenen in de context van de late Middeleeuwen* (Delft: Eburon, 2012). I was very pleased about that for a couple of reasons. First, a book written in Dutch has a very limited readership. That is especially unfortunate when the book is about Calvin, whose significance extends far beyond the Dutch-speaking world. As is evident in the annual “Calvin Bibliography” in the *Calvin Theological Journal*, the person and work of John Calvin is a subject of worldwide interest. Publication of a book on Calvin in English is important, therefore, for the Calvin research that is carried on in many countries around the world.

I am also pleased that Professor Bierma is the translator. As a Calvin scholar himself, he is well acquainted with the reformer’s work, which is important when translating a book about Calvin. He is also an outstanding translator. When I met Professor Dr. Heiko Oberman at the International Congress on Calvin Research in Edinburgh in 1994, he was very complimentary of Professor Bierma’s English translation of my book *Johannes Calvijn: zijn werk en geschriften* (Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan, 1989), which was published in 1993 under the title *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* by Baker Books in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Inter-Varsity Press in Leicester, England. Professor Bierma also contributed to the publication of an expanded edition of *The Writings of John Calvin*, published by Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, in 2008. I would very much like to thank Professor Bierma, therefore, for yet another translation of one of my books.

As editor of the Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht series *Refo500 Academic Studies*, Professor Dr. Herman Selderhuis gave his approval to the inclusion of *Of One Tree* in that series. Thank you very much! My thanks also go to the staff at V&R, particularly to Izaak de Hulster, Laura Röthele, and Jacqueline Eller, who worked assiduously to produce such a fine edition of this book. Finally, Professor Bierma and I are most grateful to Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for a financial subsidy that helped to lower the list price of the book.

It is my sincere hope that this publication will contribute to a better understanding of Calvin, particularly with respect to his view of the relationship between Jews and Christians. Calvin did not have the last word on this subject, but in his interpretation of Scripture, he did make clear how important the unity of the Old and New Testaments is for the relationship between Jews and Christians.
Author’s Preface to the English Edition ................................................................. 5

Introduction ................................................................................................................... 11

1. The Late Middle Ages: The Status of Jews in Europe; Debates and Polemical Writings ................................................................. 21
   1.1 The Status of Jews in Europe before 1570 ................................................. 21
   1.2 Jews and Christians in Debate from the Thirteenth Century Onward ... 27
   1.3 Discussions at the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century about
       the Permissibility of Jewish Literature .................................................. 30
   1.4 Important Anti-Jewish and Anti-Christian Literature from
       the Twelfth Century Onward ................................................................ 34
         1.4.1 Anti-Jewish Writings .................................................................... 34
         1.4.2 Anti-Christian Writings ............................................................... 35
   1.5 Christians in Discussion with Jews at the Beginning of the
       Sixteenth Century ................................................................................. 40
         1.5.1 Sefer Emunah (ca. 1500) .............................................................. 40
         1.5.2 Münster, Torat ha-Mashiah (1537) ............................................. 40

2. Knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism and the Critical
   Posture of Christians ......................................................................................... 43
   2.1 Interest in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judaism ............................................. 43
       2.1.1 Hebrew .......................................................................................... 43
       2.1.2 Aramaic: The Targums and the Talmud ......................................... 44
       2.1.3 Judaism ........................................................................................ 45
   2.2 Important Hebrew Sources ..................................................................... 46
   2.3 Important Books for the Knowledge of Jewish Exegesis ...................... 47
   2.4 View of the Jews and the Use of Jewish Sources .................................. 50

