

David Puckett. *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995. Pp. ix + 179.

This book, now over twenty years old, remains relevant, addressing perennial hermeneutical issues in the history of interpretation. David Puckett profiles John Calvin's Old Testament exegesis by contrasting it with two extremes he believes Calvin eschewed, that of Christian allegorical reading of the Old Testament (OT), which undervalues OT historical context on the one hand, and Christ-less Jewish reading of the OT, which dismisses the assessment of the OT by the New Testament (NT), on the other. From the introduction (chapter one): "My approach in this study is based upon my belief that Calvin reveals his method most clearly in the reasoning he offers for rejecting the interpretations of others" (p. 13). Positively, Puckett believes that Calvin charted a "*via media*": "He attempts to chart a middle course—one which betrays neither his historical sensitivities [*pace* Christian allegory; see chapter three] nor his theological commitments [*pace* Jewish exegesis; see chapter four]" (p. 18).

Puckett devotes a foundational chapter (chapter two) to two presuppositions he declares vital for understanding Calvin's OT approach: the dual (divine and human) authorship of Scripture and the unity of Scripture. Regarding dual authorship, Puckett quotes Calvin's commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16: "All those who wish to profit from the scriptures must first accept this as a settled principle We owe to the scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it" (p. 26). Puckett sees Calvin's view of human authorship as "far from mechanical" (p. 27): "the style and personality [of each human author] left their mark on scripture" (p. 29). Puckett then reflects upon OT hermeneutical implications of these commitments in subsections titled "The Holy Spirit's Intention as an Exegetical Concern," "The Human Writer's Intention as an Exegetical Concern," and "The Relation of Divine Intention and Human Intention." These sections amplify Calvin's statement from his 1540 dedicatory letter of his Romans commentary in which he claimed the goal of biblical interpretation was "to unfold the mind of the [human] writer." Summarizing, Puckett says, "It is apparent that Calvin is unwilling to divorce the intention of the human writer from the meaning of the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that for him, the intention, thoughts and the words of the prophet and of the Holy Spirit in the production of scripture are so closely related there is no practical way to distinguish them" (pp. 36–37). That is, according to Puckett, divine authorship involved functional, *not merely theoretical*, exegetical significance for Calvin.

With respect to the related matter of Calvin and the unity of the OT and NT, Puckett detects an unyielding positive appraisal in Calvin's *Institutes* and his biblical commentaries. In response to Anabaptist attempts to reduce OT Israel's hope to the earthly land of Canaan, Puckett states that Calvin believed "the Old Testament saints saw beyond the earthly promise to the spiritual reality" (p. 38). In fact, in chapter five Puckett distinguishes Calvin's view of typology ("true prophecy," "predictive prophecy") from many contemporary approaches, which only make "historical correspondences retroactively" and in which "persons/events/institutions are only seen to be typological 'in retrospect after the appearance of the antitype'" (pp. 114 and 135, n. 59). Puckett sees a direct connection between Calvin's commitment to the unity of Scripture and his approach to typology. He quotes Calvin: "It may be objected, 'Why is Christ appointed to a covenant which was ratified long before [with Abraham]?' I reply, the covenant which was made with Abraham and his posterity had its foundation in Christ And the covenant was ratified in no other manner than in the seed of Abraham, that is, in Christ, by whose coming, though it has been previously made, it was confirmed and actually sanctioned" (pp. 39–40). Puckett thinks Calvin acknowledged great diversity between the OT and the NT, as we will see below, but he concludes this seminal chapter with a quote from Calvin regarding controls upon that diversity: "Two things, therefore, must be observed: first, that the doctrine of God is the same, and always agrees with itself, that no one may now charge God with changeableness, as if he were inconsistent ... secondly, when ceremonies and shadows had been abolished, Christ was revealed, in whom the reality of them is perceived" (p. 44).

If chapters one and two provide the skeleton of Puckett's argument, in chapters three and four Puckett applies the flesh. Chapter three, "The 'Jewish' Appearance of Calvin's Exegesis," addresses Calvin's aforementioned rejection of Christian allegorical approaches to the OT. For example, Puckett cites Calvin's nuanced interpretation of Psalm 72: "We must always beware of giving the Jews occasion of making an outcry, as if it were our purpose, sophistically, to apply to Christ those things which do not directly refer to him" (p. 53). Calvin favored the "natural," "simple," "solid" meaning of the OT to the subtleties of allegory. Regarding Origen, said Calvin, "He searches everywhere for allegories and corrupts the whole scripture" (p. 54). Puckett cites Philip Schaff, who dubbed Calvin "the founder of modern historical-grammatical exegesis" (p. 56) because Calvin, trained as a humanist, prized knowledge of the Hebrew language, lexicology, and grammar—including the employment of Jewish commentators wherever

helpful—etymology, biblical usage of words and historical and literary context, and so on, for a right understanding of the OT.