3. Calvin and the Jews ....................................................................................... 65
   3.1 Calvin’s Contacts with Jews ................................................................. 65
   3.2 A Discussion with a Jew (Ad quaestiones) .......................................... 68
   3.3 Calvin’s Knowledge of Jewish Exegetes ............................................... 71
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Calvin’s View of the Old Testament</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 The Old Testament Is the Authoritative Word of God</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 The Gospel (New Testament) Accords with the Old Testament</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The Old Testament Has an Ongoing Significance</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Calvin on the Relationship between Jews and Christians</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 The Nations Will Come to Zion</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Learning from the Jews</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Israel and the Nations Become One Body</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 God Will Not Sever His Relationship with Israel</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 The Remnant That Survives and Grows Larger through the Nations Joining Israel</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Israel Remains the Firstborn among the Nations</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 Have We As Christians Taken the Place of the Jews?</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.1 Jews and Christians Together</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.2 The True Israel</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The Future of Israel</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Did Calvin Expect a Conversion of Individual Jews or of the Whole Nation?</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.1 Canaan: A Sign of God’s Grace</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.2 Canaan: A Figure of the Heavenly Inheritance</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.3 The Significance of Jerusalem in the Old Testament and after Christ</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Calvin’s Interpretation of the Prophetic Promises</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 The Kingdom of Christ Is a Spiritual Kingdom</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Calvin’s Connections with Christian and Jewish Exegetes</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Criticism of Christian Exegetes</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Connections with Jewish Exegetes</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.1 The Relationship between God and Christ</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.2 Jesus Christ and the Law</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Calvin’s View of Interest</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Calvin’s Attitude toward the Jews</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1 Examples of Both Calvin’s Positive and Highly Critical Attitude toward the Jews</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Evaluation</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1 The Relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2 The Relationship between Jews and Christians</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2.1 Jews and Christians Belong Together</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9.2.2 Jews and Christians Are Divided .............................................................. 159
9.3 The Future of Israel .................................................................................. 161

Abbreviations .................................................................................................. 167

Bibliography ................................................................................................... 169

Index of Scripture Texts ................................................................................ 185

Index of Names .............................................................................................. 193
Introduction

*Of One Tree*: that is how the title of this work begins. But it is not immediately obvious what it means. The subtitle that follows, *Calvin on Jews and Christians in the Context of the Late Middle Ages*, makes clear that *Of One Tree* refers to Jews and Christians. Anyone who is at all familiar with the Bible will recall the image of the cultivated olive tree that the apostle Paul employs in Romans 11.¹ Some of the branches of this olive tree have been broken off, and branches from a wild olive tree have been engrafted in their place. The cultivated olive tree is a reference to Abraham, with whom God had established a covenant. God had promised Abraham that he would be his God and the God of his descendants after him.

The apostle Paul is greatly distressed that not all who have descended from Abraham believe in Jesus as the Messiah. He wonders whether perhaps God has rejected his people. But that is not so, he replies. Some branches have been broken off because of unbelief, and you are where you are, he writes, only because of your faith. Christians do not exist by themselves. They are like branches from a wild olive tree grafted into a cultivated one. They belong to Israel. Jews and Christians are both part of the covenant that God established with Abraham. Jews and Christians are of one tree.

In the NT, we read in Acts 2 about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. After Peter's Pentecost address, many Jews accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but we also read in Acts that there were Jews who wanted nothing to do with him as Messiah. Later we are told that through Paul's preaching many non-Jews came to faith in Jesus Christ.

In this study I will be focusing on John Calvin (1509–1564). How did he view the relationship between Jews and Christians? Have Christians taken the place of the Jews, or do they belong to the Jews? And what might that imply? What did Calvin think about the future of the Jews?

For a good understanding of Calvin, it is important to know what the relationship between Jews and Christians was like in the Late Middle Ages. There had been ongoing tension between them for centuries, but at the beginning of the Late Middle Ages this tension increased even more. In the thirteenth century, Jews were forced to participate in debates with Christians.² The Talmud was attacked, came under censure, and could no longer be printed. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Dominicans—supported by Johannes Pfefferkorn, a Jew who had converted to Christianity—waged a fierce battle for the banning of all Jewish literature, with

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1 Rom 11:17, 18, 24. The image of the olive tree appears also in Jer 11:16.

2 See chap. 1.2, "Jews and Christians in Debate from the Thirteenth Century Onward."
the exception of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible).\textsuperscript{3} Johannes Reuchlin stood up for the Jews and opposed the burning of Jewish literature, but the discussion came to a standstill with the appearance of Luther, who now claimed all the attention.

The Jews of the Late Middle Ages also had to deal with various kinds of slander, which on occasion led to violence against them.\textsuperscript{4} At the beginning of the sixteenth century, they were expelled from several Western European countries, including France, and were also not permitted to live in Geneva. Calvin rarely encountered any Jews,\textsuperscript{5} but he must have heard things about them and also seen something of them when he traveled to places like Strasbourg, Hagenau, and Worms. During his stay in Strasbourg, he must also have heard of Bucer’s involvement in the measures being implemented in Hesse with respect to the Jews. And then there were the writings of Luther, who at first wrote positively about the Jews but later turned against them with extraordinary ferocity.

During the Nazi period in the last century, people appealed to Luther to defend violent anti-Jewish behavior. To what extent that appeal was justified is a question being discussed in many publications right up to the present. Calvin never met Luther, but we do know that he held him in high esteem because Luther had so clearly highlighted the heart of the gospel. In that respect, he regarded Luther as a father, but we do not know what he thought about Luther’s view of the Jews.

Because Calvin rarely encountered Jews and, unlike Bucer, did not find himself in circumstances where he had to offer his view of measures taken against them, it would seem that there is nothing very remarkable to say about his view of Jews and Christians. But we then lose sight of the fact that in his interpretation of Scripture he was continually dealing with God’s interaction with the Jews that also, thanks to Jesus Christ, involved Christians. Furthermore, it is significant that in his exposition of the OT, Calvin was always attentive to the explanations that Jewish exegetes had given to a particular text.\textsuperscript{6}

Calvin was deeply imbued with the notion that the Jews were a special people.\textsuperscript{7} They descended from Abraham, and in Genesis 12 we read that God called Abraham and promised to make him into a great nation and through him to bless all the nations of the earth. With respect to Romans 11, Calvin notes that Paul does not say that the entire tree, roots and all, was cut down but only that some branches

\textsuperscript{3} See pp. 30–31.
\textsuperscript{4} See pp. 23–24.
\textsuperscript{5} See chap. 3.1, “Calvin’s Contacts with Jews.”
\textsuperscript{6} See chap. 3.3, “Calvin’s Knowledge of Jewish Exegetes.”
\textsuperscript{7} See chap. 5, p. 85.
were broken off. The history of God’s dealings with the Jews began with the call of Abraham and continues right up to the present day.

In his work *Reformation und Judentum*, Achim Detmers devotes a good deal of attention to Calvin’s view of the Jews. He indicates in the subtitle that his study has to do especially with *Israel-Lehren und Einstellungen zum Judentum von Luther bis zum frühen Calvin*, thus limiting himself to “the early Calvin,” by which he meant the period up to 1544. He pays only scant attention to the further development of Calvin’s view of the Jews in the next stage of his life, focusing mostly on Calvin’s conflict with Servetus and his posthumous work *Ad quaestiones et obiecta Judaei cuiusdam*. That means that Detmers does not look at all at Calvin’s exposition of the OT, since his lectures and commentaries on the OT were all published after 1550. However, there is a great deal to be learned about Calvin’s view of the Jews from his exposition of the OT, and that exposition will be taken into consideration in this study.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that Detmers distinguishes between one’s view of Israel and one’s position with respect to Judaism, which he calls a distinction between a primary and secondary view of Israel. The primary view relates to theological statements about the faith of Israel in OT times, whereas the secondary view has to do with statements about Judaism after the coming of Christ. Detmers acknowledges that Calvin himself does not make such a distinction, but Detmers employs it as a device in his research even though he thinks that there is no sharp dividing line between the two views.

In this study of Calvin and the Jews, I have not adopted Detmers’ distinction. Calvin himself does not operate with such a distinction between Israel in the OT period and Judaism after that. He simply talks about Jews, and when he does so, we must always ask ourselves whom exactly he has in mind. For him the designation is not timebound. By Jews he can mean the people in the OT Bible passage he is explaining at the moment. He can also have in mind the Jewish exegetes whose interpretation he has consulted in his exposition of the Bible text. And sometimes he also means Jews living in his own time. Whatever Jews he has in mind, he always regards them as descendants of Abraham. That is not so strange because he only talks about Jews in connection with his interpretation of the Bible. It is also a reflection of the situation in which he found himself. He did not encounter Jews in Geneva, and France, the country to which he felt a lifelong attachment, had driven them out. But in the interpretation of the OT, he had to deal with God’s