But, says Puckett, any claim that Calvin's exegesis is "Jewish" is a misleading half-truth, as chapter four, "The 'Christian' Character of Calvin's Exegesis" demonstrates: "For Calvin, the Old and New Testaments are one book. The Hebrew Bible must never be interpreted as though it stood alone—it can only be properly understood when its interpretation is informed by the superior clarity of the New Testament This chapter will examine the unambiguously Christian character of Calvin's exegesis as seen in his criticism of Jewish exegesis and his embrace of the New Testament as an exegetical guide" (p. 82). Puckett says that "most of [Calvin's] comments about Jewish exegesis are negative," criticizing its tendency to "invent fables," which Calvin saw as a departure from "the simple meaning of the text" (p. 83), just as he did with Christian allegory. Puckett says that Calvin's ultimate "critique [was] grounded in his belief that the Jewish rejection of Christ makes it impossible for them to understand the Old Testament" (p. 88). Puckett then provides another timely subsection, addressing the NT's use of the OT, citing the Reformation anthem "scripture interprets scripture" as a hermeneutical guide for Calvin. Puckett broaches a "problem" case of the use of Deuteronomy 32 in Romans 15:10 and quotes Calvin: "If we admit that Paul took this sentence from Moses, the same Spirit, who spoke both by Moses and Paul, is the best interpreter of his own words" (p. 91). Puckett comments, "While the Holy Spirit's authorship of scripture does not yield Calvin an unambiguous hermeneutic, it does have great hermeneutical significance." That is, Puckett sees in Calvin a recognition of the nettlesome nature of the NT use of the OT discussion, citing such examples as numerical discrepancies between OT and NT texts, apparent changes in meanings of OT passages by NT authors, and translation issues, including the NT's frequent use of the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew text. But, without being able here to enter into the details, we can say that Puckett sees in Calvin an application of the principles enumerated in chapter two to the complexities of the NT's use of the OT. According to Puckett, Calvin did not attempt to solve all of the difficulties, but neither was he willing to abandon his simultaneously contextual and Christian read of the OT text.

Chapter five, "Calvin's Exegetical *Via Media*," weaves together the themes of chapters three and four, explicating Puckett's thesis from the introduction. Says Puckett, "[Calvin] was unable to agree fully with either tradition [i.e., Christian or Jewish] concerning how best to handle allegorical interpretation, typology, and the interpretation of Old Testament prophecies"

(pp. 105–6). I encourage the reader to examine this chapter with an eye toward whether or not Puckett successfully proves his case via his examples from Calvin’s OT exegesis. I believe he does, though at times one might quibble that argumentation in this chapter is somewhat redundant with previous chapters. Says Puckett, “In his treatment of allegory, typology, and prophecy in the Old Testament, Calvin adopts a moderate position in which he has avoided the temptations that too often befell Jewish and Christian exegesis. He has not uprooted the Old Testament from its historical soil nor has he been content to look at the roots once the full flowering has taken place in Jesus Christ” (pp. 131–32).

In his conclusion, Puckett highlights the word “tension” to describe Calvin’s OT exegesis (pp. 140–42). Calvin, says Puckett, held divine authorship and human authorship of Scripture in tension as well as OT historical context and NT Christian fulfillment; Puckett believes we should honor these tensions, not explain them away. While generally well stated, Puckett seems to border on positing a dialectical tension for Calvin between divine authorship and divine employment of human agents, as if the unity of Scripture is rooted in divine authorship and the diversity is a result of human authors (see esp. p. 141); this would run counter to the 2 Timothy 3:16 quote above, not to mention words from Calvin in that same paragraph: “This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare.” Puckett also affirms the importance for Calvin of the presence of the Holy Spirit in proper biblical interpretation, a point he arguably should have made clearer earlier in the book. Related to concerns just mentioned, I question the idea that the Holy Spirit exists alongside the “rational side of Calvin’s exegesis” (p. 142), as if Calvin would incipiently have conceded ground to a modern historical-critical approach. Puckett then provides an Appendix, “The Preparation and Publication of Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries,” and a thorough bibliography.

The reader has perhaps surmised this reviewer’s basic sympathy with Puckett’s treatment of this aspect of Calvin’s work, notwithstanding minor qualifiers. One other disappointment: this reviewer would like to have seen explicit attention paid to Calvin’s Christology, given the centrality of Christ to Calvin’s OT program.

In conclusion, to the degrees that Puckett accurately portrays Calvin’s approach to the OT and that Calvin is correct (this reviewer resonates with Calvin’s commitments), the usefulness of Puckett’s book, not just for those

studying the history of interpretation but for those studying the Old Testament itself, can hardly be overstated. It reminds us that one's doctrine of Scripture will affect one's hermeneutic, for better or worse.

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David R. Law. *The Historical-Critical Method: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: T&T Clark, 2012. Pp. ix + 332.

What you already think about historical criticism is what you will make of this book. Although it provides a mine of information and gives good account of the subject, it will probably not change any minds one way or the other. In fact, it could have a counterproductive effect by serving to illustrate what opponents of the historical critical method (HCM) have thought for many a day, that there is no single method in it, only a fascicle of conflicting opinions. Positively, the example of David Law's book encourages Reformed scholars to serious historical research, but on the basis of epistemologically self-conscious presuppositions and interpretations diametrically opposed to those of the critics.

For several decades now the foundations of this once unimpeachable method have been shaken by critics as diverse as James Barr and Wolfhart Pannenberg, or evangelicals whose scrutiny of the HCM goes back to the likes of Robert D. Wilson, O. T. Allis, or the early G. C. Berkouwer in the 1930s, to say nothing of those who preceded them. This book has nothing to do with them, nor is it the work of an uneasy evangelical of the Sparks-Enns-Hays-Ansberry ilk, the "new" generation of biblical scholars who identify themselves as evangelicals while dabbling with the methods and results of historical criticism.¹ No evangelical or Reformed scholar enters this account with a critical voice (or any other voice for that matter, a few footnotes aside), probably because none are deemed worthy of consideration, *academia oblige*. Nor does the noteworthy C. S. Lewis, who wrote scathing comments on biblical criticism in his famous essay "Fern Seeds and Elephants" get a mention in the sections where the HCM's fragility is in question, even though Lewis put his finger on the real problem in a way that the author seemingly has little desire to do.

¹ Robert Yarbrough, "Should Evangelicals Embrace Historical Criticism? The Hays-Ansberry Proposal," *Themelios* 39 (2014): 37–52. Cf. Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, eds., *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).