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8 Comm. on Rom 11:17 (French translation of 1550): “… entant qu’il ne dit pas que tout l’arbre ait esté coupé, et jusques à la racine, comme on dit: mais qu’aucunes des branches sont rompues …”
9 (Stuttgart, 2001).
10 See chap. 3.3, “Calvin’s Knowledge of Jewish Exegetes.”
relation to the Jews. Because he wanted to present what the OT has to say to us, the relationship between Jews and Christians regularly came up.

Calvin devoted considerable attention to the exegesis of the OT. In his weekday sermons, he offered a *lectio continua* interpretation of a number of OT books, and he also lectured on the OT. Much of this material was preserved through the efforts of stenographers. He also wrote commentaries on many books of the OT.

So far as the interpretation of the OT is concerned, Calvin lived in an extraordinary age. People had recognized for some time already that OT exegesis should be based on the text in the original Hebrew. Thanks to the invention of printing, a variety of books related to the OT had been published from the last decade of the fifteenth century onward. There included, first of all, different Hebrew editions of the OT, sometimes with annotations borrowed from Jewish exegetes. Various Targums were also published, as well as books for learning Hebrew and a number of dictionaries.

Christian Hebraists in the sixteenth century were able to consult Jewish literature, but as they studied the content of the Targums and the Talmud, their assessment of the Talmud ended up being generally negative. A point of debate was to what extent they could profit from the learning of Jewish exegetes. On this question Conrad Pellican and Sebastian Münster strongly disagreed.

Calvin was a younger contemporary of the Christian Hebraists Pellican, Münster, Paul Fagius, and Wolfgang Captio, and his knowledge of Jewish literature was more limited than theirs. Compared with them, he was not so deeply involved in the study of that literature as to be able to respond to it in the way that someone like Münster did. The main reason for not immersing himself more fully in Jewish literature was not that his knowledge of Hebrew was more limited but that he was so heavily involved in the exposition of the OT. With that as his goal, he made use of the tools available in his day, among them the works published by the Christian Hebraists for the illumination of the OT. Calvin would have known that Pellican and Münster strongly disagreed about the way in which Jewish literature should be engaged, but he never weighed in on the matter. Rather, he made use of the explanations by Jewish exegetes when he considered them important for our understanding of the text. He mentioned his disagreements with them only if he thought it was necessary.

Calvin saw his fundamental task to be the interpretation of Scripture, and in that connection he regularly mentioned the Jews. His interpretation of Scripture

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12 See chap. 2.2.1, “Hebrew.”
13 See chap. 2.2 and 2.3.
14 See chap. 2.4, “View of the Jews and the Use of Jewish Sources.”
15 See chap. 3.3, “Calvin’s Knowledge of Jewish Exegetes.”
involved his sermons, lectures, and commentaries. But the Institutes, first published in 1536, was also important. In the second edition of 1539, he examined in some detail the relationship between the OT and NT, a section that carried over nearly unchanged into subsequent editions. The relationship between the testaments was a significant theme for understanding the Bible. Moreover, Calvin had written the Institutes as a manual for understanding Scripture, which provided the advantage, then, of not having to elaborate on all sorts of doctrinal topics in his commentaries. Anyone wanting to know more about a particular topic could refer to the Institutes, where he addressed that subject in greater depth.

Calvin did not devote a separate section to his view of the Jews in his standard work, the Institutes. However, he did produce one small treatise, which has already been mentioned, in which he debated with a Jew about various questions. This treatise bears a close resemblance to the written debates that had been conducted in previous centuries. It is not certain when Calvin committed this debate to writing, but it was published (by Theodore Beza) with his permission only after his death. The treatise is of limited value for our knowledge of Calvin's view of the Jews, however, because the questions posed there to the Jew have to do mainly with the content of the Gospel of Matthew and deal with Christological topics in particular. Calvin scholars have pointed out that for a complete knowledge of Calvin's view of the Jews, one must study his commentaries and sermons as well.

Calvin's interpretation of the OT was highly significant for the way he viewed the Jews. He was aware that we have the Jews to thank for the OT and that the OT is important “for us” also, not only because Jesus was the Messiah promised by God but also because of God’s involvement with the Jews in the OT. The God whom we worship and serve is the God of Israel, who in Jesus Christ also cares for us. Calvin was firmly convinced that through Jesus Christ we can belong to the God of Israel and are therefore linked also to the Jews. Oftentimes in the OT God wanted to be Israel’s God, but he also had the nations in mind. Hence Calvin frequently pays attention in his exegesis not only to the relation of the Jews to other nations but also and especially to how we as Christians are included in the relationship between God and Israel.

Much could be said about the relationship between Jews and Christians. It is striking that when people write or say things about Calvin and the Jews, it is often the negative aspects that get the attention. I mention only the following examples:

16 See chap. 3.2, “A Discussion with a Jew—Ad quaestiones.”
17 See chap. 1.4, “Important Anti-Jewish and Anti-Christian Literature from the Twelfth Century Onward.”
18 See p. 70.
19 See chap. 4, “Calvin's View of the Old Testament.”
20 See chap. 5.3, "Israel and the Nations Become One Body."
Christians have taken the place of the Jews; the role of the Jewish people has played itself out; the OT is spiritualized; Jews can indeed come to faith in Jesus as the Christ, but there is no longer any future for the people as a whole.

That these negative aspects are cited is not so strange. Because of the new view of the relationship between Israel and the church that arose after the Second World War, people seem to be more sensitive to the negative aspects. They are the things that stand out to us, and then we emphasize them. But we do Calvin an injustice, of course, if we do not pay close attention to what he is saying and to the contexts in which he makes certain comments. In any case, when it comes to Calvin and the Jews, there are also many positive things to say that are still important today.

Because Calvin did not discuss his view of the Jews as a topic by itself, it is not easy to get a good grasp on how he understood the subject. To be sure, in his interpretation of the Bible he makes many comments about the Jews and often brings up the relationship between Jews and Christians, but these comments are always in conjunction with his exegesis of a text and thus are made in a particular context. Moreover, they are always limited in their extent. Calvin wanted to keep the interpretation in his commentaries concise and referred his readers to the Institutes for more detailed explanations. Therefore, in his interpretation of a passage, he certainly does not say everything there is to say on a given subject with just a single comment. In his treatment of another passage, he might address the same subject in a more nuanced or even a completely different way.

We must keep in mind that the relationship between Jews and Christians is a complex subject. If, for example, we examine only what Calvin had to say about the question of Christians superseding the Jews, we would be dealing with just one aspect of the subject. Therefore, I take up that particular question in chapter 5 only after addressing several other aspects of the relationship between Jews and Christians.

Chapter 6 is devoted to “Calvin’s View of the Future of Israel.” How did Calvin perceive that future? It is often said that he anticipated only the conversion of individual Jews and that the Jews as a people no longer had a role to play. Canaan, too, would no longer have any significance as the Promised Land, and the earthly Jerusalem would be superseded by the spiritual, heavenly Jerusalem. Are such statements a fair representation of Calvin’s views? Because these claims deal with such important matters, we will need to conduct a careful examination of how Calvin thought about them.

So far as the future of Israel is concerned, the promises the prophets gave to Israel in the OT are very important. In the sixteenth century, that became evident al-

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21 See chap. 5, “Calvin on the Relationship between Jews and Christians.”
22 See chap. 5.1–6.
ready in the discussion between Capito and Bucer, where Bucer in his commentary on Zephaniah (1528) challenged Capito’s interpretation in his commentaries on Habakkuk (1526) and Hosea (1528) of the prophetic promises regarding the future of Israel. Calvin must have been aware of this discussion. In this study, therefore, I consider the question of how Calvin handled the prophetic promises in his interpretation of the prophets and what they meant for the future of Israel. It is worth noting that he often thought about the prophetic promises in terms of the Kingdom of God, emphasizing its spiritual character over against Jewish interpretation. The question is what exactly he understood by that spiritual kingdom.

Calvin was an exegete who carefully studied the text in the original Hebrew. He was also conversant with what Christian and Jewish exegetes had to say. His relation to these exegetes will be the focus of chapter 7. He did not always agree with the Christian exegetes because on occasion they linked the OT too directly to Jesus Christ, and, in his view, such a forced Christian interpretation was usually unjustified. He also felt that they needed to take more into account what Jewish exegetes had to say. However, Calvin would sometimes criticize Jewish exegetes as well. With respect to his view of the Jews, therefore, it will be important to examine how he differed from the Jewish exegetes. The most important matters in that regard are the relationship between God and Christ and the relation of Jesus to the law. These were subjects that already in the Late Middle Ages occupied an important place in the discussions between Jews and Christians.

A live topic of discussion in that day was how to think about the charging of interest. Calvin offered his own opinion on that subject in his interpretation of the Scripture passages that played a role in the debate at that time.23

We can infer how Calvin thought about Jews from remarks he made about them in his commentaries and sermons. In the centuries before Calvin, there were texts that both Jews and Christians employed to support their negative posture toward the other. How did Calvin handle these texts? When he spoke negatively of the Jews, it often had to do with his criticism of their biblical interpretation.24

Calvin was a man of the sixteenth century, and we tend to think, perhaps, that his view of the Jews was determined by the general picture that people had of them at that time. That raises the obvious question of why we should look at Calvin’s view of the Jews at all. After all, we live several centuries later, and much has transpired in the meantime. But what happened to the Jews in World War II led Christians more and more to consider the relationship between Israel and the church.25 It is highly significant that in 1951 the following stipulation was incorporated into the church

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23 See chap.7.3, “Calvin’s View of Interest.”
24 See chap. 8, “Calvin’s Attitude toward the Jews.”
order of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk): “The church is called to give expression to its unrelinquishable bond with the people of Israel.” This stipulation was taken over into the church order of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in 2003. But discussions in recent years about Israel and the church suggest that there is little clarity about what is meant by “unrelinquishable bond.” Following the founding of the state of Israel, there has also been a gradual shift in thinking about the term “Israel.” The political situation in which Jews and Palestinians find themselves has led to fierce debates about the meaning of the promise of the land. Compared with the sixteenth century, much more attention is being paid today to such questions as the meaning of “all Israel” in Romans 11:26, the meaning of the promise of the land, and the significance of the earthly Jerusalem in God’s plan of salvation. But publications up to the present day show that there is little agreement on these issues as well.

Living in a different time than we do, Calvin did not have to wrestle with the return of many Jews to the land of Israel or the significance of the state of Israel. But that is not to say that there is no point in looking at his view of the Jews. It is a disadvantage that he did not treat his view in a separate treatise or specific chapter of the Institutes and that we are left only with what he brings up about Jews and Christians in his interpretation of Scripture. That makes it more difficult to figure out his view. But the advantage is that we are forced to pay careful attention to his interpretation of those Scripture texts. In that way we remain close to the source, for the Bible itself often deals with the relationship between Jews and Christians. The God of Israel wanted to be the God of the nations as well, and in Abraham he intended to bless all the nations of the earth.

Calvin, of course, did not have the last word. He was aware as an exegete that there was much he could learn from others, and he regularly listened to others in order to form his own judgment about the meaning of a text. Sometimes he openly admitted that he was making an interpretive choice that someone else might not make. But in his engagement with Scripture he made clear what he regarded as the

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26 See, for example, P. H. R. van Houwelingen, “The Redemptive-Historical Dynamics of the Salvation of ‘All Israel’ (Romans 11:26),” Calvin Theological Journal 46 (November 2011): 301–314. The various views of the meaning of “all Israel” led, for example, to the study by M. van Campen, Gans Israël: Voetiaanse en coccejaanse visies op de joden gedurende de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw (Zoetermeer, 2006).

27 See, for example, M. van Campen and G. C. den Hertog, eds., Israël, volk, land en staat: Terugblik en perspectief (Zoetermeer, 2005); H. de Jong, De landbelofte (Apeldoorn, 2011); and the pamphlet Israël en de Palestijnen (publication of the Gerefomeerde Bond, 2011).